

features

Fantastist Neil Gaiman Returns to the Graphic-Novel Series That Made Him Famous

Re-enter Sandman

by John Giuffo

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Bill Sienkiewicz's art for "Delirium," a chapter in the latest *Sandman* installment. (illustration: Bill Sienkiewicz/Courtesy DC Comics)

Neil Gaiman's improbable recipe for delicious literary success: Take one young British journalist disillusioned with the comics he loved as a teen, introduce an issue of Alan Moore's early-'80s boundary-expanding *Swamp Thing*, stir in a formerly cornball but reclaimed Golden Age DC Comics character called Sandman, season liberally with history, myth, and biblical allegory, stir in generous helpings of word of mouth, and simmer for eight years. Let congeal, then cut into 11 volumes. When cool, add a healthy dollop of gripping fantastic prose, a dash of TV fame (preferably of the BBC miniseries variety), and swaddle in black. Garnish with more Sandman for texture. Serves millions.

One glance at the giddy crowd during a Gaiman reading held last month at the Wall Street Borders and it's obvious just how popular he is. While he read from *The Wolves in the Walls*, his latest book for children, it's safe to say that most in attendance were drawn by their love of Gaiman's brooding, lanky personification of dreams, the Sandman. After a seven-year break from writing the fantastical-historical-mythical stories that made him famous, Gaiman has returned to his best-loved characters with *The Sandman: Endless Nights*, a dizzyingly lush grouping of seven tales, each focused on a different sibling in the family known as the Endless. The intervening years have been busy ones for the prolific Gaiman—three children's books, three novels, two collections, and a smattering of TV and movie projects—but it's still *The Sandman* that inspires the most fervent dedication.

Lisa Feuer is one such devotee: a thin, pale goth mom—that's right, a goth mom—who brought her 13-month-old son, Sasha, to the signing. "He actually came to Neil's last signing when he was 10 days old," beams Feuer, an a&r rep for darkwave label Projekt Records.

When I tell Gaiman at a breakfast interview the following day that I don't want to pigeonhole him, but that I plan to quote her for this piece, he chuckles and says, "Of course you will." The 43-year-old Gaiman has a well-earned reputation for being generous to his readers, usually staying at readings for hours until every last fan gets a signature. "But for every goth mom, you have a skinny art chick or a tall science fiction fan or a grandma," he says. "The thing that fascinates me is this incredibly weird, wonderful cross section."

Credit his ever diversifying body of work, from the Douglas Adams-y comic novel *Good Omens* (co-written with Terry Pratchett) to his New York *Times* bestseller, *American Gods*, to his growing collection of children's books. In addition to attracting an increasingly eclectic readership, Gaiman's forays into prose fiction have had the effect of getting his comics



Neil Gaiman
(photo: Jorde.com)

work—and, indeed, the comics medium—taken more seriously by mainstream media bent on infantilizing the form.

That's not to say that Gaiman set out to create a seminal, genre-busting work of modern mythmaking. "When I was writing *Sandman*, if I had an agenda, the agenda was purely and simply the idea of, 'Can I write a comic that will get somebody like me to go down to a comics shop once a month and spend money to find out what happens next?'" he says. "I was my audience."

Luckily, that audience has grown: The *Sandman* series has sold over 7 million copies to date, in 19 countries and 13 languages. DC Comics is betting that *Endless Nights* will be a huge hit, and Gaiman expects that it will be the first graphic novel since Art Spiegelman's 1992 Pulitzer-winning *Maus* to reach the Times bestseller list.

One look at the book proves that such hopes aren't unfounded. With illustrations by an impressive group of international artists, including Barron Storey, Bill Sienkiewicz, and Miguelanxo Prado, *Endless Nights* both delivers on the high expectations of longtime readers and surprises with its millennium-spanning variety. Each of the seven short stories focuses on one member of the Endless family—Death, Desire, Dream (the Sandman), Despair, Delirium, Destruction, and Destiny—and explores the histories and evolution of these anthropomorphized manifestations of human constants. Whereas Gaiman's *Sandman* series, which ran from 1988 to 1996, often used the title character to explore mythology and history through the prism of Dream, and of dreams, this latest installment uses contemporary allusion and mythological allegory to explore the roles played by the seven Endless siblings in human—and cosmic—events. They aren't gods, Gaiman takes pains to explain, though they are godlike, and their existence doesn't depend on belief in them (a theme Gaiman visited in *American Gods*, to a different, though familiar, end).

One of the most impressive stories in *Endless Nights* is the second, "What I've Tasted of Desire." Set in a medieval Nordic village, it tells the tale of a beautiful townswoman who wants nothing more than to capture the heart of the tribe's comely, virile prince. She finds his philandering infuriating, however, and she seeks out the assistance of the hermaphroditic Desire in her efforts to snag her man. Her mastery of desire (though, finally, not of Desire) proves to be, for all of its thirst-quenching satisfaction, but one early, oft remembered episode in her otherwise unremarkable life. Gaiman had Italian eroticist Milo Manara's work in mind when he wrote the tale, and the final product is a seamless melding of the author's mytho-historical storytelling skill and of Manara's Heavy *Metal*-style spank-mag tendencies. It's an amazing instance of an author bringing out an artist's best, and, without revealing too much, the last page is a prime example of something that's only possible in comics. "That's my fuck-off page," explains Gaiman. "If you're telling me that comics are a lesser medium, you can fuck off because you can't do this in any other medium."

Even without the novels, the children's books, the BBC miniseries (*Neverwhere*), and the movies-in-development (his *Sandman* onetime spin-off *Death: The High Cost of Living* is slated to start production next year), Gaiman still would have had a profound impact on comics, opening the form up to new styles, subjects, and possibilities.

"I remember once ranting [about the state of the comics industry] to Dave Sim, who did *Cerebus*, and he said, 'So what are you doing about it?'" Gaiman says. "And I thought about it for a minute, and I said, Well, I'm writing good comics. And I'm really pleased I did, because now I can look at those 10 volumes of *Sandman* and go, Look, this was something that meant something."