Neil Gaiman Read-alikes
By Jessica Zellers

What do readers love about Neil Gaiman?

Neil Gaiman has a Midas Touch with words. He has written in a dizzying number of genres and formats: Fantasy, Horror, Science Fiction, nonfiction, novels, short stories, screenplays, poetry, picture books, comic books, graphic novels, journal articles, and song lyrics -- and he maintained a blog (http://www.neilgaiman.com/) before blogs were popular. Astoundingly, he has met critical and popular success in everything he tries. The Dictionary of Literary Biography cites him as one of the world's top ten living post-modernists, and he has earned scores of awards, from the Eisner to the Mythopoeic Award to the Newbery.

Gaiman's varied oeuvre features memorable characters. Individually they seem dissimilar -- his protagonists include a bumbling pushover, a spooky little girl, and a mild-mannered, eleven-year-old Antichrist -- but they are always complex and always engaging. They also always find themselves in unexpected surroundings. In the Urban Fantasies Neverwhere, American Gods, and Anansi Boys, the average Joe protagonists are surprised to discover supernatural worlds lurking on the same plane as our own; in 1602, a crew of superhero English colonists travel to the New World; in the Sandman series, characters hop around to different planets and eras and dimensions. These surreal, often supernatural, settings naturally lend themselves to a dark tone. Gaiman frequently evokes creepy or even horrifying atmospheres, but he balances them with whimsical interludes and comic relief. Though he is now an American, Gaiman's native British wit always sneaks in -- or galumphs in, as in Good Omens, co-authored with fellow Englishman Terry Pratchett.

Though all of Gaiman's stories are complex, they generally move at a good clip, with the multiple storylines resolving just in the nick of time. Gaiman makes frequent, almost obsessive, use of literary and cultural references; he often alludes to Shakespeare, with the Bard himself cast as a character in The Sandman: Dream Country, while American Gods is an entire study in the meaning of myth. Despite the incessant highbrow allusions, Gaiman's prose is always straightforward, reader-friendly, and entertaining.

Readers unfamiliar with either Gaiman or graphic novels would do well to start with his signature creation, the ten-volume Sandman series. Sandman finally convinced critics that graphic novels are capable of the same literary quality as conventional books. The entire Epic Fantasy series is driven by the title character Sandman, a brooding, sexy, socially awkward protagonist. Accompanying him throughout is a cast of hundreds of secondary characters, including his quirky, perky, cutie-pie sister Death, nearly as popular with readers as the Sandman himself. The four short stories in the fourth volume, The Sandman: Dream Country, make for a good introduction to the series. Any of the earlier volumes are acceptable entry points, though the final three volumes should be saved for last.
Those who have read all of Gaiman's adult novels but still crave more may be pleasantly surprised by his works for younger audiences. Like many fantasy writers, Gaiman's books for children and young adults appeal to many different age levels. Start with a dark tribute to Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, Gaiman’s Newbery Award-winning *The Graveyard Book*, about a young man who is raised by the ghosts in the local cemetery.

**Read-alike Suggestions**

As the co-author of Gaiman's *Good Omens*, fellow British author **Terry Pratchett** is a natural read-alike. Readers who enjoy the British humor in Gaiman's works will be rewarded with Pratchett's witty prose and uproarious dialogue. Those who like their protagonists helplessly, comically flawed may enjoy the Rincewind books, a sub-series of the Discworld books; start with *The Colour of Magic*.

Gaiman’s British friend **Alan Moore** is a good choice for readers who enjoy graphic novels; in fact, Gaiman took over after Moore finished his run on the comic series Miracleman. Like Gaiman, Moore has earned critical and popular success for his sequential art. The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen books are recommended not only for graphic novel aficionados but for those who like literary, artistic, and cultural references to play a significant role in a story.

Fantasy writer **Robin McKinley** is perhaps best known for *Beauty*, a novel-length retelling of "Beauty and the Beast." This and *Spindle's End*, based on "Sleeping Beauty," call to mind Gaiman's fairy tale novel *Stardust* and his short story "Snow, Glass, Apples," based on "Snow White" and collected in *Smoke and Mirrors*. For a magical Urban Fantasy with a sophisticated writing style, try McKinley's *Sunshine*. Two main characters drive the story, which is dark in places but ultimately upbeat; Gaiman himself called it "pretty much perfect."

**Stephen King** is a fellow Fantasy and Horror writer who excels at the can't-put-it-down story. The typical King novel places likeable characters in thoroughly nasty situations, but liberal doses of humor and optimism prevent his books from being bleak; always there is a positive slant at the end. Fans of the Sandman series should look to King's Dark Tower books for another deliciously long Dark Fantasy series starring an enigmatic, tight-lipped loner. Another good bet is *The Eyes of the Dragon*, a suspenseful fairy tale with unexpected plot twists and an engaging, readable style.

Many of Gaiman’s books, though suitable for children or young adults, resonate with adult readers. Likewise, the works of **Philip Pullman** are marketed toward young audiences but may actually work better for adults. Pullman’s fertile imagination and keen prose style are showcased in his fantasy novels, and his grim worldview will appeal to those who appreciate the dark edge in Gaiman’s tone. Start with *The Golden Compass*, first in the His Dark Materials series, in which orphan heroine Lyra becomes entangled in a clash of politics, science, and religion in an alternate-world version of Oxford.

*Jessica Zellers is a Collection Development Librarian with Mid-Continent Public Library. She has a weakness for fat Russian novels, which never conclude with an HEA.*