Let me tell you my favorite Neil Gaiman story. It’s partly a story about the history of Gaiman as an author, partly about the history of scholarship on Gaiman, and partly a chance for me to settle a very old score.

First, pick up your copy of *American Gods*. Look all the way in the back, on the second page of the acknowledgements. There, right after the name of little-known comics author Alan Moore, you’ll see my name.

Now, you would think Neil’s recognition would make me happy. He had worked on *American Gods* for a long time, and in many ways it was his first major step as a novelist in his own right: he had a novel with Terry Pratchett, but that was co-authored; he had *Neverwhere*, but that was really a novelization of the BBC miniseries of the same name; he had *Stardust*, but that was conceived as an illustrated story with Charles Vess, not precisely a novel. *American Gods* was proof that Neil could work in a medium with no pictures and that he could do it by himself. When it became a best seller, it validated him as a novelist. It was a major event in his career, and there he was, mentioning my name as someone who had played some part in making this dream of his come true.

Here’s the problem: he’s not talking about me. In fact, he’s pointedly not talking about me. Look closer at that line in the acknowledgements: Neil thanks “the original Joe Sanders” (464).

Why the qualifier? Is there some other Joe Sanders whom he is not thanking? I first met Neil when I was a graduate student, delivering a paper at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts about his use of language in his *Death* mini-series. Neil was one of the special guests at that conference, and he very sweetly attended my session, acted interested, and even asked a question at the end. Later, we walked out to the pool together for a photograph that would later appear in the industry magazine *Locus*, along the way discussing comics, language, analysis, and all the other things that two new best friends talk about. After the conference, we stayed in touch sporadically, and from time to time we exchanged e-mails, usually about matters having to do with our children.

But at that very panel where we first became—or so I thought—bosom companions, there was another scholar named Joe (note the lack of middle name) Sanders. That was no accident: he and I had discovered the previous year at the same conference that we had interests as similar as our names, and we thought it would be funny to have a Joe Sanders panel at the conference. Joe was an established scholar and very well known within the field (he had actually received an award in recognition of a lifetime of generosity to the profession one year before I met him), so he knew how to propose a special session that was more likely to get picked up, and thus the double Joe Sanders panel was born. That Joe also gave a paper on Gaiman at our panel, when Neil was in the audience. In fact, it was a really good paper. In fact, it was so much better than mine that Neil and Joe kept talking about it after the conference. In fact, that conversation became the seed of *The Sandman Papers*, the first book of collected scholarship on Gaiman, edited by Joe and including one little paper by me, a book that happened in part because Neil pushed behind the scenes to get not-me Joe the support he needed.

As part of that blooming friendship, Neil sent not-me Joe drafts of his own manuscripts while he was working on them, and not-me Joe gave helpful advice. Advice for which Neil was, it turns out, grateful.
Therefore, when you see in the acknowledgements page that Neil, in writing this book that would be so consequential for his career, thanks “the original Joe Sanders,” he is not thanking me. He is instead thanking the Joe Sanders who was born first and is, hence, original. Indeed, one might say that he is going out of his way not to thank me.

“You know that bald Joe Sanders with the misspelled British middle name?” the acknowledgement seems to ask. “Screw that guy, he did bugger all to help me, and I’ve got exactly zero thanks for him. No, let the record show very plainly exactly which Joe Sanders I am thanking, and it is 100% not that guy.”

In the years that have followed, I have had the joy of pointing out to wave after wave of students who notice my name in the back of this book—or in The Graveyard Book, which won the highest award in my field, and to which the original Joe evidently also contributed some precious morsel of help—that no, Mr. Gaiman is not thanking me. Yes, he knows me, but he has not the slightest bit of gratitude toward me. He’s talking about someone else, someone he likes better.

It’s an annual tradition that always helps lower me in my students’ eyes, a service for which I am deeply grateful. Perhaps I should put something about it in my own acknowledgements page.

Don’t worry, there’s a point to all this self-flagellation.

The subtext to this story—the text being, of course, how horribly I have been wronged in not having been thanked for not in fact helping—is easy to miss, but it is one that follows hot on the heels of a theme that has wound through all of the essays that you have just read. Throughout, every single chapter in this collection has been arguing in one way or another that to understand Gaiman best, one must think about Gaiman as between two points that at first appear incompatible. Recounting them all would be tedious, but let me point to a few of the most obvious theses as examples: in The Books of Magic, mimesis and anti-mimesis intertwine; in his adaptations of fairy tales, Gaiman creates a tension between original and adaptation by emphasizing their interconnectedness; in his collaborations with Dave McKean, Gaiman hovers in a space of hesitation between fantasy and reality; in his essays, Gaiman asks us to step between one subject position and another to create empathy; in his social media posts, Gaiman is both himself and a character he creates for those posts. In her chapter, Eric McCrystal [RIGHT, GUYS? IT WASN’T SUPER CLEAR IN THE DRAFT I HAVE: I’M LOOKING AT THE CHAPTER CALLED “Liminality and the Gothic Sublime”] uses exactly the word that I have been dancing around: for her, Gaiman’s is “a liminal fantasy that thrives on the mystery created when reality and fantasy are not distinct” (NO IDEA ON PAGE NUMBER YET). This fuzzy space between, which overlaps with and connects two ideas that we generally take to be separate is the liminal space. In their introduction, the editors of this volume point out that they have created a special section for chapters on the liminal, but I think that the liminal has—and perhaps this is inevitable—slipped the boundaries that the editors set for it, tip-toeing into the other sections and whispering in the ears of the other authors. It is in the in-between spaces that all of the essays have been saying one can best understand Gaiman’s work.

The concept of liminality hit literary studies when I was in graduate school (in fact, at exactly the time that I met and signally failed to impress the floppy-haired author in question). I remember coming up with jokes about how far everyone wanted to stretch this new concept with Theodora Goss, who was also a graduate student and then went on to become a brilliant fantasy writer who also never thanked me in any of her books. Dora and I were, again, sitting next to the pool at the Ft. Lauderdale hotel for the conference at which I gave my paper on Death. It’s
important to keep in mind that *American Gods* had yet to appear, and Neil Gaiman was not yet, if I may put it so obtusely, quite Neil Gaiman. Those of us who were reading comics in the 1990s knew who he was, of course, but outside of comics, he wasn’t yet the public figure whose emergence Lanette Cadle so ably portrays. To those who weren’t reading comics or hadn’t stumbled across the promising short stories that had begun appearing, he was more likely to stand out as the fellow rather foolishly insisting on wearing black jeans and a black leather jacket in the Floridian humidity.

But the fact that he was there—indeed, that he was a special guest of the conference—was an early sign of how important liminality would be to the identity of Neil Gaiman when he eventually became Neil Gaiman. The conference was an academic conference, founded by Bob Collins, a literature professor, decades earlier, and academic conferences are rarely a place to find living authors (dead ones, sure: we grind them up to make into the ink with which we print our programs). This conference, however, is rare in that it emphasizes scholarship as well as the reading and production of original works of drama, poetry, and prose. Academic sessions run alongside panels of authors reading forthcoming stories or poetry, and once, a fellow academic and I joined Brian Aldiss (who counts as an academic or novelist depending on whom you’re trying to impress) in performing a play written by Sydney Duncan (a playwright who eventually became the president of the academic organization that puts on the conference), a play I admiringly described as “*Waiting for Godot* after the apocalypse.” I often reflected in my many happy years attending that conference that it was as though the scholars of fantasy and science fiction had found themselves in the academic gutter, then looked over at the *writers* of fantasy and science fiction in their own gutter, and said, “We should really party together.” It is a conference built on liminality, and Gaiman’s presence there as a special guest signaled early on that his career should best be understood as a career built in the seams that stitch together communities that the larger world insists must be kept separate.

Since then, Gaiman’s profile has only become delightfully messier. As Sarah Thaller demonstrates in her contribution to this volume, even Gaiman’s works that are most clearly for either children or adults are difficult to prove as exclusively belonging to one group or the other, a point on which Joe M. Sommers and Kyle Eveleth expand in their introduction. Thaller’s provocative conclusion is that the works most explicitly for children are dark works that actually draw from fears more closely associated with adult experiences, not child experiences. Sommers and Eveleth’s conclusion is that Gaiman prods us to question the boundaries between child and adult on which the grown-up world so anxiously insists. Thaller points out that Gaiman’s fantastic children’s books are therefore horror books for adults, and if we put her conclusion together with that of the introduction, we might wonder whether one of the reasons they play upon the fears of adults is that if we insist on the overlap between—the liminality of—these books, they quietly argue that when adults talk about what childhood is, they don’t know what they’re talking about. And they know that it’s only a matter of time before children figure them out.

*The Graveyard Book*, surely the most recognizable of Gaiman’s books for young readers, again marks his place among and between. As the only book ever to have won both the Carnegie Medal and the Newbery Medal, it was an instant classic of children’s literature, but of whose children’s literature? The Carnegie is a British award founded by the British Library Association, and although it is open to non-Brits, the list of winners is heavily dominated by British writers, including four of the five authors preceding Gaiman—the fifth, incidentally, is an American long based in London. The Newbery, of course, is a profoundly American institution,
emphatically for American books almost since it was first conceived. However, like Susan Cooper before him (both have lived in the U.S. for decades), the organization behind the award—the American Library Association—determined that Gaiman was British, yes, but American enough for its highest award. Therefore, British and American librarians seem to think of Gaiman as British and sort of American.

I have been suggesting that the essays in this collection argue that the best position from which to understand Gaiman’s work is one staked out in liminal spaces, but I might also add that this advice is important not just for those of us reading his work, but for the author himself. A review in *The Economist* of his most recent book, *Norse Mythology*, recommends the book as “an excellent introduction to the stories that wield such great cultural influence.” However, the review also complains that Gaiman’s “retelling is almost tentative, restricting itself to the core of the corpus.” The stories are, the reviewer argues, too beholden to their original category, of myths told by someone else for another time, and they go on to argue that not enough of the retellings blurs the boundaries between yesteryear and “modern times.” When the reviewer complains that too much of Gaiman’s “typical style” is absent, it might be that what they are missing the Gaiman who lifts the fence enough for ideas to stray from their intended pastures.

Compare these complaints, though, with Sarah Hunter’s review of Gaiman’s most recent work in comics: 2016’s *How to Talk to Girls at Parties*, a graphic adaptation of a signature (indeed, award-winning) short story originally published in 2006. Hunter has many positive things to say about the artwork provided by the extraordinary Brazilian comics team of Fabio Moon and Gabriel Ba, but her highest praise is reserved for Gaiman writing in the mode that the reviewer from *The Economist* linked to Gaiman’s signature style. Hunter singles out Gaiman’s, as she puts it, “particular brand” of horror wedded to science fiction, two genres that Gaiman has made a career of blending. Horror and science fiction both draw from traditions variously dubbed as the fantastic or speculative, but when Gaiman brings this energy to his story, he does so by blurring the genre boundaries on which contemporary marketing relies. He does so here in this edition of the story, he did so earlier in his previous edition of the story, and, as Hunter points out, he does so routinely throughout his body of work. “Most enchanting” in the story, Hunter suggests, is how Gaiman positions his tale right on the edge of knowing the full details of the action. The viewpoint character hovers at the edge of the action, glimpsing the outlines of the tale’s sublime villains and overhearing suggestions of but never witnessing the dark liaison at the center of the conflict. The story works, this reviewer argues, because it is so firmly rooted in the places between: between genres, between knowledge and ignorance. The story succeeds because it is liminal, because it fits Gaiman’s “particular brand.”

What the essays in this collection reveal, then, is that the quintessential voice (to return to another idea of the introduction) of Neil Gaiman is one that pointedly borrows from different fields, ideas, age categories, epistemological subjectivities, and periods that should not, we have been told, be allowed to mix.

This realization can, as these essays demonstrate, make us better readers of Gaiman. It might also, if these reviewers are right, make Gaiman a better writer of stories that are in the mode of Gaiman.

Not, as he will be quick to point out, that he takes advice from me.

**Works Cited**


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¹ For the full story on the birth of the Newbery, see Leonard Marcus’s indispensable *Minders of Make-Believe*, page 87.