

BOOKS | A WORD WITH: NEIL GAIMAN

# A Literary Expert on Driving in the Dark

Neil Gaiman Follows the Guiding Light of Instinct

By FELICIA R. LEE JUNE 13, 2014

Stirring his pot of nightmares, legends, fairy tales and human folly into stories, the British-born fantasy writer Neil Gaiman has produced more than 20 books for children and adults, most of them scary and strange. The multitasking Mr. Gaiman is the author of the best-selling adult fairy tale “The Ocean at the End of the Lane” and the children’s books “Coraline” and “Stardust,” which have been made into films. He has written and directed episodes for the sci-fi TV show “Dr. Who,” and is the author of the popular “Sandman” series of graphic novels. And then there are his 1.9 million Twitter followers.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Gaiman has a full slate of projects. On June 27 he will appear at Carnegie Hall, reading his buried-treasure novella “The Truth Is a Cave in the Black Mountains” in a performance with music by the FourPlay string quartet and projected illustrations by Eddie Campbell. A new hardcover edition of the book — a dark adult tale of two mismatched characters searching for gold in Scotland — with illustrations by Mr. Campbell, will be published on Tuesday by William Morrow and Company. And in November, his illustrated version of “Hansel and Gretel” is coming out.

Mr. Gaiman, 53, was interviewed recently in New York about his Carnegie Hall appearance, his take on “Hansel and Gretel” and the time he spent in a Jordanian refugee camp. These are excerpts from the conversation.

**Q.** Do you have a different approach for different kinds of work?

**A.** I have no idea of what parts of my brain I use to do what I do. Mostly, the creative process is really, really fast. And when it happens, I have a pretty good idea of what something is. I am much more like somebody driving in the dark. My

headlights will illuminate a little bit ahead of me, and I know where I'm going. I'm not just driving randomly. I know if I keep down this road, I will get to New York. But what happens on the way, I will find out.

**Q.** How did the Carnegie Hall performance come about?

**A.** It began with a festival at the Sydney Opera House. I was invited to come out, and they basically said: "You've got the stage for two hours. Do whatever you want. But we'd love if it combined a story and music and pictures." The organizer of the event suggested the FourPlay String quartet. This is a string quartet that is like a rock band. I went out and spent an entire day with FourPlay, reading the story while they played. I said: "I love this, this, this and this. Can we put in a pause here? Can we get sort of downbeat and more depressing over here?" The music made it feel like a movie.

**Q.** What else have you planned for Carnegie Hall?

**A.** I think I'm going to read. I've got a new book coming out in November — a version of "Hansel and Gretel." I had been fascinated by "Hansel and Gretel" since I was 5, hearing the story on a radio adaptation. And I remember getting really irritated in my 20s, around the time when those books on psychological interpretations of fairy tales started coming out. I would read these things explaining that "Hansel and Gretel" was all about sex. From my perspective, it's about a famine that is bad enough that the parents are basically having to go, "O.K., we can abandon our children, and we parents have a chance of living, or we all four die because there is no food." It's about leaving clues that are then eaten. It's about a gingerbread house, the desire for sweets.

**Q.** That relates to a recent experience you had with famine. You tweeted about World Refugee Day and ended up visiting a refugee camp.

**A.** Three weeks ago, I am in a camp in Jordan, the Azraq Camp. They were telling us about running out of food, and what happens in a village when the farmers don't go in the fields, because they get shot at. Bit by bit, you've eaten everything. They were at the point, they were telling me, about getting permission from their sheikh to eat cats and to feed the livers of dogs to their children — unclean animals, but they were still around. They were making soup out of grass and out of the leaves of trees.

**Q.** Does it show that what happens in real life is scarier than anything you can come up with?

**A.** I took two things from Jordan that were huge, one of which is the incredible fragility of civilization. We assume that we are living in a solid place because when you turn on the light, the light comes on, when you turn the tap, the water comes out.

**Q.** Is that a reason people love being scared? On some level we know that civilization is fragile?

**A.** I agree. It is one of the places that horror fiction and scary fiction work. You're giving people little rehearsals. Back in the 17th century, back when poisoning used to happen a lot more than it happens now, people would ingest poisons regularly in tiny amounts to build up immunity, so that if someone tried to poison them, they would be O.K.

Fiction allows us to go safely behind other eyes and allows us to look out at the world. We take our little bits of poison and safely ingest them, so when the real thing happens, we're prepared.

**Q.** How did you come up with all the nasty stuff in "The Truth Is a Cave in the Black Mountains"?

**A.** I was reading Otta F. Swire's book on the legends of the Isle of Skye. She mentioned that there was a cave in the black mountains, where it was said you could go and bring back gold. You could go into the cave, and you could go as many times as you wanted to, but each time, it would eat a little bit of your soul, and you would become more evil. I'd never run into a legend like that anywhere.

**Q.** You wrote "Ocean at the End of the Lane" for your wife. Over the years, did you read your stories to your children?

**A.** Yes. Maddy [his youngest] was my guinea pig for "Coraline." If she had actually been traumatized, it would have gone out as an adult novel.

**Q.** Did you think about weird things as a kid?

**A.** As a kid, I would sit there in school, thinking, "What happens if I get home tonight, and my parents have sold the house and moved, and they'd forgotten about me? It could happen." Then I would think about what would happen if my parents sold the house and had forgotten about me, but a new family moved in who looked exactly the same as my parents. How would I know they weren't my real parents? You sit there rehearsing this stuff and you're 7, you're 8. That's where "Coraline" came from — your other mother, with big buttons for eyes.

**Q.** You must have a lighter side. What do you do for fun?

**A. Beekeeping. Apparently because I think that everyone should have a hobby that could kill them.**

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