

June 2010 - NEIL GAIMAN / Just Imagine

Neil Gaiman is the multi-award winning creator not only of comics (*Sandman*) and adult novels (*American Gods*) but also children's books (*Coraline*). His latest children's title, *The Graveyard Book*, published in late 2008, has already won the Locus Young Adult Award, the Hugo Best Novel Prize and the Booktrust Teenage Fiction Prize, as well as the Newbery Medal in the US. On 24th June 2010, Neil was awarded the CILIP Carnegie Medal for *The Graveyard Book*, making him the first author ever to win a Newbery and a Carnegie medal for the same novel.

First of all, congratulations on the CILIP Carnegie win.

I'm happy...it's amazing!

Apart from having pictures by David McKean (or, depending on the version you have, Chris Riddell) *Graveyard* is a very pictorial book, in which you've created some extraordinary and lasting images - where did they come from?

I stole chunks of the western part of Highgate Cemetery for the book, but I actually started out with Abney Park Cemetery in Stoke Newington...the middle of London, busy High Street, and you walk into this amazing, crumbling Victorian place with a decaying chapel in the middle of it. I'd filmed *A Short Film About John Bolton* there in 2002, and at the time I went 'This is the cemetery in my story...I thought I'd made it up, but here it is!', because a kid could absolutely live there.

A year later I was in Glasgow, working on *The Wolves in the Walls* opera for the National Theatre of Scotland, and I went to the necropolis. It was much, much, much too tidy, but I *loved* the hill with the view over the city, so I took Abney Park and put it on a hill like that, reconfigured the topography.

If we might, I'd like to go back a bit, to reconfigure the topography here, so we can tell the story from the beginning...you're quoted as saying you were a voracious reader as a child, was there anyone you could say was an early influence on you?

There are quite a few, some of whom have fed into *The Graveyard Book* and some who haven't...CS Lewis was the first author who ever made an impression on me as an author; when I was six I saw the first part of the black and white TV adaptation of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* at my grandparents house, came home and bought the Puffin paperback, then bought the next book they had in my local WHSmith, which was *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. And then asked for the boxed set for my birthday.

One of the things that was most important to me was [CSLewis's] authorial tone of voice. It was the very first time I realised that 'someone' was writing this. It was the things he put in brackets, the author's asides to the readers, that made you feel somebody who liked you - and was friendly, kind and good natured and had his own opinions - was there talking to you.

Oddly enough, the saddest thing about the *Prince Caspian* film - which is a very sad film, and left me going: I never want to see any more of these, this was *such* a bad idea - was because the *Narnia* books are now perceived as an exclusively Christian allegory, they had to take out all the Greek gods! My love of and fascination for the entirety of Greek mythology starts in *Prince Caspian* - it's the most fundamentally, deeply pagan book to hand to a seven-year old; it's filled with gods, and I wanted to find out more about this stuff. [The book] never made me go 'Oh my god, I have to dig into the New Testament!'. In fact the point where I noticed that Eustace Scrubb's conversion to dragonhood bore more than a passing resemblance to St Paul on the road to Damascus, was the point where I put down the books for twenty years.

Somebody else from the same time period who was also hugely influential was Richmal Crompton...

Was there a moment in your youth when you discovered that Richmal Crompton was a woman, and you were shocked at the discovery?

No, I originally inherited my *Just William* books from my mother and my aunts and they were these red hardbacks, none of them with dust jackets, so no information about the author. At some time in the early days I bought an Armada paperback, and on the back was a little author bio, which is how I found out Richmal was a 'she', and I was young enough that it wasn't shocking and just went in as information.

But of course Enid Blyton was also a 'she', although of the two of them, Richmal Crompton influences my prose style even today, but I don't think Enid Blyton *ever* influenced my writing in any way, shape or form. She was purely about story. The weird thing about Blyton, which I knew even when I was young, was the way that you couldn't go back to her - what you liked when you were six was *horribly* kiddy and clunky when you were nine.

When I was fourteen I could re-read a William book, when I was thirty I re-read William books - for that matter Terry Pratchett and I wrote our own William book with *Good Omens!* And then there's PL Travers, another lady author, somebody with a *beautiful*, clean prose style who actually influenced *The Graveyard Book* - it's very easy to point to Kipling, and a lot of people, including myself, have done so, but the *Danse Macabre* and the *Hounds of God* chapters both really owe as much to PL Travers as Kipling...

[*here Neil pauses for thought...*]

This is one of those horrible moments when you realise something during an interview...I was saying proudly to an interviewer this morning, when talking about the structure of the book, that *The Graveyard Book* is a short story collection that's a novel, and 'no one has ever done that before'...but now I think about it, the person who did that successfully quite a few times was PL Travers in the *Mary Poppins* books. Each of them are sequences of short stories that are novels, they have an arc, with mini-arcs within. A bit like [a sequence of] comics.

You've been so prolific over the years, there's a lot of your material out there and a huge fan base: have you noticed any signs that you've had an influence on other writers?

Yes. Which is odd...there's a weird level at which you just have to accept it. You can't get prissy about it and you can't get possessive. There's that TV show *Supernatural*, which is forever doing things where I'll get letters saying 'Hey! They just did a chapter of *American Gods*, or this *Sandman* thing, or now they've got a demon named Crowley after *Good Omens!*' and you have to think: OK, good, they're fans. And, if you're being nice - and I *am* nice - that it's an homage, probably.

In my head none of this has been going on for very long; in my head it was yesterday that I really wanted write a comic and I came up with *Sandman*. In my head it's now half past yesterday and I'm going, 'That was a lot of fun writing comics, but let's see what happens if I write novels'. The books started coming out twelve years ago and you have writers in their thirties who are saying 'I've been reading you all my life'...writers like Joe Hill [Stephen King's son, author of *Heart-shaped Box* and the comic-book series *Locke & Key*], will cite me, and that's so cool because he's brilliant!

What attracted you to comics in the first place, was it the specific creative process, or that, generally speaking, it's a very collegiate environment?

What attracted me to comics was that there was stuff nobody had done in comics and I wanted to do it! It was the feeling that, if I wrote a novel, they've been writing them for 3,000 years and I'd up against the greats...comics have only been around for a hundred years and there was so much unexplored territory.

When I was at school I'd get into arguments with teachers, saying that comics were as good as *anything*, and they'd say, well, they're not. I thought they could be as powerful as any medium, but nobody was doing

that yet; then I saw that Alan Moore was doing what I thought hadn't been done, and it proved my thesis and meant that *I* could go and do it...write something with as much power, as much thought and passion as a novel, stage play, film or poem.

Because the comics medium is so reliant on pictures, Dave McKean must have played an important role - where did you meet him?

In the offices of a telephone sales company off Wimpole Street, where a gentleman called Hunter Tremayne - not his real name, as it turned out - claimed to be starting a brand new comic called *Borderline*. I went to a meeting, and Dave was there. And that was it.

Comics are very much a meeting of two minds, two storytellers - one using words, the other pictures - so do you think that if you hadn't met Dave things would have been radically different?

Mmmm, probably not. I think it would have taken a *slightly* different route, had there been no Dave. In terms of DC Comics, for example, when Dave McKean and I went in to pitch [a story called] *Black Orchid*, I was pleasantly surprised when Karen Berger [Executive Editor Vertigo Comics/Senior VP DC Comics] said 'Oh my god, it's you, I've been looking for you!'...I'd given her a script for a *Swamp Thing* story and hadn't put a phone number on it.

Without Dave there wouldn't have been a *Violent Cases*, but there probably would have been a *Sandman*, or something similar. It was great for both our careers that we met each other, but more important than that has been having him as a friend for the last quarter-century.

Your first foray into novels was *Good Omens*, which you co-wrote with Terry Pratchett. How did that happen?

He was young, he was struggling, I said, look Terry, I'll give you a hand, work with you...it actually happened because I wrote a non-fiction book about Douglas Adams called *Don't Panic: The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. I got to write a book in a style that could best be described as classic British humour - it wasn't writing *like* Douglas, which would have been a huge mistake because no one can do Douglas like Douglas could. And I discovered I could do classic British humour...it was a comfortable style.

When I'd finished the book, I thought it would be fun to write a novel in that style. I'd been reading, of all things, Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. There's a bit at the beginning where they all get together and discuss their evil deeds: one's been poisoning Christian children...another's been corrupting people. And that combined with a weird notion, which at the time I was calling William the Anti-Christ...what would've happened if the anti-Christ from *The Omen* movie had actually been [Richmal Crompton's] William Brown?

So I started writing, did about 5,000 words and basically wrote the baby swap, with Crowley in the cemetery with the demons, and then put it aside because *Sandman* started and suddenly it became my life. But I'd sent it to a few friends, and about a year later I got call from Terry [Pratchett] saying, are you doing anything with that story?

So you already knew him?

I was the very first journalist to interview him, ever, in February 1985. *The Colour of Magic* had just been published in paperback, and *The Light Fantastic* was coming out in hardback. We became friends and stayed in touch; in fact I became one of Terry's beta-readers.

So anyway, he told me that he thought it was a great idea and that he knew what happened next with the story; he then offered to either buy it off me, or write it with me. Now I, who am *nobody's* fool, felt like this was an awful lot like Michelangelo asking if I'd like to work on a statue with him. You just go, yeah!

You've since collaborated with two other writers - Gene Wolf (on *A Walking Tour of the Shambles/2002*) and Mike Reeves (on *Interworld/2007*) - so you've must have enjoyed the experience...

All three were completely different things. With Terry it was *absolute* collaboration, in the sense that we were on the phone every day and put the whole thing together in such a way that *I* thought it was completely impossible to tell who'd done what. And then I recently heard Martin Jarvis reading the American audio book and I realised I could pick out my sentences because they actually *sounded* a little bit different, although they read the same as Terry's on the page.

With Gene, I wrote three pages, sent them to him, a week later there's three pages back in the post and we went on like that until it was done...with Mike Reeves, we weren't actually planning to write a book; we'd done an outline for a TV series and people *didn't* get it - concepts that 12 year-old boys have no problems with, like parallel universes and stuff, were making TV execs heads bleed. When we were trying to explain it, there came a point when we said, maybe it'd be easier just to *do* a book. We wrote it in a week.

Do you think this ability to work with other people has a lot to do with having worked in comics?

Absolutely, yeah. It's so much about being a part of a team, unlike normal authorship. The thing I *love* about comics - and making movies and TV - is there are people! Authoring is *such* a lonely business. Just you and a blank sheet of paper or screen and that's it...plus fingers that aren't *quite* getting the beautiful stuff in your head down on the page.

With comics, you have someone to talk to; you can phone the artist, talk to them and they give you things back and it starts feeling like this wonderful game of tennis and you find out stuff you didn't know they could do. It becomes a glorious game.

Your first solo novel was *Neverwhere*, which was actually based on a TV script...

Yup, exactly. When I got to *American Gods* I was saying to people that it was my first solo novel, and they'd say what about *Neverwhere*? My reply to that was that *Neverwhere* was a collaboration with Neil Gaiman, I got to work with the guy who wrote the scripts. I took his scripts and everything else in my head, everything that had been cut out, [and did a book].

Was *American Gods* a very different project to anything else you'd done?

American Gods was the first thing I'd done which was *really* lonely...it's a very lonely book. It took the best part of two years to write and for the first six months of writing it I went off on my own, I borrowed houses from friends, and I didn't know that I could do this thing. I knew it was going to be a big novel, that in order to work it had to be *thick* and that I was aiming for a quarter of a million words. It was a strange time, I was in houses I'd borrowed from Tori Amos and Jonathan Ross and I was just on my own writing, making stuff up and practicing coin tricks.

If I get to the point where I need to write something as long as *American Gods* again, I can absolutely see myself doing that again, and it's going to be harder.

Even though you know you can do it?

When I'd finished the first draft of *American Gods*, I went on a tour for the Comic Book Legal Defence Fund. I was in Chicago and Gene and Rosemary Wolf came as my guests to the reading, and I told Gene I'd finished the book and I told him that I'd finally figured out how to write a novel. And he looked at me with *infinite* wisdom and kindness and said 'Neil, you *never* figure out how to write a novel...you just figure out how to write the novel you're on'. And I remember thinking: how can that be? But that's exactly how it works.

One thing you've managed to do is straddle the widely different worlds of literature and pop culture and be successful and lauded in both. Any idea how?

[Who] knows. I was a journalist, and I learned things interviewing authors, things that became enormously important later. I would interview best selling, big gun authors, and I remember realising - often not during the interview, but afterwards, sitting and chatting - that for a lot of the bestselling authors, their success was a frustrating and limiting thing.

It meant they were in a box. They'd become successful as the person who does 'X', whether it's spy novels, horror, fantasy, humour, whatever. And I'd hear this refrain over and over, along the lines of: 'I want to do this French Revolution novel, but my publisher won't let me', and I'd be going, but you're so-and-so, what do you mean your publisher won't let you?

I started to realise after a while that, for a lot of these people, they'd started out doing what they wanted to, but now they were only allowed to do that one thing. I saw that happen enough times that I was painfully aware, after having worked in comics, that the great thing about them is that they were a medium that had been mistaken for a genre. I was allowed to do *anything* I wanted to in comics - I was allowed to write ghost stories, historical, real life and *nobody minded* because it was all comics.

When I became an author of prose I could see all these rules and boxes and I decided *not* to write a book that would have been 'brilliant', and I made exactly the right choice by *not* writing it. After *Neverwhere* and *Stardust* the next book I was going to write was called *Time in the Smoke*, all about the city of London...it would have been funny and fast and chronologically weird, and had I done that I would have been that English guy who writes *those* kind of novels. In some ways *American Gods* was me saying that I needed to draw a very large territory for me to walk within.

With *Sandman*, I spent the first eight issues going more extreme, in some ways, than I was ever going to go in the rest of the series. But having defined that territory - having pushed the boundaries out so far - now no

one could say 'That's not a *Sandman* story!', because I'd defined the series as this huge expanse.

Is that why the children's books came in, because you needed to acquire more territory?

No, they came in because I was a parent. And also because *that* was one of those things I'd always wanted to do. My very first book, the one I wrote when I was 21 - which I sent off to Kestrel Books and they sent back with a very nice note and I shrugged and put it away - was a children's book. After the success of *Coraline*, when I still used to read to my daughter Maddy every night, I went up to the attic and found it and read it to her. Then I put it *back* in the attic and I'd be perfectly happy for it to stay there for ever. But that's where I started.

You've said that, at the time you had the idea for *The Graveyard Book*, it was a much better idea than you were a writer. True, or do ideas just have their own time?

Yes and no. There are two statements that are completely true: I was probably wrong to say that I should put off writing the book until I was a good enough writer, because you don't necessarily write a *better* book, just a different one. And that's true.

On the other hand, would the novel that I was capable of writing at 25 have won the Carnegie and the Newbery? No. Not *necessarily* because I wasn't a good enough writer, because I would have had a lot of things on my side, just in terms of enthusiasm and delight and that the way I deployed words as a 25 year-old is very different to the way I do it now. But at that point I was the father of a two-year old son and a two-month old baby. My experience of kids was from the inside.

One of the things that gives *The Graveyard Book* its emotional heft at the end is that it's about the cycle of childhood. It's about leaving and the glorious tragedy of being a parent, which means that there comes a point -

if you've done your job right, if you haven't screwed them up and you have a well-adjusted human being who is capable of going out into the world and being happy - they leave you. If you do your job right you have this person, whom you adore, who is going to go away. And that's right. But that emotional heft is something I couldn't have written about without actually having two kids who've done it.

So what brought you back to a 20 year old idea?

Every eight years I would sit down and do a page or two of the story, and always the same page or two...the kid coming into the graveyard. I would write that scene, say I wasn't good enough and I'd put it away again.

By about 2003 two things were coming obvious to me - one, I wasn't getting any better, and was now probably as good a writer as I was ever going to be...so I may as well write the book. And the other was that I'd written *Coraline*, and it was starting to win awards. So I began to look at strategies for writing the other children's book I had in my head, that had been there for ever.

I knew the shape of the book in my head - that it was a set of short stories and that the hero would leave when he was about 16 - and I thought: Why don't I write about when Bod's eight years old [Chapter 4, *The Witch's Headstone*], when he's the protagonist. I wanted him as a person, not a baby, and I wanted to find out what the interactions with the other characters are like.

So I was on holiday on Antigua, and I'm crap at holidays...by Day 3 I'm usually looking for my notebook. Which is what happened this time, and I started writing the opening pages of *Headstone* on the beach; I had *just* got to the point of stopping, because I thought it was no good, when my daughter came out of the sea and asked me what I was doing. I told her and she asked me to read it to her, and when I'd finished she wanted to know what happened next. During the holiday [the chapter] got done, and once that existed, almost like yoghurt starter, the rest of the book spread from it.

There was a moment, reading the book - through a combination of your words and Dave's art - when I realised I was getting very strong reminders of Wildwood Cemetery, the home of the great Will Eisner's extraordinary comic book character *The Spirit*...

Yes! That's lovely, I wish I could tell Will that.

You knew him?

Yes, I knew Will...I was very, very lucky, and I miss him a lot. When I was a kid I did that thing a lot of kids do when they turn 16, which is that you discover girls and you stop reading comics. You look around and you go, these things are basically pre-adolescent power fantasies and they are no longer working for me.

I stopped reading comics and didn't start again until I was about 22, but in the intervening years I still bought and read all the Warren, the Harvey and the Kitchen Sink¹ reprints of *The Spirit*. They weren't childish, they were real and they were extraordinary, not only for what was on the page, but that each of the stories was only seven pages long.

You are a writer of big ideas - belief, meaning, religion, and with a very strong connection with Death - but at the same time you also seem to be drawn to the lighter side of the dark.

This is a book about the potential of life...look at the final two paragraphs...[Neil picks up a copy of *The Graveyard Book*]

"There was a passport in his bag, money in his pocket. There was a smile dancing on his lips, although it was a wary smile, for the world is a bigger place than a little graveyard on a hill; and there would be dangers in it and mysteries, new friends to make, old friends to rediscover, mistakes to be

¹ American comic book publishers

made and many paths to be walked before he would, finally, return to the graveyard or ride with the Lady on the broad back of her great grey stallion.

“But between now and then, there was Life; and Bod walked into it with his eyes and his heart wide open.”

This is a book about the meaning and the value of life. There are a few of the things that Silas says to Bod - like where he says when you're dead you can't change anything. I would *love* it if a lonely kid who's being bullied goes 'Do I go home and hang myself with my tie, or do I stick this out because it's important to be alive and be able change things?'. If one child ever thought that, I'd be happy.

Is Bod in any way a reflection of you as a child?

No, he's not really. You steal, magpie-like, from everything, including yourself, but Bod was very much *himself*. I love the fact that I've now got three very different child protagonists: Bod, Coraline and Odd, from *Odd and the Frost Giants* [Neil's 2008 World Book Day title], and none of them are me.

You take little bits of yourself...the only moment in the book when I was very aware that Bod was a little bit me was when he's sitting on the statue, way out of the way, to read. That's what *I* used to do, I would go and find places that weren't exactly hiding places, but hidden places, where I knew I could read undisturbed.

Are there any places you haven't been yet, as an author?

Oh god, yeah. There's lots of stuff I haven't done, still big territories unexplored. The current project I'm working on is non-fiction, because I haven't written a non-fiction book in 22 years and I want to find out if I can still do it, and that'll be fun. I want to do something bigger and weirder than any of the non-fiction I did in the 80s.

The hardest thing, in some ways, is how very, very much I want both to write sequels to the stuff that already exists, but I also want to keep moving

and do whatever the next thing is. I would love to write another *Neverwhere* book, and there's at least one more *American Gods* novel and about three *American Gods* novellas I'd love to write.

With *The Graveyard Book* there's a book that I would love to do, once I've figured out how to do it. It'd be an adult novel with Silas and the Honour Guard - there's a lot more plot than ever got in there, in terms of backstory, and there's stuff that Bod is told that is not entirely true, or isn't the entire picture.

There's one point - when Bod went through the ghoul-gate - where I felt you expanded the story away from the graveyard, then had to rein it back again...

You're right, I did have to sort of pull back to the graveyard...and there was similar stuff with the Jacks plot at the end, which is huge, but you only get to see a little bit. I'm very tempted to write more, but what worries me most about doing that novel is if I did, then *The Graveyard Book* would look like *The Hobbit* to that book's *Lord of the Rings*.

Are you aware of the weight of other people's expectations of you, that you're being watched all the time, or do you ignore all that and just do what you want?

I think I can more or less do what I want.

Is that at all scary?

Hmmm...some years ago an editor wrote a letter to my agent, saying that she knew my contract was nearly up and I should leave Headline and go to her company. She said 'I will make him a *huge* bestselling phenomenon in the UK, because his career has been very badly managed so far. However, with *American Gods* we've seen the beginnings of some kind of success, and

what he's going to have to do is write one book like that every year, just a bit more commercial. If he does that, I can guarantee he'll be one of the biggest authors in the UK.' I looked at that and thought I'd rather blow my brains out.

I'm now in this weird and wonderful place in which what my publishers expect from me is a Neil Gaiman book - whatever that means, whatever that is, that's what they expect. Should I turn round and say 'The next book's a pornographic cookbook, does anybody have a problem with that?', the odds are they'd say go write it, we'll publish it.

Do we know what the next book will be?

It's the big non-fiction book - which is about China, about Monkey and the journey to the west and the original monk who made the journey. I'm hoping to have it finished in about eight months.

The other thing I've done is a little picture book, which was written mostly because my picture books are not published in China as they're deemed a little bit too subversive. So I wrote one that, while being subversive, the subversion would go unspotted...it's about a baby panda who sneezes, because sneezing baby pandas are the single cutest thing in the world...