

Praise for Neil Gaiman

'Gaiman is god in the universe of story' Stephen Fry

'A very fine and imaginative writer' *The Sunday Times*

'Fantasy rooted in the darkest corners of reality' *Independent on Sunday*

'Gaiman is a master of fear, and he understands the nature of fairytales' A S Byatt, *Guardian*

'Gaiman's achievement is to make the fantasy world seem true' *The Times*

'In prose that dances and dazzles, Gaiman describes the indescribable' Susanna Clarke

'One of the best fabulists of our age' *Financial Times*

'Gaiman is, simply put, a treasure-house of story, and we are lucky to have him' Stephen King

'His mind is a dark, fathomless ocean, and every time I sink into it, this world fades, replaced by one far more terrible and beautiful in which I will happily drown' *New York Times Book Review*

'A rich imagination... and an ability to tackle large themes' Philip Pullman

'He's the master of fantasy and realism twisted together' Hugo Rifkind, *Spectator*

'A power that defies explanation' *Sunday Express*

'Neil Gaiman is a star. He constructs stories like some demented cook might make a wedding cake, building layer upon layer, including all kinds of sweet and sour in the mix' Clive Barker

By Neil Gaiman and published by Headline

The View From The Cheap Seats
Trigger Warning
The Ocean at the End of the Lane
Fragile Things
Anansi Boys
American Gods
Stardust
Smoke and Mirrors
Nowhere

How the Marquis Got His Coat Back
(a *Nowhere* short story)

Illustrated editions

American Gods
Anansi Boys
The Monarch of the Glen
Black Dog
(illustrated by Daniel Egnéus)

Nowhere
(illustrated by Chris Riddell)

The Truth is a Cave in the Black Mountains
(illustrated by Eddie Campbell)

How to Talk to Girls at Parties
(adaptation and artwork by Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá)

Troll Bridge
(adaptation and artwork by Colleen Doran)

Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House
of the Night of Dread Desire
(adaptation and artwork by Shane Oakley)

MirrorMask: The Illustrated Film Script
(with Dave McKean)

NEIL
GAIMAN
AMERICAN
GODS



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For absent friends – Kathy Acker and
Roger Zelazny, and all points between

Jangal Publication

Caveat, and Warning for Travelers

This is a work of fiction, not a guidebook. While the geography of the United States of America in this tale is not entirely imaginary – many of the landmarks in this book can be visited, paths can be followed, ways can be mapped – I have taken liberties. Fewer liberties than you might imagine, but liberties nonetheless.

Permission has neither been asked nor given for the use of real places in this story when they appear: I expect that the owners of Rock City or the House on the Rock, and the hunters who own the motel in the centre of America are as perplexed as anyone would be to find their properties here.

I have obscured the location of several of the places in this book: the town of Lakeside, for example, and the farm with the ash-tree an hour south of Blacksburg. You may look for them if you wish. You might even find them. Furthermore, it goes without saying that all of the people, living, dead and otherwise in this story are fictional or used in a fictional context. Only the gods are real.

One question that has always intrigued me is what happens to demonic beings when immigrants move from their homelands. Irish-Americans remember the fairies, Norwegian-Americans the *nisser*, Greek-Americans the *vrykólakas*, but only in relation to events remembered in the Old Country. When I once asked why such demons are not seen in America, my informants giggled confusedly and said, 'They're scared to pass the ocean, it's too far,' pointing out that Christ and the apostles never came to America.

Richard Dorson, 'A Theory for American Folklore',
American Folklore and the Historian, (University of Chicago
Press, 1971)

Introduction to This Text

The book you're holding is slightly different from the version of the book that was previously published.

I wrote *American Gods* over a couple of years between 1999 and 2001. I wanted it to be a number of things. I wanted to write a book that was big and odd and meandering, and I did. I finished it, eventually, and I handed it in, taking a certain amount of comfort in the old saying that a novel can best be defined as a long piece of prose with something wrong with it, and I was fairly sure that I'd written one of those. My editor was concerned that the book was slightly too big and too meandering (she didn't mind it being too odd), and she wanted me to trim it, and I did. I suspect her instincts may have been right, for the book was very successful – it sold many copies, and it was given a number of awards including the Nebula and the Hugo awards (for, primarily, SF), the Bram Stoker award (for horror), the Locus award (for fantasy), demonstrating that it may have been a fairly odd novel and that even if it was popular nobody was quite certain which box it belonged in. And, of course, that people liked it.

Two of the people who liked it were Pete Atkins and Peter

Schneider, the partners in Hill House, Publishers, a small press book publisher, who, a few years later, arranged with the book's US publishers to do a small press edition of *American Gods*. As they told me about the wonderful treats they had planned for the limited edition – something they planned to be a miracle of the book-maker's art – I began feeling more and more uncomfortable with the text that they would be using.

Would they, I enquired rather diffidently, be willing to use my original, untrimmed text?

As it turned out, they would.

And then it became more complicated, as I realized that, of course, *after* I had trimmed *American Gods*, I had made other editorial corrections and changes, many of which were for the better. So the only way someone could create a definitive *American Gods* text would be by comparing my final, unedited version with my final edited version, and then with the final printed version (because I had cheerfully scrawled changes on the galley proofs, and just as cheerfully not actually bothered to keep track of them), and then making a number of judgement calls.

It was going to be an enormous amount of work. So I did the only sane thing under the circumstances that I could do: I sent several enormous computer files and two copies of the book (the English and the American editions) to Pete Atkins, along with my list of errors and typos I'd noticed since the book was published, and I asked him to sort it out. He did, excellently. Then I took the manuscript that Pete had prepared and went through it myself, fixing things and tidying and sometimes restoring cuts I'd made for a reason that wasn't just making it a bit shorter, to come up with a final version of the text that I was perfectly happy with, given that a novel is always, at least for the author, a long piece of prose with something wrong with it.

Hill House published it in a very nice (and expensive) limited edition of about 750 copies (described as 'a miracle

of the book-maker's art' and not by them this time). They sent the books out along with free 'reader's copies' so the person who had bought the book could read the expanded text without worrying about getting jam stains on any of the pages.

When Headline Books decided it was time to reissue all my novels in this extremely elegant uniform edition, they enquired whether it would be possible to add anything to any of the books, as extra value for the readers – interviews and suchlike. In the case of *American Gods*, I had an entire book that I wanted people to read. This version of *American Gods* is about twelve thousand words longer than the one that won all the awards, and it's the version of which I'm the most proud.

I'm grateful that Headline were willing to publish the expanded version of the book, and I would particularly like to thank Pete Atkins for his help in the preparation of this manuscript.

On a plane to Singapore, 3 July, 2005

Part One
SHADOWS

Jangal Publication

Chapter One

The boundaries of our country, sir? Why sir, onto the north we are bounded by the Aurora Borealis, on the east we are bounded by the rising sun, on the south we are bounded by the procession of the Equinoxes, and on the west by the Day of Judgement.

– The American Joe Miller's Jest Book

Shadow had done three years in prison. He was big enough, and looked don't-fuck-with-me enough that his biggest problem was killing time. So he kept himself in shape, and taught himself coin tricks, and thought a lot about how much he loved his wife.

The best thing – in Shadow's opinion, perhaps the only good thing – about being in prison was a feeling of relief. The feeling that he'd plunged as low as he could plunge and he'd hit bottom. He didn't worry that the man was going to get him, because the man had got him. He did not awake in prison with a feeling of dread; he was no longer scared of what tomorrow might bring, because yesterday had brought it.

It did not matter, Shadow decided, if you had done what

you had been convicted of or not. In his experience everyone he met in prison was aggrieved about something: there was always something the authorities had got wrong, something they said you did when you didn't – or you didn't do quite like they said you did. What was important was that they had got you.

He had noticed it in the first few days, when everything, from the slang to the bad food, was new. Despite the misery and the utter skin-crawling horror of incarceration, he was breathing relief.

Shadow tried not to talk too much. Somewhere around the middle of year two he mentioned his theory to Low Key Lyesmith, his cell-mate.

Low Key, who was a grifter from Minnesota, smiled his scarred smile. 'Yeah,' he said. 'That's true. It's even better when you've been sentenced to death. That's when you remember the jokes about the guys who kicked their boots off as the noose flipped around their necks, because their friends always told them they'd die with their boots on.'

'Is that a joke?' asked Shadow.

'Damn right. Gallows humor. Best kind there is – bang, the worst has happened. You get a few days for it to sink in, then you're riding the cart on your way to do the dance on nothing.'

'When did they last hang a man in this state?' asked Shadow.

'How the hell should I know?' Lyesmith kept his orange-blond hair pretty much shaved. You could see the lines of his skull. 'Tell you what, though. This country started going to hell when they stopped hanging folks. No gallows dirt. No gallows deals.'

Shadow shrugged. He could see nothing romantic in a death sentence.

If you didn't have a death sentence, he decided, then prison was, at best, only a temporary reprieve from life, for two reasons. First, life creeps back into prison. There are

always places to go further down, even when you've been taken off the board; life goes on, even if it's life under a microscope or life in a cage. And second, if you just hang in there, some day they're going to have to let you out.

In the beginning it was too far away for Shadow to focus on. Then it became a distant beam of hope, and he learned how to tell himself 'this too shall pass' when the prison shit went down, as prison shit always did. One day the magic door would open and he'd walk through it. So he marked off the days on his *Songbirds of North America* calendar, which was the only calendar they sold in the prison commissary, and the sun went down and he didn't see it and the sun came up and he didn't see it. He practiced coin tricks from a book he found in the wasteland of the prison library; and he worked out; and he made lists in his head of what he'd do when he got out of prison.

Shadow's lists got shorter and shorter. After two years he had it down to three things.

First, he was going to take a bath. A real, long, serious soak, in a tub with bubbles in. Maybe read the paper, maybe not. Some days he thought one way, some days the other.

Second he was going to towel himself off, put on a robe. Maybe slippers. He liked the idea of slippers. If he smoked he would be smoking a pipe about now, but he didn't smoke. He would pick up his wife in his arms ('Puppy,' she would squeal in mock horror and real delight, 'what are you doing?'). He would carry her into the bedroom, and close the door. They'd call out for pizzas if they got hungry.

Third, after he and Laura had come out of the bedroom, maybe a couple of days later, he was going to keep his head down and stay out of trouble for the rest of his life.

'And then you'll be happy?' asked Low Key Lyesmith. That day they were working in the prison shop, assembling bird-feeders, which was barely more interesting than stamping out license plates.

'Call no man happy,' said Shadow, 'until he is dead.'

'Herodotus,' said Low Key. 'Hey. You're learning.'

'Who the fuck's Herodotus?' asked the Iceman, slotting together the sides of a birdfeeder, and passing it to Shadow, who bolted and screwed it tight.

'Dead Greek,' said Shadow.

'My last girlfriend was Greek,' said the Iceman. 'The shit her family ate. You would not believe. Like rice wrapped in leaves. Shit like that.'

The Iceman was the same size and shape as a Coke machine, with blue eyes and hair so blonde it was almost white. He had beaten the crap out of some guy who had made the mistake of copping a feel off his girlfriend in the bar where she danced and the Iceman bounced. The guy's friends had called the police, who arrested the Iceman and ran a check on him which revealed that the Iceman had walked from a work-release program eighteen months earlier.

'So what was I supposed to do?' asked the Iceman, aggrieved, when he had told Shadow the whole sad tale. 'I'd told him she was my girlfriend. Was I supposed to let him disrespect me like that? Was I? I mean, he had his hands all over her.'

Shadow had said something meaningless like 'You tell 'em,' and left it at that. One thing he had learned early, you do your own time in prison. You don't do anyone else's time for them.

Keep your head down. Do your own time.

Lyesmith had loaned Shadow a battered paperback copy of Herodotus's *Histories* several months earlier. 'It's not boring. It's cool,' he said, when Shadow protested that he didn't read books. 'Read it first, then tell me it's cool.'

Shadow had made a face, but he had started to read, and had found himself hooked against his will.

'Greeks,' said the Iceman, with disgust. 'And it ain't true what they say about them, neither. I tried giving it to my girlfriend in the ass, she almost clawed my eyes out.'