



Gaiman and Dream return

By David Cotton, USA TODAY

For the dark and sometimes mystic Neil Gaiman, this is the stuff dreams are made of.

The Englishman's last novel, *American Gods*, was a surprise best seller. His last two children's books, *Coraline* and *The Wolves in the Walls*, are subversive, cuddle-up-and-shudder favorites. (Related audio: [Listen to Neil Gaiman talk about his work](#))



Members of the endless from *The Sandman*.

Now the book world is anticipating the return after seven years of Gaiman's most famous character, the Sandman, the tormented Dream King who rules the world of our nightmares but who can find no rest of his own.

Words of Neil Gaiman

Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* takes place in *The Dreaming*, where a squabbling family of demigods called "The Endless" carry on a cosmic soap opera worthy of mythological prime time. Some musings:

Dream

"Tell me, Lucifer. What power would Hell have if those imprisoned were not able to dream of Heaven?"

Death

"When the first living thing existed, I was there waiting. When the last living thing dies, my job will be finished. I'll put

With 7 million comic books and graphic novels in print, the character made the soft-spoken writer a favorite on the **cult-and-angst** circuit. *Sandman* just might be the smartest comic book ever written.

Fans are evangelical. He's friends with Tori Amos, hailed by Norman Mailer. A poster of Gaiman's dysfunctional family of godlings from *The Sandman*—Dream and his siblings Death, Desire, Destiny, Destruction, Delirium and Despair — was hung each week in rebellious Darlene's room on Roseanne.

"I don't tend to look at it as conquering the world," says Gaiman, 42, choosing each word as deliberately as he fills thought balloons, in an interview from his home in Menomonie, Wis.

"It's really fun to have a comic book out. You're doing these numbers, and you're read, and yet nobody knows you. I continue to be The Most Famous Writer Nobody's Ever Heard Of. I don't think that's necessarily a very bad thing to be, but it's a very odd thing to be."

the chairs on the tables, turn out the lights and lock the universe behind me as I leave."

Desire

"Human beings are the creatures of Desire. They twist and bend as I require it. If I thought otherwise, I would crack, like Delirium."

Despair

"She is in a thousand thousand waiting rooms and empty streets in grey concrete buildings and anonymous hotels. She is on the other side of every mirror."

Destruction

"Poor Despair. I remember when first she became Desire's twin."

Destiny

"Not even Destiny knows where each twist and turn will lead. Even if Destiny could tell you, he will not. Destiny holds his secrets."

Delirium

"Have you ever spent days and days and days making up flavors of ice cream that no one's ever eaten before? Green mouse ice cream was the worst. I didn't like that at all."

"Neil seems very nice," says songwriter and creative soul mate Amos, "but don't let that fool you. He's a very dangerous man!"

Dangerous or not, the book industry hopes Sandman: Endless Nights, a hardcover collection of seven stories — released Wednesday and illustrated by a who's-who of American and European artists — will kick the \$100 million graphic-novel category into higher profitability.

"This is absolutely his day in the sun," enthuses Maggie Thompson, editor of industry newsletter Comic Buyers Guide. "I won't say the field wouldn't be here today without him, but it can only have profited from his experience."

Comic books used to cost a dime and sell in the millions. Now they are in ever-pricier formats and are sold at bookstores. Much of that is a result of Gaiman's head-turning work on the Sandman from 1988 to 1996.

So great is the demand for new Sandman tales that the hardbound Endless Nights has a record first printing of 100,000 copies priced at \$24.95.

"Anyone you hand the book to says, 'Wow,' " says Paul Levitz, publisher of DC's Vertigo Comics, which has a huge stake in matching the success that such collections enjoy in Europe and Japan. "What Neil and his collaborators have achieved is America's first world-class graphic novel."

On the Gaiman bandwagon

Graphic novels "are of utmost importance," says Joe Quesada, editor in chief of DC's chief competitor, Marvel Comics. "Newsstands are going the way of the dinosaur, and there's been a huge increase in our business thanks to the bookstore trade."

Marvel, too, is on the Gaiman bandwagon with the release of 7602, his six-part look at the X-Men set in 17th-century England. It was the best-selling comic book in America in August, and will hit bookstores in a collection once

the run is done.

"It was fantastic to land Neil," Quesada says. "Something's happening out there, and Neil is in the forefront of the resurgence."

All this began when Gaiman, part of a restless pool of comic-book intellectuals from England, persuaded DC to give him a shot at reviving a forgotten crimefighter from the 1930s, the Sandman.

Gaiman and illustrators Sam Kieth and Mike Dringenberg ignored superhero restrictions and renamed him Dream, a new Sandman who ruled the dreams of mortals. For 76 issues, the stories were about myths and death, Shakespeare and Ramadan, tales told from the edges about doomed heroes, hope and hypocrisies.

In one story, a bored Lucifer gives up the keys to Hell and walks away like an absentee landlord. In another, a meeting of nerds in the Midwest turns out to be a convention for serial killers.

"Sandman was always a big resilient structure that was never about superheroes," Gaiman says of his eight-year run. "The giant 2,000-page story is an enormously upbeat tragedy, if such a thing is possible."

The series grew in reputation when the stories were reprinted in 10 best-selling collections.

The saga was helped along enormously by Gaiman's invention of six other members of "The Endless" family, including Dream's terrible sister Death, who is always drawn as a Winona Ryder-type teenager.

"One by one, you will all come to me," Death tells the gods and mortals in Sandman stories.

Amos was so taken by the stories that she included the line "Hanging out with the Dream King" in her *Tear in Your Heart* song in 1990.

Gaiman met her in London and they became artistic buddies. Gaiman wrote much of his epic novel, *American Gods*, at Amos' beach houses in Florida and **Ireland**.

"Neil does his research and knows his archetypes," says Amos. "You really have to do character studies of the myths. You can't just do Athena 'your way,' because if you do, it won't be true."

Their give-and-take works, Amos says, because "first of all, we can't fire each other. We want the other one to win, not getting anything out of it except the happiness of the work. I tell him, 'I'd rather hear it from you, Neil, than read it in *The New York Times*.' "

Fan speculation has flourished at this meeting of mysticism's two cultural bookends, but Amos says they are "sister-brother. We're not kissing cousins."

Says Gaiman: "Tori's someone I'd known forever as soon as we met. It was like discovering a sister, or an oldest friend I didn't know I had. She's fairy godmother to my daughter, and I'm fairy godfather to her daughter."

Gaiman, his hair tousled Tim Burton-style and wearing black T-shirts by Armani, lives in a 123-year-old "Addams Family house" with his wife and college-age kids. He has lived there since 1992, so long that when he goes back to England, "I don't know if I'm English anymore. I've achieved a general state of 'You're not from around here, are you?' "

The Dream weaver

The decision to return to Sandman was not a hard one.

"When I stopped doing Sandman in 1996, people said, 'Why? Do you hate the character or something?' I said, 'No, no, I love these characters. That's why I'm going to stop.' When I came back to them, they were still waiting for me."

Gaiman's enthusiasm grew when he was able to line up superstar illustrators from Europe, such as Milo Manara and Miguelanxo Prado, all but unknown in the USA.

'You get things like the Delirium story, where I essentially write about madness from five different points of view. I do things like the Destruction story, the Desire story. In the Dream story, I get to tell the first-ever Sandman story, which was really fun, almost a 'secret origins.' "

Gaiman stops the show with a withering sequence called "15 portraits of Despair," with artist Barron Storey. "I felt that was about as 'out there' as anything I've ever done, challenging what makes comics, what we can do with words and with pictures.

"That's the joy of comics. It really is that 'picture worth a thousand words' thing. It's the joy of looking at Will Eisner's work, where one raised eyebrow, one tiny fraction of a line, says more about what's going on inside a character's heart than anything a writer could possibly say."

Gaiman is a big draw at bookstores. He signed copies of *American Gods* in June 2001 at the Borders at 5 World Trade Center, which was destroyed three months later.

"They just reopened down on Wall Street, and I went and did a signing there," Gaiman says quietly. "It felt very appropriate, and I wanted to show my support for that store, and those people."

"In a sense, it was a homecoming," says **Daryl Mattson**, a spokesman for the relocated Borders Wall Street. "His fan base has grown so much over the years. There are people who arrive hours ahead of time at the signings just to get a glimpse of Neil. *Endless Nights* is going to be huge."

Asked about his appeal, Amos says Gaiman tries to describe how characters "taste in their mouth."

"We all have different combinations," she says. "You can see it when someone walks in a room. Maybe there's lots of Destiny and very little Delirium. We're able to play out these different parts of ourselves."

And Neil Gaiman, the creator of Dream. Is he, in truth, the Sandman?

"Of **course**," says Amos. "But he's all of them. Despair, I think he knows. I think he enjoys Desire sometimes. He enjoys them all." She laughs. "That's his big lie."

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