

The Reading Guide

Reading Group Questions

1. *American Gods* is an epic novel dealing with many big themes, including sacrifice, loyalty, betrayal, love and faith. Which theme affected you most strongly, and why?

2. Shadow begins the novel as a convict, and ends it a different man. How does the novel exploit the idea of America as a place where immigrants and exiles, both physical and emotional, can reinvent themselves? What makes Shadow himself so compelling and complex?

3. *American Gods* is partly a road trip through small-town America, where Shadow can see the darker side of life that other people ignore. What does the novel say about what people will accept in order to maintain a sense of normality?

4. The old gods expect sacrifice, violence and worship. How have they adapted to the modern world? What does this say about the nature of divinity? How and why have Americans transferred their devotion to the new technological and material gods from the old spiritual gods? What comment is being made about modern cultural values?

5. What is the significance of the illusions, cons and magic tricks that occur throughout the novel? *American Gods* is a novel where magic, myth and the divine coexist with the normal, mundane and human in a way that is utterly believable. How is this illusion maintained?

6. How does the background description increase the power of the narrative? What do the secondary characters, particularly the gods whose lives and deaths we are given a brief insight into, add to the novel?

About the Book

After three years in prison, Shadow has done his time. But as the time until his release ticks away, he can feel a storm brewing. Two days before he gets out, his wife Laura dies in a mysterious car crash, in adulterous circumstances. Dazed, Shadow travels home, only to encounter the bizarre Mr Wednesday claiming to be a refugee from a distant war, a former god and the king of America. Together they embark on a very strange journey across the States, along the way solving the murders which have occurred every winter in one small American town. But the storm is about to break...

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About the Author

Neil Gaiman was born in England but now lives in Minnesota, in a big house of uncertain location where he accumulates computers and cats.

Author Interview

1. Which god-like powers would you like to possess?

I want to make time stretchier. I would like much more rubbery days, and I just wish that you could lean on a week, and sort of push the walls out a bit, and suddenly about nineteen extra days would rush in to fill the vacuum. There is not enough time, and I wind up just wanting to do things that I don't have time for. There are so many things that I'd love to do, and I have to put off, or that it's a matter of me choosing, when really I'd love to do both. And if only time were infinitely stretchy, I could.

2. As an Englishman in America, do you see yourself as an immigrant or an ex-pat, or something in between?

I think I'm slightly more of an ex-pat than an immigrant. I've lived in America more than anywhere else for the last thirteen years, and when I went over there I figured it would probably be a three-year stay and then we'd come back. These days I know that I'm stuck there at least for another eight years until my youngest daughter finishes high school. But I've never felt that I was a permanent addition to continental America. I've always felt like somebody who would eventually fly away, or possibly get the boat and go away. Or just walk off.

3. What's your favourite roadside attraction?

The House on the Rock in American Gods actually is real. Most people think I made it up, whereas in actual fact I just toned it down a bit so that people would believe it. Because being a real place it has no obligation to be likely. So I left out the 120 piece robot orchestra and other stuff. I remember, the first time I went to The House on the Rock, thinking, I just don't believe this place, and the second time I went to The House on the Rock still not believing this place. Then I had to go back for Entertainment Weekly to take my photograph standing beside the largest carousel in the world. It was the single loudest photo session I've ever had because they actually pitch the volume of the mechanical instruments in that room in order to keep people moving through. You're not really meant to linger too long by the largest carousel in the world.

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The photo session went on for several hours and the photographer was communicating with me entirely by hand gestures. He would tap his chin and point up so that I'd know to look up a bit.

4. How did you find out about it?

Like most roadside attractions in America, they have signposts for it that start about 300 miles away, and imply it's just round the corner. I'd seen all these signs saying 'The House on the Rock', and thought it was very near where I lived, and eventually discovered it was 250 miles away. On the other hand, Rock City, which is also in American Gods, is worse, because I saw my first signpost to 'See Rock City, the World's Wonder' driving through mountainous Tennessee or Kentucky or somewhere, and again assumed it was just around the corner, and then drove for the greater part of a day. And then of course, because it's almost impossible to get to once you're there, I drove straight past it. Then I drove back and checked it out, and decided it was going to be in my book.

Do you think this is one of the big differences between England and America, in that you could drive from London to Scotland in the time it takes to follow the signs to Rock City?

I think the biggest difference between England and America is that England has history, and America has geography. In England, you can find whatever you need as long as you're willing to go back far enough, or go and find out when it happened. In America you can find whatever you need just as long as you're prepared to drive far enough. Also I get fascinated by the difference between England and America whereby places in England are all about time – the time it takes you to get there. And getting to places which would be five minutes away in America would take three or four hours sometimes. Not to mention Scotland, which gets positively fractal. You have these infinitely wiggly roads. Fractally wiggly roads.

5. What was your strangest plane journey?

The trouble with plane journeys is you start folding them all together. I do remember one which was not necessarily my strangest plane journey, but had something I've never seen happen before or since. I'd just been served with a large cup of apple juice and the plane hit one of those air pockets and dropped several hundred feet. It didn't bother any of us because we were all seatbelted in, but my apple juice shot straight out of my cup. The cup remained in the same place, but the contents made a slow and incredibly graceful arc across the cabin and landed in a businessman's lap half an aeroplane away. I was with

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Dave McKean at the time on a Mr Punch signing tour and we tried to pretend it wasn't us. At least they knew we hadn't actually thrown it; it was the apple juice that made a mad leap for freedom.

6. What's your favourite coin trick?

The favourite coin trick I've ever done was when I started work on *American Gods* and I had a large notebook, a fountain pen, and a copy of Bobo's *Modern Coin Magic*. I went from one to the other and I spent days practising my French Drop and my Downs Palm and all of those things because I knew Shadow was going to be into coin magic and I felt that I had to be able to write about it reasonably convincingly. I'd never done any magic before but I decided I had to now. I was actually on a train across America, going to San Diego, and there was a ten-year-old girl traveling with her mother. We'd all been on this train now for about three days so we all knew each other, and I disappeared a coin for her rather unexpectedly and reappeared it from her ear. I don't think anybody had ever done anything like that for her and seeing the expression on her face left me understanding why people become magicians. I of course have never become a magician, but I get to hang around with the Penn and Tellers and the Derren Browns of this world, who are all very, very good people and who will humour me and treat me like one of their own although they know that really I'm not.

7. Favourite con artist or con trick?

Ponzi, who created the Ponzi scheme. The thing that people laugh at in terms of confidence tricks is somebody selling you the Brooklyn Bridge, or in England somebody selling you London Bridge, or in France somebody selling you the Eiffel Tower. Ponzi sold the Eiffel Tower by going to all the major scrap metal agents in France, presenting himself as a representative of the French government, and explaining that the Eiffel Tower had become unsafe and they were going to be scrapping it, but they needed somebody who could handle the dismantling of the tower and the volume of metal that this would generate. He also implied that the French government was going to be so grateful that there would probably be all sorts of decorations involved for anybody who took this on. And then he explained to each of them in turn that it was a sealed envelope bid, so there was no possibility for corruption. So they went off to prepare their bids, and he privately got in touch with each of these gentlemen and explained that he could be bribed. And each of them gave him vast sums of money in order to buy the Eiffel Tower. And that, I feel, is still my favourite con.

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8. Did you enjoy making up the con tricks in AMERICAN GODS?

I did enjoy making up the con tricks very much, although I have to say I found myself rather baffled. The one that I thought you could actually do I tried to sort of fuzz the edges of a bit, so the reader can't actually figure out exactly how things work with Mr Wednesday and the credit cards. What he did is doable but I fuzzed the edges so that the reader can't do it. But I was very proud of myself for coming up with the ATM card-night deposit con. I made that up, and I thought it was really funny until the phone rang about eighteen months ago and it was a reporter from Canada letting me know that somebody who was a fan of the book had just done it and was now on the run, having taken local merchants for \$30,000. You don't expect your readers to go, 'Ah, this book's not just a fine work of literary whatsisname, but also a get-rich quick scheme,' to be followed shortly afterwards by a go-to-prison-quick scheme, which I believe he did. Are there any myths you would like to dispel? I have my journal over at www.neilgaiman.com, and one of the reasons for having it, apart from the fact that it's incredibly useful to have an immediate plug-in to your readers, is that I used to turn up at signings and people would expect me to be characters that I'd created. Particularly the Sandman. So I'd turn up to the signing and see the disappointment on people's faces because I wasn't tall and pale and beautiful and very morbid. They expected me to speak in gnomic gothic sentences and possibly iambic pentameter, or triolets or something. I like the blog because it undercuts and dispels that. I don't think you can imagine somebody as a beautiful gothic figure if they've just written about clearing up cat vomit from the floor at three o'clock in the morning.

9. It's now a few years since AMERICAN GODS came out. Do you have any thoughts on the novel?

People were incredibly nice about *American Gods*. I never expected all the awards that it won, particularly when it won the Hugo, and the Nebula, and the Bram Stoker award – that was delightful. And Americans were terribly nice about it. Nobody actually did the whole 'How dare you, being English, write about America?', which I thought was kind of them. The thing I found really amusing was about some places in the middle where people are talking in the way they talk in Wisconsin and Minnesota: occasionally I would have New Yorkers and Los Angelenos accusing me of lapsing into Britishisms there, mostly I think because people have no idea what people talk like in the rest of their country.

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Reviews

'This is a fantastic novel...runs as precisely as clockwork, but reads as smoothly as silk or warm chocolate' **Independent**

'American Gods is some kind of miracle. Neil Gaiman has managed to tell the tallest of tales in the most heart rending and believable fashion, despite the story's truly mythic scale. It is an important, essential book. As Pablo Neruda once said of another world class novel, not to read it is the same as never having tasted an orange' **Jonathan Carroll**

'From his first collection of short stories, Neil Gaiman has always been a remarkable, remarkably gifted writer, but *American Gods* is the first of his fictions to match, even *Sandman* series of graphic novels. Here we have poignancy, terror, nobility, magic, sacrifice, wisdom, mystery, heartbreak, and a hard-earned sense of resolution - a real emotional richness and grandeur that emerge from masterful storytelling' **Peter Straub**

'Neil Gaiman, a writer of rare perception and endless imagination, has long been an English treasure; and is now an American treasure as well' **William Gibson**

'Fantasy fans are about to discover something that comic book readers have known for years -- there's no one quite like Neil Gaiman. *American Gods* is Gaiman at the top of his game, original, engrossing, and endlessly inventive, a picaresque journey across America where the travellers are even stranger than the roadside attractions' **George R R Martin**

'You long for writers like Neil Gaiman, his vision is so personal and idiosyncratic. And unexpected, like the writer himself. An Englishman living in America, he explores the contradictions with a light all his own' **Chris Carter, creator of *The X Files***