

THE INTRODUCTION

At the Request of Norton I, Emperor of the United States, the Imperial Historical Pantaloon and Jester-Without-Portfolio Enters the Following:

This is the moment when we, kerfuffle, introductions to books, rhubarb natter, material here presented will certainly, noises offstage, useful as training wheels on a surfboard, the paying customers are eyeing the exits, but of course the work speaks for itself.

Which is to say, I won't keep you long, but I am happy to be here.

I'm happily here because Neil asked me to be, which, considering the number and quality of people he could have asked, was deeply kind and generous of him (as it was kind and generous of him to introduce a book like this for me). But the book ain't about me, folks.

Or, as someone else might have put it:

In the hills of Transylvania, where they never will explain ya
Why you can't go to the castle with the drayman,
Very late they scotch the shandy for the purplish-amber brandy,
And they all soon will be talking of Neil Gaiman.

Where the action is frenetic, or the order is hermetic,
Under open skies or hidden from the layman,
True believer or zetetic, all shall soon be copacetic,
Drums and voices will be talking of Neil Gaiman.

Which is an in-joke, yes, but not a secret beyond decipherment, and if nothing else it illustrates the correct pronunciation of Neil's surname, a Q which is A'd surprisingly F.

People ask what Neil is like, but the Stage Manager is eyeing me and the first-act curtain rope with an intensely synergistic gleam, so I will limit my remarks.

First, he is not Terry Pratchett. I have conversed with both of them at once, and even Peter Sellers couldn't do that without technical assistance. His humorous delivery tends to the British-dry-gin variety, something like the late Peter Cook, but with more authentic merriment. (Cook always seemed to be sizing up his companion for sale by weight, as in the last line of a Lovecraft pastiche.)

Not that there isn't a silly-funny Neil as well, with the love of onomatopoeia that kids like better than meaning in words (his conversations with his younger daughter Maddy can be like opals spinning in sunlight), and grownups—well, the *Bullwinkle Show* writers could name a Wall Street fussybudget 'Fiduciary Blurt,' and people who don't laugh at that could probably lower their blood pressure by fifty points if they learned how.

As many rimshots as I'm hitting here, I really do mean this about words. A staggering number of people who want to be writers do not seem to like words very much. They want to produce a kind of

pH-neutral prose, usually described as ‘transparent,’ that simply generates fully nuanced scenes in the reader’s head without, well, the damp and wriggly bits, and are convinced that was how James Michener and Lev Tolstoi did it, adding two fingers of the best straight up for Hemingway.

(Apologies. This is the intrusion of a sometime manuscript reader, still carrying his memories of the dark place and the cold black river of coffee and the insistent drumming in the left temple near the eye. ‘Mistah Strunk—he dead.’)

But you gotta love the words, friends. You’ve got to love them for themselves, for the sounds they make and the figures they cut on the page and the light they give off when they facet together; love them even when they don’t seem to be doing anything. Especially then.

Neil loves them, which brings us inevitably to *Sandman*. There is not, at least as I write this, anything directly about *Sandman* in this book, but you have this book immediately to hand (if not, I’m sure it’s a very interesting backstory), and it’s just possible you have had no contact with *Sandman*. The Great Roc is unselective about whom she seizes.

Sandman seems to me a genuine original, an of-its-kind-and-no-other, which is rarer in fantasy than silver-haired people who aren’t magicians. Of course it draws from sources, ranging from Greek myth to French history to what your cat is thinking when he is not batting at the catnip mouse or playing *Everquest* on your credit card. And yes, there were other Sandmen; they are all there in the narrative, like inlay fit gapless without glue.

Morpheus is a genuine synthesis of the Dream and the World, the substance of one but intimately coupled to the other, perpetually fascinated and grieved by the events of both. He has a conscience, but that’s not the same thing as *being* a Conscience; and like all monarchs with a conscience (there have been a couple of others), knows that the movement of his finger both creates and destroys.

The voting majority of this book is a from-the-field log of Neil’s long multinational tour to promote *American Gods*, his exceptional novel of the contemporary world and what lives both alongside and a certain bit inside it. It was originally a Web publication, posted as it happened, or when Neil could catch his breath long enough. There was some discussion in the book’s preparation whether to retain material like lists of (then) upcoming appearance dates; they remain, and they are, in fact, part of the narrative. There’s something about reading the list of venues and days in succession, working out the compression ratio, that carries a point simply reading the entries at leisure doesn’t.

It doesn’t quite reproduce the experience some of us had following the log day by day—watching Phileas Fogg being juggled from the hands of one Passepartout to the next, signing books each day in quantities larger than some trade hardcovers are printed, one step ahead of the hired car, two steps away from the sushi bar, and he’s so tired—one expects at any moment for Morpheus, in his parallel aspect as Sleep, to reach in and say, ‘Mine now.’

Now, there, I have actually introduced the contents of the book. There are more, naturally—poems, introductions, essays on multifarious topics of all shapes and importances. Opals, whirling.

I trust that the benevolent Emperor of this great nation will find my contribution of value. Now I depart, as if borne aloft by the California Street line. As that someone else surely might have said,

Though you’ve wandered o’er the byre, or the tramways of desire,
From the Thules to the beaches of Grand Cayman,

Chock the tire and cut the wire, stoke the fire a little higher,
You are going on a journey with Neil Gaiman.

—John M. Ford, 2001

MOSTLY INTRODUCTIONS

Eddie Campbell portrayed me, cruelly and inaccurately, in his comic *Bacchus*, as a man imprisoned in a back room whose own life and work had been taken over by the constant interruption of writing blurbs and introductions. It's not true. It's not like that. It's just, some weeks, it can feel like it.

When I get weeks like that I tell the world very loudly that I'm not going to introduce anything ever again, let alone write another blurb, and I mean it too; and the resolution lasts until someone waves something I really like at me. And then comes the urge to tell people. And all too often, I do.

I tried to explain it once, in an appreciation I did of writer-artist Bryan Talbot, in 1994. It began:

I was one of the Guests of Honour this year at the British Eastercon, in Liverpool. And I tried to make a point of keeping people introduced to each other, as one does. At least one of my fellow guests knew nobody there.

I made some introductions. I like making introductions.

"This is Geoff Ryman" I said. "He's one of Britain's finest writers. His last book, *Was*, was a tour-de-force. He's also one of the nicest people you could hope to meet." I didn't say anything about Geoff being tall, because that was obvious.

"This is Professor Jack Cohen," I said. "He's a leading reproductive biologist with an international reputation, and as a sideline he designs aliens for famous science fiction writers. He also knows more strange and bizarre biological facts than anyone you will ever meet in your life." I said nothing about Jack looking like a real honest-to-goodness crazed professor, because that was obvious.

"This is John Clute. He's the foremost critic of science fiction in the world, and has the finest critical mind and the largest vocabulary of anyone I've ever met." I did not say anything about John's wife Judith being the nicest person I know, and that wasn't obvious because she was in London at the time, but it's true anyway.

And a young lady who was nearby snorted loudly, and said to me "I see what you do. You use introductions to *flatter* people." She said this proudly, as if she had deduced, from damning evidence, that I was wanted by the police of several nations.

I tried, and failed, to explain that I wasn't flattering anyone. Jack Cohen is everything I said he was and more; Geoff Ryman is without question one of the finest writers out there; John Clute has the most incisive critical mind I've ever encountered. These are remarkable people, and it gave me pleasure to say so.

Introductions should tell you the important things like this. They should tell you things you didn't know about people. They should avoid the obvious.

(The young lady, incidentally, was Jane Barnett, and I don't think she was more than 15 at the time, and the guest I was introducing around was Barbara Hambly.)

The best thing about introducing things is that it allows you to stop and decide what you think about them. And then it allows you to tell other people about them. It allows you to point to what's good,

and to talk about why it's good.

Sometimes it lets you stretch your fingers and actually attempt a short essay.

(I have been told that the H. P. Lovecraft introduction contains several factual errors. This may be true, but my source for them was editor emeritus Julius Schwartz. Julie is old, funny, cranky and knows everybody and everything. "When I was Lovecraft's agent," Julie told me, once. "I sold his only story to *Astounding*." Now, honestly: which version of events would you choose? Julie's, or some reference-book written by someone you don't even know? Exactly.)

These introductions were written over a period of 13 years, in a variety of voices and styles, for a variety of audiences. There are ones written for people who know and love the work they are about to read, and ones written for people who do not have a clue about the book they've picked up. There are pieces to explain why something's important and pieces that exist to give background and to make what they are reading comprehensible. (There's one piece that exists because the author called me up and said "You have to write an introduction, as I've already printed the book-cover and it has your name on the spine." So I sighed and I did. But that trick only works once.)

A few of them aren't introductions. "After They've Brought on the Dancing Girls..." was an afterword for a benefit book done to raise money for artist Reed Waller's medical bills. Reed drew a comic called *Omaha The Cat Dancer*, an anthropomorphic soap opera about an exotic dancer. "300 Good Reasons to Resent Dave Sim" was written, if memory serves, for the *Comic Buyer's Guide* on the occasion of Cerebus achieving some landmark number or other. Dave's within spitting distance of episode 300, his finishing post, as I write this and manages to embody even more contradictions than he did when I wrote the article, ten years ago. The Roger Zelazny piece was an afterword to my story in *Lord of the Fantastic*, an appreciation of Roger.

"The Dark Knight Returns" piece, which I wrote for John Clute when he was editing the SF Foundation's house journal, *Foundation*, is the only piece of full-length criticism I've ever attempted (as opposed to book reviewing, which I did for years). Looking it over now, fifteen years later, I'm no longer sure I agree with its conclusion; but without it, as a thesis, it strikes me that *Sandman* would probably not have taken the shape it did.