

Neil Gaiman Interview

Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean have conquered the world with the *Sandman* series, *Coraline* and most recently *MirrorMask*, a stunning new feature film. Bookshops across the world are crammed with their work and Gaiman is a regular New York Times number one bestseller. Having expressed their unique vision through graphic and adult novels, children's books, television and film, [The Wolves in the Walls](#) is the first time the duo's work gatecrashes theatre. National Theatre of Scotland Web Editor, Colin Clark, caught up with Neil Gaiman recently and asked him more about his involvement in the show...

CC Colin Clark

NG Neil Gaiman

CC *You're one of the most versatile writers around – journalism, film scripts, graphic novels, of course, children's books . . . and now theatre. With all this range of genres what is it that's drawn you towards producing such a diverse range of output?*

NG Partly I think I'm just easily bored, and part of it is just what you are. I'm not a novelist, for example. I've met novelists and they are people who write novels and that's what they do, and if they're not writing a novel they're not happy. And I've met film makers and they make films and some theatre people just make theatre. I think I'm probably a storyteller. What I love doing is telling stories and part of that is just the joy of being able to move from medium to medium, which is a lot like getting to be a kid in a sweet shop: you get to go and open different bottles.

CC *Is there any medium you've not explored that you'd like to move in to or to try out?*

NG This is my first wander into live theatre. In the past, lots of theatre has been done based on my work, but it's always involved me giving permission to somebody for them to turn something I'd done into theatre and my part in it tends to be going to a first night and sitting there thinking "I wouldn't have done it like that". So part of the fun of this for me has been finally getting to be involved in all of the theatre stuff.

CC *Is this something you'd like to do more of? Have you considered writing a full play?*

NG It's something I'd love to do is write a full play. But there's only so much time and there's only a limited number of me.

CC *Is there a particular genre of writing that you consider "home"? Say maybe storytelling, would that be home? Or is there a particular style of writing you feel more comfortable with or that you return to more?*

NG I suppose if you have to have a classification, I'm probably more of a fantasy writer than I am anything else just because I tend to like to bend the rules of reality to whatever I need for my story. And I like to use things that are slightly outside the quotidian reality in order to comment on what's going on. But really I'm just someone who likes making stuff up.

CC *Do you have anyone in mind particularly when you write? Is there someone you're writing to – for instance your wife, or your kids, your best friend?*

NG Normally when I'm writing I have me in mind. I would like to entertain someone a lot like me who just hadn't written that book. Which may be one reason I do a lot of different stuff which is because I *like* a lot of different stuff. But I think with the kids' books I tend to be trying to amuse my children.

CC *So what was the genesis of *Wolves in the Walls*? Where did that come from?*

NG Wolves in the Walls I *stole* from my daughter who was four at the time. She woke up having had a bad dream and she said, “Daddy, daddy, there are wolves in the walls and they came out of the walls and they took over the house.” And I said, “No, it was only a dream.” And she said, “No it wasn’t, I can prove it.” I said “How?” And she said, “I’ll show you the place in the wallpaper they came out from.” And she did.

This sort of sat in my head and I tried telling her little stories about wolves in walls to make it funnier and easier for her and somewhere in there I realised that this really was a story. When I came to write it, it was a lot funnier than I thought it was going to be. The wolves in my head before I wrote the story were a lot more scary and I was faintly pleasantly surprised that when they came out of the walls they were just these job wolves, they weren’t nightmare Nazi wolves.

CC *Just bad neighbours.*

NG Exactly. The kind of people you really don’t want in your house.

CC *And how did your daughter feel about having her bad dream turned into a book?*

NG I think she’s very proud. Maddy loves being in books and having inspired them. For the next children’s book of mine, which is a poem I wrote for her inspired by an email she sent me, I’m actually cutting her in for a chunk of the royalties. So I figure it becomes her college fund or something.

CC *Thinking about the stories that affected you as a child, which stories made the biggest impact on you?*

NG Lots of stories made a huge impact on me. “The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe” series was definitely one of them. I remember seeing a very bad BBC TV adaptation, and going away and buying the book and being hooked. So definitely CS Lewis and the Narnia books. Tolkien made a huge impact on me as a kid. Pretty much everything I read made an impact on me, that’s the glorious thing about being a kid. Also, my parents never seemed to get rid of any books, so when I was growing up I had all their books too, which was great fun, so I’d devour their wartime copies of the Just William books.

CC *Reading recently an interview for TIME magazine with Joss Whedon, you said that in the USA the idea of “family” entertainment is something you can put a five year old in front of for two hours and come back safe in the knowledge that the child won’t have been exposed to any “ideas”. What’s your idea of family entertainment?*

NG My idea of family entertainment is something that you could take a seven year old to and take a ten year old to and take a fifteen year old to and take a twenty-five year old to and take a fifty year old to and a seventy-five year old to and they would all get something very different out of it. I like the idea that family entertainment is full of ideas, that it’s just things that you’re going to see differently at different angles.

The wolves in the walls. Part of the fun of this, for me anyway, is that if a seven year old comes to this show they will see a different show than a thirty year old will see or that a sixty year old will see. At the end of the day, it’s a show about family, but it’s also a show about bravery, and it’s a show about listening to kids. It’s not one of those nice things that you can just reduce down to something nice and simple, nor does it actually end with everybody hugging.

I suppose primarily I think of it as American because it comes as much from Disney-style entertainment as it does from anything else – or modern Disney. But it’s there on most UK children’s programmes, or small children’s programmes, which is just the idea that the world is an incredibly safe, warm and comforting place and everything is lovely. Which is not actually the point of view of most children, and if you start talking to them even a five year old knows that somebody is trying to sell them something in this idea. It’s not really true.

I like the idea in *Wolves in the Walls* of doing a show that *would* have some scary stuff, but at the end of the day was really about confronting the stuff you're afraid of. It's about being brave and seeing what happens when you actually take some action against the stuff you're scared of, but that doesn't actually say "*no, no the world is perfectly hospitable and everybody loves everybody for everyone now let's have a hug*".

CC *What do you think the fans of Neil Gaiman adult & graphic fiction will make of the production that's in process just now?*

NG I hope, if nothing else, the ones who have already read "The Wolves in the Walls" are going to come out to see how Julian and Vicky and their collaborators have actually put it on the stage because it's quite astonishing.

We saw our first wolf this morning, which was quite magical. One of the puppeteers, with the aid of a lot of fabric – and a mask and a tail – suddenly got to become a wolf and it was unbelievable. So there's that, and there's also the fact that I've been writing lyrics and words for this for about 18 months now and sending them over to Nick Powell, and Nick plays with them and we now have a strangely coherent . . . we're calling it a *pandemonium* because "children's opera" seemed to give the wrong idea. It sort of implied that it was probably going to be boring. And "musical" implies it's going to be frothy and it's not really frothy either. So we're using "pandemonium" for now until a better word comes along.

CC *How has Wolves in the Walls changed in the collaboration with Vicky & Julian & the NTS team from the book to what we are going to see on the stage?*

NG It's really interesting. It's probably the most exact transformation of something from a book to the stage that I've ever been involved in. But then it's also all about opening it up, making it musical and interesting. For example, when we meet the family at the beginning the mum is bottling jam in the book, so we got to write a jam song for her which is this song all about the delights of jam. This morning they're working through a computer game song, which is the song sung by Lucy's brother playing his computer game. And whereas the jam song is this beautiful, pastoral, almost classical piece, the computer game song is this wild, guitar-based piece of pop that wouldn't have been out of place in Spinal Tap.

So we're expanding things. Also, there's so much stuff that even I don't know what they're going to do. They've started playing with shadow puppets, they've started playing with all sorts of different wolf heads, wolf parts. Julian Crouch claims that anything with the right number of triangles can become a wolf and I have no idea what he means by this and I also don't know how he's planning to get four elephants onto the stage, which was his last thing. He said he'd figured out how to get four elephants on to the stage.

CC *One last question. You always seem to have multiple projects happening simultaneously. Your screenplay of Beowulf [with Roger Avary] has gone into production, your novel Anansi Boys has just been published, Wolves in the Walls is on-going . . . What's happening in the near future for you?*

NG The nice thing is most of the things you've listed are already things that are done so the next thing is that I need to write my next children's novel. That's the biggest thing. And do a pilot film for the independent film channel in the States that we're working on. I'll probably be doing the "Death and the High Cost of Living" movie next year. That's I think the biggest thing.

CC *Directing? Writing?*

NG Directing, writing, everything. We're just haggling over a few million on the budget right now and I think we can get it down to a level at which New Line will sign off on it and then I get to go and make it.

[ENDS]