



Neil Gaiman interviewed for Books for Keeps by Nicholas Tucker

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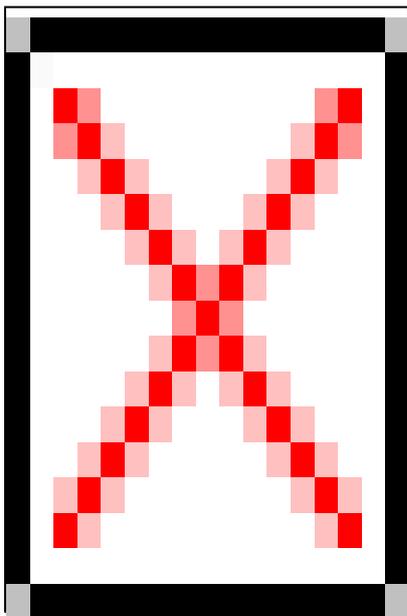
[Nicholas Tucker](#) [1]

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Byline:

Nicholas Tucker interviews Neil Gaiman about his new book **Fortunately the Milk**.

Red-eyed from a mega-signing session the evening before and still facing a mountain of books to sign, [Neil Gaiman](#) [3] could have been excused for passing over the prospect of yet another interview at his publisher's office in London but this increasingly celebrated fantasy writer is a nice man as well and still patiently answering questions about his latest novels even after non-stop publicity tours first in America and now over here. Has all this been an ordeal?, asked Nicholas Tucker.



?It's OK as long as the subject changes. But after talking about **The Ocean at the End of the Lane** for two months I get to the stage where every question is something I have already been asked a lot and it's difficult to summon up the energy to answer it again.?

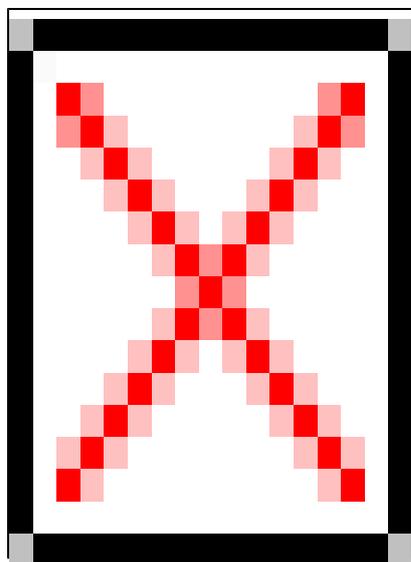
So could there be a temptation sometimes to give contradictory answers, just to pep things up a little

?No. There's always the urge to try not to repeat yourself in quite the same way. But these days everyone has the internet handy and therefore can read anyone else's interview and would soon spot any glaring inconsistencies. But I do remember doing the **Good Omens** tour in America with Terry Pratchett in 1990 where at every stop we would make up new stories because we found this so funny. But no-one was cross-checking then; you just had reporters from unconnected local papers.?

Let's get on to The Ocean at the End of the Lane. A novel with a recognisably realistic setting can always be tested by comparing it with what any reviewer knows from their own experience. But how does a reviewer assess fantasy? What can this be measured against? What are the criteria for deciding whether it works or not?

?I think the criteria are the same for reviewing any book. What is the writer trying to do and how well have they done it? And secondly, how much does it matter that they have done it at all? For me, the purpose of good fantasy is to take the world, revolve it 45 degrees, and then start turning the metaphorical into concrete images. And sometimes do the reverse: turn things that are normally concrete into metaphors. In each case the effect will be to see the world we are familiar with now from a new angle. So in my novel **Neverwhere** I make people like the homeless and the generally dispossessed that we normally treat as invisible actually become invisible. And I talk about another more dangerous London below where these people go.

?In **Coraline** I am writing about what it means to be very small in this strange big world and how to be brave and tricky and cope. And now, eleven years after publication, I am meeting women on signing tours presenting me with battered copies of the story and telling me how its example of courage helped them get through some bad times during their own teens. I don't know to this day what I gave them. But whatever it was, it worked. The magic of escapist fiction, and the thing that I think many critics miss, is that it can actually offer you a genuine escape from a bad place. And in the process of escaping it can furnish you with armour, knowledge, weapons and other tools you can take back into your life to help make it better. I don't think there's anybody who loves reading who has not at some point gone to a book, very often when they were young, as a means of escaping from an otherwise intolerable situation.?



But can there be times when fantasy simply becomes too implausible for readers, even when it is set in other realms running on other types of logic?

?The task of any writing is to make you suspend your disbelief. My job as an author is to take you, the reader, by the hand and say you can trust me utterly. We are going to walk together into dark places and I'm going to show you scary things but you are going to be just fine. And then at some point I'm going to let go of your hand and run away, leaving you in the dark where things will become weird and exciting. But in order to first get you into the darkness you have to trust me every step of the way. So if I am going to describe something inherently implausible it is vital that I make it as convincing as possible.?

What would happen though if you have taken the reader by the hand, put them in a dark place and then decide this is where they have to stay for the rest of the story? Is this something you would ever do?

?No I wouldn't. I always feel that the biggest and most important thing about fiction is that you take readers on a journey. But this journey must involve hope as well as change and it must also provide keys that can unlock both what the characters are up against and also what readers may be facing in their own lives. You have to tell them that things can be bad but that they can always get better.?

But is that part of the fantasy?

?I think there is an obligation when writing for the young to offer hope. But such hope has to be discovered by readers

from their own imaginative resources. I have no time for the 'baby bird' type of fiction, where the writer predigests some chunky moral lesson plus a healthy dose of education and then vomits it into the reader's mouth. That is why the idea of a journey is so important in my fiction, both in terms of plot and also what happens to readers themselves as they work through to the end of each particular story, discovering more and more as they go forward.

In my book **American Gods** I talk about the fact that people often decry imaginary things, with this idea that realism must always come first. But so often the things that people go to war over are in fact imaginary, rather like two bunches of kids arguing whose invisible friend likes them best. Look at all those disputes over national boundaries. Unless you live in an island when you get high enough and look down you can see that a national boundary is a completely imaginary thing.

Let me quote you a passage from *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. 'I saw the world I had walked since my birth and I understood how fragile it was, that the reality I knew was a thin layer of icing on a great dark birthday cake writhing with grubs and nightmares and hunger.' This is a seven year old boy talking. But does he also reflect your own view of the world we live in?

No! I'm pretty fond of the world. But I think that may have been far more how I would have seen the world when I was seven. When I was a kid I loved some of the things I did, like disappearing into books. But the powerlessness was no fun. The random cruelty of other kids far outweighed any cruelty coming from the adult side. These particular giants who had power of life or death over you seemed always to be faintly oblivious as to what was really going on in your life. I remember reading **Lord of the Flies** aged ten and genuinely wondering what all the fuss was about. I always knew that other children could sometimes be monsters. But these days I love the world. I get to control my life in the way I want, I make up stories, which is all that I have ever wished to do, I have a wonderful life and great children and rather more of the fame and glory I feel comfortable with. So why wouldn't the world seem to me a truly glorious place

Time for a last question before Neil is whisked away to sign copies of his latest children's book, *Fortunately the Milk*. This account of a dad telling a succession of tall stories after returning from a modest trip down the road to a local grocery store seems a very different type of story. Is it?

Oh yes. Because this is about a father telling a story to his two kids who do not believe a word he says and enjoy seizing on any inconsistency they are able to spot. One of my favourite moments is when the Dad is describing being encircled in the sea by sharks and piranha fish, only to have his children point out that piranhas are in fact freshwater fish. I love what Chris Riddell did with the illustrations for that book, where on the first few pages he shows you all the various household objects that the dad will later draw on as his story turns more and more fantastic. In ***The Ocean at the End of the Lane*** I want everything to convince you. But ***Fortunately the Milk*** is not about convincing anyone. It's about a dad entertaining his children.

Neil is now led away for his next engagement. The Dad character in ***Fortunately the Milk*** is pictured by Chris Riddell in Neil's exact likeness, tousle-headed and looking by turns either quizzical or slyly amused. For those who can't get enough of this engagingly enigmatic writer, and there are many, here is one extra and unexpected opportunity to enjoy his company on the page while continuing to relish his huge skill as a story-teller.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

[Fortunately, the Milk](#) [4], Neil Gaiman illustrated by Chris Riddell, Bloomsbury, 160pp, 978-1408841761, £10.99

[Coraline Anniversary Edition](#) [5], Neil Gaiman illustrated by Chris Riddell, Bloomsbury, 978-1408841754, £6.99

The Ocean at the End of the Lane, Neil Gaiman, Headline, 978-1472200310, £16.99

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