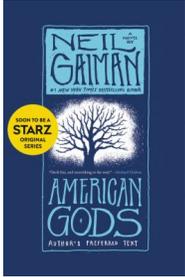


# Books by the Stack



## **American Gods by Neil Gaiman**

Days before his release from prison, Shadow learns that his wife has been killed in an accident. On the plane ride back home for the funeral, he meets Mr. Wednesday, who offers Shadow a job. Shadow accepts but soon discovers that Mr. Wednesday is far more dangerous than he could ever have imagined.

**Why you'll like it:** *Fantasy. Darkly humorous. Intricately plotted.*

**About the Author:** Neil Gaiman was born in Portchester, England on November 10, 1960. He worked as a journalist and freelance writer for a time, before deciding to try his hand at comic books. His first comic endeavor was the graphic novel series *The Sandman*. The series has won every major industry award including nine Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards, three Harvey Awards, and the 1991 World Fantasy Award making it the first comic ever to win a literary award. He writes both children and adult books. His adult books include *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, *Stardust*, *American Gods*, *Anansi Boys*; *Trigger Warning: Short Fictions and Disturbances*; and *The View from the Cheap Seats*: His children's books include *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish*, *Coraline*, *The Wolves in the Walls*, *Odd* and the *Frost Giants*, *The Graveyard Book*, and *The Sandman: Overture* (Bowker Author Biography)

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. *American Gods* contains both the magical and the mundane, a fantastic world of divine beings and bizarre happenings and world of prisons, rundown roadside attractions, and quaint small towns. How is Gaiman able to bring these worlds together in the novel? How does he manage to make their coexistence believable?
2. What is the cultural significance of the war between the gods of old and the “new gods of credit card and freeway, of Internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon”? In what ways have Americans transferred their devotion from spiritual to material and technological gods? What are the consequences of such a shift?
3. Gaiman, who now lives in the U.S., is originally from England. How might his perspective as a relative outsider affect his view of America? In what ways can *American Gods* be read as a satire or critique of American life?
4. What makes Shadow such a compelling protagonist? What are his most appealing qualities? At what crucial points in the novel does he demonstrate courage, compassion, intelligence, a willingness to sacrifice himself? What does his relationship with Laura reveal about him? What is the significance of his obsession with coin tricks?
5. What role do dreams play in *American Gods*? What are some of the Shadow's more vivid and unusual dreams? Why does the Buffalo Man tell him in a dream to “believe everything”?

- 6.** The narrator, discussing how we relate to the suffering of others, writes that “Fiction allows us to slide into these other heads, these other places, and look out through other eyes. And then in the tale we stop before we die, or we die vicariously and unharmed, and we resume our lives.” What does *American Gods* reveal by letting readers see through the eyes of a collection of down-at-heel and nearly forgotten divinities? What vicarious deaths does it allow us to experience?
- 7.** After shortchanging a waitress, Wednesday tells Shadow that the American people “don’t sacrifice rams or bulls to me. They don’t send me the souls of killers and slaves, gallows-hung and raven picked. They made me. They forgot me. Now I take a little back from them. Isn’t that fair?” What are the implications of god like Odin becoming, essentially, a con-man? What is the biggest con he tries to pull off in the novel?
- 8.** What do the old gods need to stay alive and vital? What means do they use to get what they need? What is Gaiman suggesting about the nature of divinity, sacrifice, and devotion?
- 9.** Late in the novel, the narrator says that “Religions are, by definition, metaphors...Religions are places to stand and look and act, vantage points from which to view the world.’ Would you agree with this assertion? What are the gods in *American Gods* metaphors for? What is the difference between a world view based on worship, sacrifice and belief in the divine and a world view based on the accumulation of material wealth and comfort?
- 10.** Who are some of the more colorful and vividly drawn secondary characters – human and divine - in the novel? What do they add to the overall impression of the book? How do they affect Shadow?
- 11.** What does the novel imply about the reality of life in small-town America? What darker truths lies behind the pleasant idyll of Lakewood, Wisconsin?
- 12.** At the end of the novel, Shadow thinks to himself: “People believe...People populate the darkness; with ghosts, with gods, with electrons, with tales. People imagine and people believe; and it is that belief, that rock-solid belief, that makes things happen.” Would you agree that what people believe in are largely projections of their own needs and desires? In what ways does the novel itself confirm or refute this idea?

*(Questions provided by the publisher)*



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