

INTRODUCTION

I have always thought that “B Sides and Rarities” would make a good name for a collection like this.

But there are no B sides any longer. Not really. I mean, sure, there’s Vinyl, but in the olden days, when dinosaurs walked the Earth and I saw bankers in bowler hats go to work on the train every morning, we bought our songs on 45 revolutions per minute seven inch disks called singles. And because all such disks are, by their nature and the way the universe is made, two-sided, the song you wanted to buy was the A side, and another song that you’d never heard of was the B side. When albums came out they would often not have the singles on them, and even if they had the single, the B side would be nowhere to be seen. (I am told that the composer of the song on the B side made as much as the composer on the A side, and that many fortunes were made by managers or publishers or record company men putting their songs on the B sides.)

For an author the B sides are the things that you write that nobody notices when you write them, and that remain uncollected, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes not.

“Featherquest” has been uncollected and unreprinted since its first publication, in 1984. I wrote it when I was 22, and it was my first professional sale, to *Imagine Magazine*. (Colin Greenland suggested I send it to them.) *Imagine*’s only condition for publishing the story was that I cut it from 8,000 words to 4,000, so I did. (Or perhaps they cut it themselves. Anyway, somebody cut it.)

I was disappointed when I read the published story, convinced it was only half as good as the one that I had written.

And then, as I wrote more, and I learned how to write stories and to end them, I decided that neither version had been particularly good, and I would let them both fade and be forgotten.

Some years ago I took the second story that I had sold to *Imagine*, “How to Sell the Ponti Bridge” and I tidied it up a little and put it in my collection *M is for Magic*. “Featherquest” however, never called me to tidy it up, and the version you read here is the complete version and it’s the version I wrote when I was 22. Looking at it today, it’s like a collage of authors I liked. I’m not sure there’s a sentence that actually sounds like me.

“Jerusalem” was commissioned by Lu Kemp at BBC Radio Four for their William Blake celebrations. I was told to write something inspired by a Blake poem, and I wrote a story inspired by a peculiar morning I had spent in Jerusalem. I found myself frustrated by the limitations of length on radio, and it was cut further before it was broadcast to fit its time slot. This is the first time it’s been printed.

“Feminine Endings” was written for a volume of *Love Letters*. When I first met my wife she told me she had once been a human statue and I sent her this story.

“Orange” was written in airports. I based the narrator on Ms. Hayley Campbell, and loved writing a story that was only answers. It was written for editor Jonathan Strahan, and has been anthologized several times, although not yet collected. One day I’ll write a short story that’s just questions.

“Orphee” was written for a CD liner notes, and it was for the late Kathy Acker.

“Ghosts in the Machines” was written for the *New York Times* Editorial page at Hallowe’en. It’s almost an op-ed piece.

I’m not a book reviewer. I was when I was young—it was a marvelous way to feed my book habit

and to find books that I would otherwise have never encountered. Nobody cared if a snotty young journalist, often pseudonymous because he was writing too much for too many people, liked or didn't like a book. These days I can muster no enthusiasm for being cleverly rude about a bad book (there are so many bad books, and there are people who loved to write them and loved to read them, and why would I try and spoil anyone's fun?) and if I am going to read a good book I would rather I were reading it for pleasure and that it did not feel like work.

But there is a dialogue about books, a dialogue between the reviewers and the reviewed, and it is a good thing to feel part of that dialogue. So I waver, from time to time, and review a book for an editor who asks me at the right moment. I have included a few of those book reviews here.

The journalism is self-explanatory. Well, I hope it is. The Oscars piece was meant to be about the Oscars, but it really isn't. It's about the melancholy days when everyone else is celebrating and you do not know how. The piece on Fairy Tales was written for the *Guardian* when *Stardust The Movie* came out. The Dresden Dolls article was written for *Spin Online*, and was as honest a piece of writing as I've ever managed.

There's an introduction to a Brian Aldiss book here; a couple of extracts from my blog at www.neilgaiman.com which have, in their own way, gone on to have lives away from the blog; and two very different speeches, both delivered at awards ceremonies.

And as for the poetry, the poems here gave me pleasure in the writing. One poem is a warning and instruction for readers, made into a beautiful print by letterer Todd Klein, another is an account of a visit to a trout farm with my wife before she was even my girlfriend.

My thanks to Tom and Elizabeth Monteleone for allowing me to display some of my B-sides and my rarities in public. I hope you enjoy them, and I trust that somewhere in these ghastly pages you find something golden. Or that somewhere in this golden volume you find something ghastly.

I'm easy ...

—Neil

BEFORE YOU READ THIS

Before you read this familiarise yourself with the text. Note the position of the escape hatches, the candles that will light in the event of a forced landing to show you the way out. The author will make an announcement.

Before you read this watch the moon. Note the golden colour as it rises the way it pales and shrinks when it is high in the sky.

Before you read this remember: Do not read these words in order. Make your path. Start in the middle. End at the beginning.

Before you read this do something else. The water is high in the creek from snow-melt. Overhead the geese are honking an arrowhead. Fly with them.

Before you read this purify yourself. Remove your clothes and walk through the fire. Forget all you have learned. Forget your letters.

Before you read this write it down. Take a candle and your childhood into an attic. Make a paper house of books and dreams and burn it to ash.

Before you read this.

Before you read this let your heart dissolve, the words made mould and mist and memories. (Leave the memories inside the paper house you burned.)

Before you read this ride the night train. Do not sleep. Encounter people you remember, now long dead, and read to them.

Before you read this
battle zombies,
watch your step, trust no one,
kiss without thinking.

Before you read this
perform a small miracle.

Before you read this. Before you.

Before you read this,
read these instructions. Commit them to
memory. (The only ways out are
booby-trapped.)

Before you read this, listen to the silence,
perfect and entire. Resolve not to read anything
not any longer, not ever, not again.
If possible, first attain Nirvana.

Before you read this summon genies and spiders
all the king's huntsmen
and follow the trail of the author through the dark wood
from tree to tree, until it vanishes.

Before you read this make your will
and pray.
Say goodbye to your loved ones. Know it
will change nothing.

Before you read this leave your room.
Leave everything. Walk naked into the darkness
that has no words, in which there are no words,
in which all reading is over. Before you read this.

Before you read this.

Before you read.

FEATHERQUEST

This is a tale they tell in ancient Khem, late at night when the fires are low and the candles are liquefying in their sticks; in Derana they tell it and the Tromilly; sailors tell it on the long passage down the River Xyths, that does not flow into the sea; the folk of the small islands of Andar, Vandar, Sandar and Giff also know of it, but in Kharan they do not know it, and in Fasstiarelle of the sleepy towers they only tell it in odd-numbered months. In the marshes of Fogpool, where tax-collectors fear to tread they tell it, and in Scryrrh it is told in the market places, by old men. They do not tell it in the city of Lost Carnadine, though I have spoken to one who claimed to have seen it written in a garbled form upon the walls of a public convenience in that remarkable city.

They call it the Tale of the Dreamer, and it begins in such a fashion:

There was in the city of Melk'arn, which is the capital of Nia (of the seven deserts) a certain man, whom men called Road, which means, Constant, and he lived in the poorer part of the city in a house that had been his father's and *his* father's before him: for know you that the fortunes of men and cities change even as the gods decree, and in far off days Roan's ancestors were accounted among the nobility and were blessed with great fortune.

Alas, those days were long gone and Roan lived alone in the crumbling house without servant or concubine, and spent his days and nights studying the old books and parchments that were all his father had left when he quit this life. Young Roan was reduced to selling the tapestries and carpets of the house to buy food and candles wherewith to exist and to read at night, and in this he was frugal, for he bought the cheapest cuts of meat, and the last fruit from the vendor's barrows, also he bought candles of bibble wax, that smoked and stench, rather than candles of bees wax or berry wax. In this way Roan passed his days: when his father died Road was eighteen years of age, and when the tale starts his two and twentieth birthday had just come and gone, a fact which our hero did not remark upon, for in his dusty library all days were one, and he scarcely reckoned between them.

It came to pass that one night Roan slept in the library, as he often did, his head on a manuscript pillow. And sleeping he dreamed a dream so cunningly fashioned that he was hard put to tell that he was not awake. For in his dream a stranger came to him and by certain signs roan knew that the stranger was not a man but a djinn, for his eyes neither white nor iris nor pupil, but were instead made of flame, but withal he was passing comely to look upon.

"Roan," he said. "Roan."

"That is me, Lord," said Roan for he was a well-mannered youth.

"Roan," said the djinn, "I have come to tell you of your fortune. Say naught, but listen. You must leave this city and take ship for the Far Reaches; arriving at the port of Rilmereee you must travel by camel to Pundondeor, where bad taste is considered a virtue and all men (and women too, if the truth be known) are improper, indelicate, ribald and obscene, and where they tell the tale of The Day That Abu Hassan Broke Wind while seated at the dinner table and *before* the dessert.

"From Pundender you must travel on foot down the poppy road to Thelicum, where the bandit-wizards have their court, and from there to Utter Haslet, where the Pittites are, and the Pit. You must cross the Ruddy Mountains until you are come to the bounds of the Calyx Empire. Take horse and from there to the capital city of Captandum, where you must go to the house of the Emperor wearing red britches, a green belt, and on you head a purple hat, and great fortune and happiness shall be yours."