

MAGAZINE

# Neil Gaiman's Books Have Enchanted Millions. Finally, Hollywood Is on Board.

'The Sandman' and other morally complicated Gaiman creations are finding their way to screens — just when we need them most

By Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson

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**I**t's a spring evening, and the Miller Theater in Center City, Philadelphia, is bursting with an excited crowd. Patrons serpentine the lobby waiting to buy presigned books by the British author Neil Gaiman. Gaiman, whom Stephen King once heralded as a “treasure-house of story,” had to stop live signings because readers would queue several city blocks outside his events. During his final signing tour in 2013, as he inked his name and personal notes in thousands of books, Gaiman took to plunging his aching arm in a bucket of ice on the advice of a physical therapist.

Tonight's event has been billed as "An Evening With Neil Gaiman," and it's a reschedule from 2020, after a plot twist worthy of one of his stories shuttered the world. Gaiman often writes about the macabre — the coming apocalypse, journeys to Hell, life in a graveyard, campfire-quality horror — and yet his work carries a compassionate generosity, a dark humor that revels in the exquisite muddle that is a human life. His characters are frequently normal people bumping up against the fantastical, where they must contend with witches and gods — or, as in the novel "Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch" (1990), which he co-wrote with the late British author Terry Pratchett, an angel and a demon who have followed humanity since the time of the poisoned apple and have forged an unlikely friendship and a love of us mortals.

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# The Washington Post Magazine



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The FBI found Dorothy's stolen ruby slippers. But who was the thief?

“Neil breaks life down to the fundamentals of what it is that makes us human,” the actor Jon Hamm tells me. Hamm started reading Gaiman’s novels, including “Good Omens,” around the time he moved to Los Angeles to pursue acting, and now he plays a role in the Amazon Studios and BBC Studios series based on the book. (Amazon founder Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.) “It’s not about what makes us American, or what makes us Black or White or any of the labels that we’ve established for ourselves over the course of however many millennia we’ve been here, but what it is that connects us.”

Entire families, some three generations deep, are here to see Gaiman tonight, and what they buy reflects his genre-busting reach. There are board books for children; novels, like “American Gods” (2001), which showcases Gaiman’s capacity to blend fantasy, folklore and myth; and multiple collections of short stories and essays. And then there are the dictionary-size volumes of “The Sandman,” the series that arguably put Gaiman on the map. Published by DC Comics between 1989 and 1996, the 76 issues of “The Sandman,” which many critics agree helped usher in the golden age of the contemporary graphic novel, tell the story of Morpheus, King of the Dreaming, and his godlike siblings who include Death and Destiny. In the sprawling tale, Morpheus struggles to regain control of his Dream world after being captured by humans dabbling in the occult.

“The Sandman” was a revelation when it came out, according to the comedian and actor Patton Oswalt, who met Gaiman in the 1990s when he was one of the many fans waiting in a long signing line. Oswalt had first read “The Sandman” in college. “I could not believe how amazing it was,” he says, because “it contained universes. I had never seen that done in a comic so perfectly.”

And yet, for the better part of Gaiman’s career, only a few of his novels and short stories made it to screens, notably “Stardust” and “Coraline.” Many of his most formative books and graphic novels proved difficult to translate. Gaiman used, as his storytelling framework for “The Sandman,” the entirety of history, bringing in figures from Norse gods and Lucifer to Shakespeare and Mark Twain. He also creates characters that are rarely simple binaries of good or evil, reflecting the baffling complexity of human nature.

“All of the things that made ‘Sandman’ wonderful were the same things that made it almost impossible to adapt for film and television for 30 years,” says David S. Goyer, a filmmaker and producer who was a co-writer on the “Dark Knight” Batman trilogy. “All of the features that we love about ‘Sandman’ — that it is, in essence, a story about stories — are the bugs that stymied Hollywood.”

Today that is no longer the case. Quietly and steadily over the past six years, Gaiman has matched some of the most prolific creators in Hollywood. And after 32 years trapped in the purgatory of Hollywood development, a 10-episode series based on “The Sandman” will premiere on Netflix on Aug. 5. Developed by Gaiman, Goyer and writer Allan Heinberg, it represents one of the streaming service’s biggest-budget original productions. Meanwhile, Gaiman’s 2005 novel “Anansi Boys,” a modern twist on the ancient stories of the West African trickster god Anansi, is now an Amazon Studios series in postproduction, and “Good Omens” recently wrapped filming its second season. These follow on the heels of the series “American Gods,” which premiered in 2017 on Starz — earning two Emmy nominations for its first season — and aired its third season last year.

In total, Gaiman has seven shows that he has developed or that are based on his writing, with more in the works. He has become the great adapter, pulling from the store of fable and myth for his books, and transmogrifying his written work into radio and stage plays, audiobooks and movies. And now television.

Gaiman's books "couldn't get made in a three-network landscape," Hamm says, owing to their complexity. As television has matured, though, so too have the opportunities to tell more-nuanced stories. Shows like "The Wire," "The Sopranos," "Breaking Bad" and "Game of Thrones" have seasoned audiences with their myriad storylines and morally ambiguous characters, while the maturation of streaming services has allowed more niche stories to exist. This confluence of online viewing and marketplace readiness has led to a watershed moment for the adaptation of Gaiman's work. And the timing is ripe: In an era when public discourse so rarely reflects the complicated truth of our existence — when politics and punditry seem hellbent on reductionism and division — Neil Gaiman's intricacies may be exactly what we need.

**G**aiman, who was born in 1960 in Portchester, England, can credit his career, in some measure, to the British new wave band Duran Duran. He was 23 years old, a young father and freelance journalist who had skipped college to begin writing. A U.K. publisher asked if he'd like to pen a music biography. "I was offered three to choose from: Barry Manilow, Def Leppard or Duran Duran," Gaiman tells me over Zoom one evening — he in Scotland, I in Maryland. "And I thought: Barry Manilow has done a lot of albums and I don't want to listen to many of them. I don't really know anything about Def Leppard. So, I'll take Duran Duran."

He did the math: The advance would pay his rent for six months and allow him to buy an electric typewriter. He also calculated precisely how many books he would need to sell to begin earning royalties. The Duran Duran book was published in 1984 and quickly sold out. It was heading into a second printing, and to the promise of earning royalties, when the publisher declared bankruptcy. "I spent months of my life writing a book I wouldn't have wanted to read and I did it for the money — *I only* did it for the money — and now there is no more money," Gaiman says. "Had that book been successful, I probably would have written more books that I wouldn't have wanted to read."

Gaiman made himself a promise. "I wouldn't do anything just for the money, because if you don't get the money, you haven't got anything," he says. "But if I made something that I cared about and I never got the money, at least I had this thing I loved and could be proud of. Over the years, this philosophy has looked after me. When I stray from it, I get kicked in the teeth and am reminded that I should not have strayed."

He often credits his prolific career to a childhood spent in public libraries. He read Charles Dickens and many of the science fiction and fantasy greats, like Ray Bradbury, Madeleine L'Engle and G.K. Chesterton, who is one of Gaiman's many literary heroes. Reading so much as a kid was Gaiman's way of learning about both the world and the act of world building. "I was developing empathy, realizing and understanding that all the different incarnations of 'I' in stories, who were not me, were real, and passing on their wisdom and experience, allowing me to learn from their mistakes," he recounted during a 2012 lecture. "And I knew then, as I know now, that things need not have happened to be true."

Growing up in fictional landscapes — Narnia, Middle-earth, Asgard with the Norse gods, the woods of Grimm, the mythological worlds captured by writer Roger Lancelyn Green — led Gaiman to see “the sheer rightness” of these stories, he has said. He was also an ethnically Jewish kid who was raised by Scientologist parents and attended High Church of England schools. (Gaiman is not a Scientologist; rather, he says, he is “the kind of Jew who mostly just feels guilty for working through” the high holy days.) All those books, all those religions, blended into this “huge moldering sludge of loving ideas and all of the things people believe,” Gaiman explained in 2020 on the podcast of actor David Tennant, who co-stars in “Good Omens.” “I love the fact that humans are believing machines.”

Gaiman is the “epitome of the storyteller,” actor Tom Sturridge tells me, “and he does it in every form imaginable.” Sturridge stars in the lead role of Morpheus in the Netflix series, with Patton Oswalt voicing Matthew the Raven, his trusted emissary.

“The Sandman” comic book series came about after Gaiman had published his first comic in 1986. Karen Berger, then an editor at DC Comics, asked him if there might be a character in DC’s catalogue that he’d want to revive. Gaiman chose Sandman — a creation that had first appeared in the 1930s in the form of millionaire Wesley Dodds, a vigilante who donned a gas mask and sedated criminals at night for the police to find. The character of Sandman reappeared over time, including in a 1970s version where he lived in “the Dream Dome.” Gaiman carried over some general ideas from previous iterations, even as he embarked on a reinvention — abandoning Dodds and the entire superhero concept, and instead creating Morpheus, also known as Dream, a Sandman character capable of containing the vastness of human imagination.

Gaiman enjoyed the creative collaboration of comics, where writer, artist and letterer work in tandem to realize a story. He would call the artists before he began writing that month’s installment of “The Sandman” to ask what it was that they loved to draw, or always wanted to draw but were never given the chance to.

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# radio and stage plays, audiobooks and movies. And now television.

It is this spirit that likely helped prepare him for his later years working on television production sets. He is “quite generous” as he watches actors inhabit the characters he’s written, according to Michael Sheen, who plays the angel Aziraphale in “Good Omens” opposite David Tennant’s demon, Crowley. “The fact that I didn’t ever have to think about what was in Neil’s book while acting is a testament to Neil, because he never came up and said, ‘Actually, what I wrote was this,’ ” Sheen says. “Neil would be delighted, sitting there at the monitor watching me and David or whoever it was, doing something that wasn’t in the book. He’d be absolutely delighted, and if it didn’t work for the world he was building, he’d tell us.”

Gaiman’s literary choices weren’t always appreciated, though, and he was sometimes marginalized. In 1999, he was invited to give a lecture at a university — he had three novels published by then — and “on the way to the talk, a member of the art department casually mentioned that there wouldn’t be anybody at my talk from the English department,” he recalls. “They were boycotting it since I wrote comics.”

While academia may have taken its time in embracing Gaiman’s work, his readers never did. “The Sandman” became one of DC’s most popular and profitable titles. With its success, Gaiman could have comfortably made a living within the world of comics — yet he had wider interests. Merrilee Heifetz, of the New York-based literary agency Writers House, has been Gaiman’s agent since 1987 and is his manager. She remembers him telling her during their first meeting in New York: “I’m going to write novels. I’m going to write movies. I have lots and lots of plans for my stories.” The conversation turned out to be the literary equivalent of Babe Ruth pointing to the outfield and then hitting a home run precisely in that spot. “He did everything that he said he was going to do,” Heifetz says.

More so than many authors, Gaiman has developed a relationship with his fans. He attended Comic-Con and sci-fi and fantasy conventions starting in the 1980s, and began blogging in 2001. He has a Twitter following of 2.9 million and a Tumblr account where he answers fans’ questions. This direct line to his readership has afforded him a “critic-proof career,” as he told the *New Yorker* in a 2010 profile, and it is why, even today, he doesn’t bother with a publicist.

Now, the academics who once spurned him put his books on their syllabi. And Gaiman has returned the sentiment. “I’ve always had a healthy respect for academia,” he wrote in 2006 in the introduction to “The Sandman Papers: An Exploration of The Sandman Mythology,” one of the many academic books that parse his work. “Even when puzzled by it, it treats art as if it matters. And for those of us who make art, that’s a fine thing to experience.”

**M**aking art in the sausage factory that is Hollywood can be a daunting endeavor. There's a short story — collected in Gaiman's 1998 anthology of short fiction, "Smoke and Mirrors" — that's loosely based on Gaiman's first experience in Los Angeles. In it, a British author has optioned his novel to a movie studio in Hollywood and is flown first class to help adapt the book into a film. The fictional writer quickly learns that everyone from the taxi driver to the bellhop has a script they're peddling, and the land of sunshine and silicone has a surface-level sheen that belies a dark vapidness.

Our protagonist is shuttled to a series of meetings where "I didn't quite catch anybody's name" and "the men had beards or baseball caps or both; the women were astoundingly attractive, in a sanitary sort of way." Everyone tells him how much they love the book, and also why it needs to be drastically overhauled.

The story is, partly, about that dizzying feeling of being an outsider in a world that appears to be running via inscrutable inner machinations. It is, like many Gaiman stories, about a character on the margins of the mainstream. "I can feel like a fraud," Gaiman tells me. "You know, the impostor syndrome thing is very real.

But if Gaiman has struggled at times with how he fits in, he has still pursued control over how his stories could be imagined for TV and film. He created the Blank Corp. decades ago as a way to manage his screenwriting projects (he's written for shows like the BBC's "Doctor Who") and the optioning of his novels. By 2016, with so much interest in his work, Gaiman formally launched it as a production company. Soon after, he was helping to adapt what others had spent decades struggling with: his own work.

"I think Neil was nervous about entering this space," Hamm says. "It's an endeavor that can be very intimidating, you know, when you're so good at one thing and then you're asked to do another thing. It can be a gut-check moment." Hamm and Gaiman got to know each other several years ago at an event; there Hamm told him how much he loved "Good Omens." For the series, Gaiman created a new character, the archangel Gabriel, and he emailed Hamm to ask him to play the part. Hamm replied with one word — "YES" — without ever having read the scripts. "I knew I was in very good hands," the actor says.

If Gaiman were to write a character to play the role of his partner in crime in Hollywood, it would be Cat Mihos, vice president of the Blank Corp. With a veritable mane of thick black hair and half sleeves of tattoos on her arms, Mihos looks like she could have walked off the pages of one of her boss's books. Like many of Gaiman's collaborators, Mihos, who grew up in the suburbs outside D.C., started off as a fan. (I first met Mihos in Baltimore in the 1990s, and the two of us worked for many years as "roadies" for the same music tour production company.)

She later met Gaiman while working on tour for the musician Tori Amos, one of Gaiman's close friends, and by 2006, Mihos was helping Gaiman in Los Angeles as he met with studio executives and as she established a merchandise line for his fans. There was a desire by some, as Gaiman's star began to rise, to commodify him, but "he never wanted to be a brand," Mihos says. To this day, much of his merchandise, like broadsides of poems, are used as fundraisers for literacy causes or for his work with the U.N. Refugee Agency (Gaiman's Jewish cousins escaped the Nazis thanks to the help of the resistance).

Mihos, like Gaiman, is a Hollywood outsider — someone who wasn't reared within the studio system — and together, they've helmed or participated in adaptations of "The Sandman," "American Gods," "Good Omens" and "Anansi Boys," among others. Gaiman has had overall deals with Fremantle and Amazon Studios to develop and create movies and shows — some based on his published writing and some that he is developing with different writers.

Unlike his other work, where Gaiman has strategically optioned or retained the rights for development, the character of Sandman was always a property of DC Comics. Warner Bros. started considering an adaptation of "The Sandman" as early as 1990. Lisa Henson, daughter of Muppets creator Jim Henson, was a Warner Bros. executive at the time, and the two met on one of his early trips to L.A. Henson told him that there was a lot of interest in making "The Sandman" into a movie and he remembers her asking, "What do you think?" Gaiman asked her to please hold off. The comic was "just getting going and a movie would be a huge distraction," he says. Henson told Gaiman that he was the first writer ever to come into her office and ask her *not* to make a movie. (The two became friends, and Gaiman's production company is now housed on the Jim Henson Co. lot in Hollywood.)

It wasn't long, though, before Warner Bros. tried again, and "The Sandman" spent years toggling between different producers, directors and writers who would on occasion consult with the story's creator about their plans. Gaiman often said that he would rather not see a "Sandman" movie or show ever get made than witness a poor one be greenlit.

People were "banging their heads against walls, I think, trying to find a way to make a single story work and still be able to tell the multiple stories that Gaiman composed in 'Sandman,'" Michael Sheen tells me. "I think the only way you can make it work, really, is by telling it as a multi-episode story with multilayered characters. And, you know, that time has come."

It wasn't until David Goyer became attached to the project in 2013 and insisted that Gaiman be involved as an executive producer that the author had an official role. "I can't believe I was the first person to suggest it, but no one had ever courted Neil," Goyer says. By 2016, after yet another writer quit — saying, according to Gaiman, that "it was impossible to squeeze 'Sandman' into a movie" — Warner Bros. agreed to make it a TV show. Goyer called Gaiman with the news, as Gaiman was on set filming the first season of "Good Omens."

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“Warner Brothers says we can make it as a series.”

Gaiman could hear there was more. “What’s the rub?”

“I want you to write it with me,” Goyer said.

It would be 2½ more years before their schedules aligned. Goyer also brought in Allan Heinberg as a writer and a showrunner because he was “someone who loved ‘Sandman’ as much as I did,” Goyer says. Goyer and Heinberg both tell me that they had read Gaiman for years, and they each have original ‘Sandman’ art that they acquired in their 20s. “There are all these executives and creatives in Hollywood today who grew up reading Neil, and now they are in a position to make his work,” Mihos says.

It can be challenging to adapt Gaiman, not just as a fan, but because “he’s so smart and because his reach and the amount that he’s read and absorbed is so vast,” says Heinberg, who is no stranger to adapting a cherished character — he was the screenwriter for the 2017 “Wonder Woman” movie. “Neil’s concerns are so profoundly intimate and loving, primarily, and I believe that’s why he’s so beloved and why his work continues to inspire people,” Heinberg tells me. “His writing is very intimate, and it’s very epic at the same time.”

The Friday before they were to pitch “The Sandman” as a series to streaming channels in June 2019, Goyer, Gaiman and Heinberg met for dinner in L.A. They made a pact. When they met with the streamers, they would, according to Goyer, act as a united front protecting the essence of “The Sandman.” They would take “all of the things that studios historically felt were bugs — things that were difficult to adapt — and we would present them as features,” he says.

One of the “bugs,” Mihos explains, is that there is no main villain. It took three decades for “The Sandman” to be adapted in part because people kept trying to fit a multilayered story into the superhero feature film trope. “They couldn’t understand that there wasn’t one single villain,” Mihos says.

In “The Sandman,” as in most of Gaiman’s stories, characters contain myriad, often contradictory truths. This is explained best perhaps in one of Gaiman’s novels, “The Ocean at the End of the Lane,” where one of the main characters tells the young protagonist that “nobody actually looks like what they really are on the inside. ... People are much more complicated than that.”

Now, in much the same way that Gaiman reimagined what a comic could be while writing “The Sandman,” he’s reworking the scope and aesthetic of the typical television series. The teaser trailer, released in June, features Sturridge, thin and pale and remarkably accurate to the Morpheus/Dream character depicted in the comics, after he’s been captured by humans. Over the 10-episode arc, viewers will be taken on a journey that spans thousands of years. “The tone varies wildly from episode to episode, just as the tone of ‘Sandman’ did, which is something that you don’t normally do in television,” Gaiman says. Episodes of television “are meant to feel and taste alike,” he explains, so that if you slice out one episode from a season, it still very much resembles the rest of the series. “But we’re doing it differently with ‘Sandman.’”

As “The Sandman” was wrapping filming in London, “Anansi Boys” was being filmed on a soundstage in Scotland. Hanelle M. Culpepper directed two episodes of “Anansi Boys,” including the pilot, which was written by Gaiman. Moving from the vastness of a Gaiman novel to the contained realities of filming on a soundstage was one of Culpepper’s challenges. “There are some times when you just cannot do what’s in the book for whatever reason — logistics, budget — and you have to come up with a different way of visually showing it,” Culpepper tells me. She has also directed episodes of “Picard” for the Star Trek franchise and grew up loving sci-fi and fantasy. She says the key to adapting a beloved text like “Anansi Boys” is to “always make sure that it’s fair to the essence of the book and is equally emotionally satisfying as it was for you when you first read it.”

Hamm says that when you see how different “Good Omens,” “Anansi Boys” and “The Sandman” are, “just in their radically different paths down which they take you, it’s really bold. And the fun thing here is that filmmaking has caught up to our ability to tell tremendously fantastical stories like these. And the marketplace has, too.”

**A**s I talked with colleagues and collaborators about Gaiman, many remarked at the serendipity of these stories finally arriving to us in 2022. “Sandman,” Heinberg says, is “profoundly timely” given how “universal all of our human concerns are, particularly at a time when our nation and our world are so divisive. We’re in all of these separate camps, usually demarcated by our religious affiliations and beliefs. But what you learn through this story is that no matter which religion you are, no matter which mythology you mine, all the human concerns are the same. And because dreams belong to all pantheons and all citizens, Neil is telling a story that transcends these divisions that we have built up in our cultures. ‘Sandman’ is really about how we are loving citizens of the world — and of the universe of which our world is a part. What Neil does so expertly is he doesn’t pretend that boundaries don’t exist, that those cultures don’t exist. He honors them, embraces all of them in a very loving way.”

Oswalt, one of the first actors to be attached to the “Sandman” series, believes the story is even more relevant 30 years on. “We’re living in a time where it feels like we’re in beta testing for how completely our reality can be manipulated,” he says. “Everyone has a camera in their pocket, everything is being documented. There are certain leaders who are saying that the thing that you just saw and heard is not what you saw and heard, and they’re seeing how far they can push that. There is a really dangerous, dark experiment going on right in front of us, and it’s fascinating to watch, but it’s terrible to live through.”

As the real world has become so manipulated, as it has become more and more difficult to discern real from false, it may be that our greatest truth tellers at present are the storytellers — the writers who remind us of the universal thread of narrative that’s been with us since the beginning. A return to the origin stories, the birth myths, feels like a salve. In his epigraph to “Coraline,” Gaiman sums up how he feels about stories like these with a quote that he adapted from G.K. Chesterton: “Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.” To go back to these stories is to remember that we are always and forever fighting the same dragons.

But perhaps nothing makes Gaiman’s work more relevant in 2022 than his approach to questions of good, evil and moral ambiguity. “Neil’s work generally has a thrilling balance of a universe that is full of malevolence and sinister elements and is truly terrifying, as well as a deep commitment and investment to goodness and compassion and empathy and kindness,” Sheen says. “He writes with real warmth and respect about human fallibility.”

I recently re-watched the first season of “Good Omens,” a show premised on an angel and a devil creating an unlikely alliance and friendship, and I couldn’t help but think about America’s broken bipartisanship and the global politics of binaries. Here, Heaven and Hell are intent on starting the apocalypse, on burning it all down. The powers that be seem to revel in bureaucratic stalemates and are, in fact, quite eager to get on with this Earth-destructing final battle, while a handful of celestial and human beings clamber to find some measure of stability and salvage our world.

Gaiman’s stories are populated with complex characters, in situations that avoid stark notions of right and wrong. They manage to be deeply hopeful while reminding us that life is, well, messy and oftentimes inexplicable. There is no one truth. And this is what his collective work does so well: illuminate the reality of our shared experience, while encouraging us to embrace the curious mystery that is human life.

*Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson is a writer in Baltimore.*