



American Gods

By Neil Gaiman
ISBN: 9780380973651

Introduction

Shadow Moon spent three years in prison, keeping his head down, doing his time. All he wanted was to get back to the loving arms of his wife, Laura, and to stay out of trouble for the rest of his life. But just a few days before his release, he learns that Laura has been fatally injured in a car accident.

On the plane ride home to the funeral, a grizzled man who calls himself Mr. Wednesday makes Shadow an offer he can't refuse. But Shadow soon learns that his role in Wednesday's schemes will be far more dangerous than he ever could have imagined. Entangled in a world of secrets, he embarks on a wild road odyssey and encounters, among others, the murderous Czernobog, the impish Mr. Nancy, and the beautiful Easter -- all of whom seem to know a great deal about Shadow's private life.

Shadow will discover that everyone in Mr. Wednesday's world harbors secrets, that the living and the dead are all around him, and that nothing is what it appears. As a storm of epic proportions threatens to break all around them, Shadow and Wednesday get swept up in a conflict as old as humanity itself; for beneath the placid surface of everyday life, a pitched battle is being fought over America's soul.

As unsettling as it is exhilarating, *American Gods* is a dark and kaleidoscopic journey into an America at once eerily familiar and utterly alien. Magnificently told, this work of literary magic will haunt the reader far beyond the final page.

Discussion Questions

- American Gods* contains both the magical and the mundane, a fantastic world of divine beings and bizarre happenings and a world of prisons, rundown roadside attractions, and quaint small towns. How is Gaiman able to bring these worlds together in the novel? How does he manage to make their coexistence believable?
- What is the cultural significance of the war between the gods of old and the "new gods of credit card and freeway, of Internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon"? In what ways have Americans transferred their devotion from spiritual to material and technological gods? What are the consequences of such a shift?
- Gaiman, who now lives in the U.S., is originally from England. How might his perspective as a relative outsider affect his view of America? In what ways can *American Gods* be read as a satire or critique of American life?
- What makes Shadow such a compelling protagonist? What are his most appealing qualities? At what crucial points in the novel does he demonstrate courage, compassion, intelligence, a willingness to sacrifice himself? What does his relationship with Laura reveal about him? What is the significance of his obsession with coin tricks?
- What role do dreams play in *American Gods*? What are some of Shadow's more vivid and unusual dreams? Why does the Buffalo Man tell him in a dream to "believe everything"?
- The narrator, discussing how we relate to the suffering of others, writes that "Fiction allows us to slide into these other heads, these other places, and look out through other eyes. And then in the tale we stop before we die, or we die vicariously and unharmed, and in the world beyond the tale we turn the page and close the book, and we resume our lives." What does *American Gods* reveal by letting readers see through the eyes of a collection of down-at-heel and nearly forgotten divinities? What vicarious deaths does it allow us to experience?
- After shortchanging a waitress, Wednesday tells Shadow that the American people "don't sacrifice rams or bulls to me. They don't send me the souls of killers and slaves, gallows-hung and raven-picked. They made me. They forgot me. Now I take a little back from them. Isn't that fair?" What are the implications of a god like Odin becoming, essentially, a con-man? What is the biggest con he tries to pull off in the novel?
- What do the old gods need to stay alive and vital? What means do they use to get what they need? What is Gaiman suggesting about the nature of divinity, sacrifice, and devotion?
- Late in the novel, the narrator says that "Religions are, by definition, metaphors.... Religions are places to stand and look and act, vantage points from which to view the world." Would you agree with this assertion? What are the gods in *American Gods* metaphors for? What is the difference between a world view based on worship, sacrifice, and belief in the divine and a world view based on the accumulation of material wealth and comfort?
- Who are some of the more colorful and vividly drawn secondary characters -- human and divine -- in the novel? What do they add to the overall impression of the book? How do they affect Shadow?
- What does the novel imply about the reality of life in small-town America? What darker truth lies behind the pleasant idyll of Lakewood, Wisconsin?
- At the end of the novel, Shadow thinks to himself: "People believe.... People populate the darkness; with ghosts, with gods, with electrons, with tales. People imagine and people believe: and it is that belief, that rock-solid belief, that makes things happen." Would you agree that what people believe in are largely projections of their own needs and desires? In what ways does the novel itself confirm or refute this idea?

About the author

Neil Gaiman is the critically acclaimed author of the novels *American Gods* (winner of the 2002 Hugo Award for Best Novel), *Stardust* (winner of the American Library Association's Alex Award), and the award-winning *Sandman* series of graphic novels, as well as *Smoke and Mirrors*, a collection of short fiction, and *Coraline* (winner of the 2003 Hugo Award for Best Novella), a tale for readers of all ages. His first book for children, *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish*, illustrated by Dave McKean, was one of Newsweek's Best Children's Books of 1997. In 2003, Gaiman and McKean teamed up again to produce another illustrated children's book, *The Wolves in the Walls*. His small press story collection, *Angels & Visitations*, was nominated for a World Fantasy Award and won the International Horror Critics Guild Award for Best Collection. Originally from England, Gaiman now lives in America.