

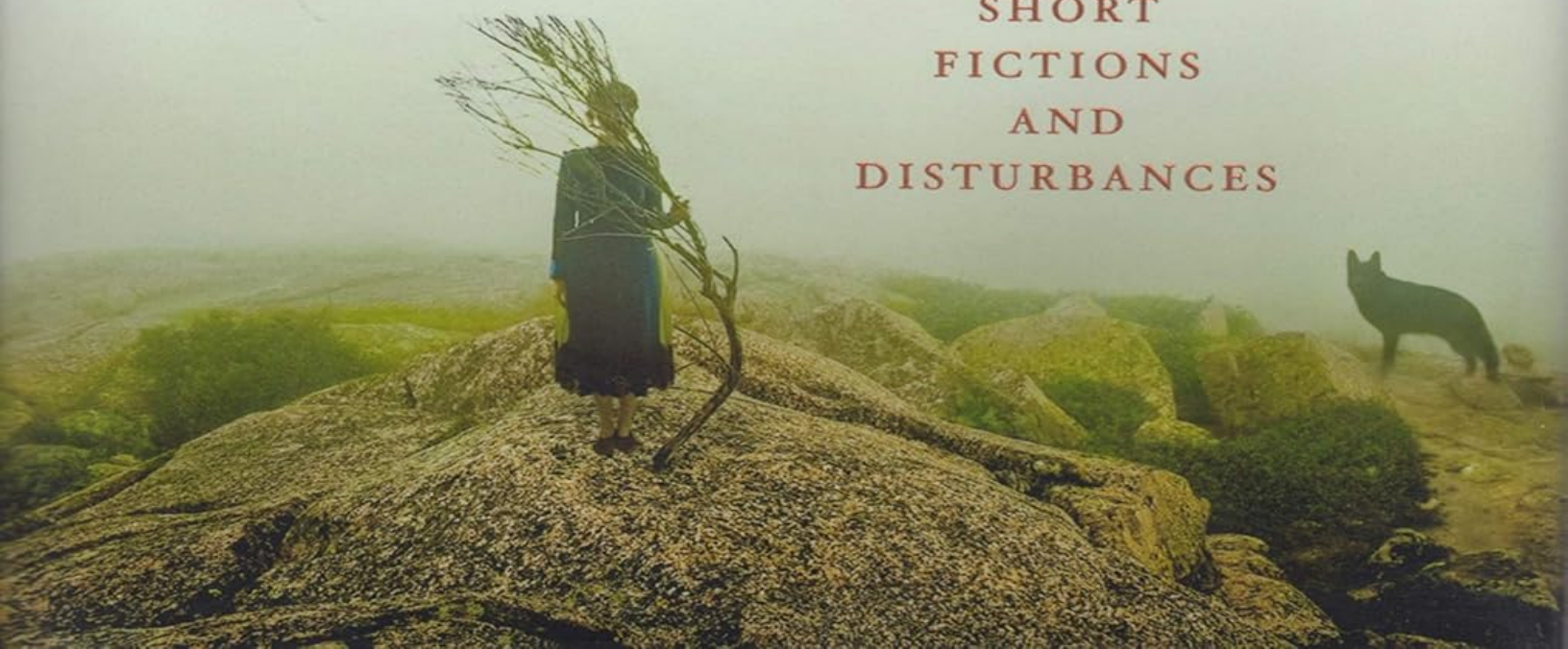


NEIL
GAIMAN

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

TRIGGER
WARNING

SHORT
FICTIONS
AND
DISTURBANCES





TRIGGER WARNING

SHORT FICTIONS AND DISTURBANCES

NEIL
GAIMAN


WILLIAM MORROW
An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

DEDICATION

*I'm not sure how I wound up with an honourable Hollywood agent who reads books for pleasure but I did, eighteen years ago. He's still my agent, still honourable, and he still likes short stories best of all.
This book of tales is for Jon Levin.*

CONTENTS

Dedication

Introduction

Making a Chair

A Lunar Labyrinth

The Thing About Cassandra

Down to a Sunless Sea

“The Truth Is a Cave in the Black Mountains . . .”

My Last Landlady

Adventure Story

Orange

A Calendar of Tales

The Case of Death and Honey

The Man Who Forgot Ray Bradbury

Jerusalem

Click-Clack the Rattlebag

An Invocation of Incuriosity

“And Weep, Like Alexander”

Nothing O’Clock

Diamonds and Pearls: A Fairy Tale

The Return of the Thin White Duke

Feminine Endings

Observing the Formalities

The Sleeper and the Spindle

Witch Work

In Relig Odhráin

Black Dog

Permissions

[*About the Author*](#)

[*Also by Neil Gaiman*](#)

[*Credits*](#)

[*Copyright*](#)

[*About the Publisher*](#)

INTRODUCTION

I. LITTLE TRIGGERS

There are things that upset us. That's not quite what we're talking about here, though. I'm thinking rather about those images or words or ideas that drop like trapdoors beneath us, throwing us out of our safe, sane world into a place much more dark and less welcoming. Our hearts skip a ratatat drumbeat in our chests, and we fight for breath. Blood retreats from our faces and our fingers, leaving us pale and gasping and shocked.

And what we learn about ourselves in those moments, where the trigger has been squeezed, is this: the past is not dead. There are things that wait for us, patiently, in the dark corridors of our lives. We think we have moved on, put them out of mind, left them to desiccate and shrivel and blow away; but we are wrong. They have been waiting there in the darkness, working out, practicing their most vicious blows, their sharp hard thoughtless punches into the gut, killing time until we came back that way.

The monsters in our cupboards and our minds are always there in the darkness, like mold beneath the floorboards and behind the wallpaper, and there is so much darkness, an inexhaustible supply of darkness. The universe is amply supplied with night.

What do we need to be warned about? We each have our little triggers.

I first encountered the phrase *Trigger Warning* on the Internet, where it existed primarily to warn people of links to images or ideas that could upset them and trigger flashbacks or anxiety or terror, in order that the images or ideas could be filtered out of a feed, or that the person reading could be mentally prepared before encountering them.

I was fascinated when I learned that trigger warnings had crossed the divide from the Internet to the world of things you could touch. Several colleges, it was announced, were considering putting trigger warnings on works of literature, art or film, to warn students of what was waiting for them, an idea that I found myself simultaneously warming to (of course you want to let people who may be distressed know that this might distress them) while at the same time being deeply troubled by it: when I wrote *Sandman* and it was being published as a monthly comic, it had a warning on each issue, telling the world it was Suggested for Mature Readers, which I thought was wise. It told potential readers that this was not a children's comic and it might contain images or ideas that could be troubling, and also suggests that if you are mature (whatever that happens to mean) you are on your own. As for what they would find that might disturb them, or shake them, or make them think something they had never thought before, I felt that that was their own lookout. We are mature, we decide what we read or do not read.

What we read as adults should be read, I think, with no warnings or alerts beyond, perhaps: enter at your own risk. We need to find out what fiction is, what it means, to us, an experience that is going to be unlike anyone else's experience of the story.

We build the stories in our heads. We take words, and we give them power, and we look out through other eyes, and we see, and experience, what others see. I wonder, *Are fictions safe places?* And then I ask myself, *Should they be safe places?* There are stories I read as a child I wished, once I had read them, that I had never encountered, because I was not ready for them and they upset me: stories which contained helplessness, in which people were embarrassed, or mutilated, in which adults were made vulnerable and parents could be of no assistance. They troubled me and haunted my nightmares and my daydreams, worried and upset me on profound levels, but they also taught me that, if I was going to read fiction, sometimes I would only know what my comfort zone was by leaving it; and now, as an adult, I would not erase the experience of having read them if I could.

There are still things that profoundly upset me when I encounter them, whether it's on the Web or the word or in the world. They never get easier, never stop my heart from trip-trapping, never let me escape, this time, unscathed. But they teach me things, and they open my eyes, and if they hurt, they hurt in ways that make me think and grow and change.

I wondered, reading about the college discussions, whether, one day, people would put a trigger warning on my fiction. I wondered whether or not they would be justified in doing it. And then I decided to do it first.

There are things in this book, as in life, that might upset you. There is death and pain in here, tears and discomfort, violence of all kinds, cruelty, even abuse. There is kindness, too, I hope, sometimes. Even a handful of happy endings. (Few stories end unhappily for all participants, after all.) And there's more than that: I know a lady called Rocky who is triggered by tentacles, and who genuinely needs warnings for things that have tentacles in them, especially tentacles with suckers, and who, confronted with an unexpected slice of squid or octopus, will dive, shaking, behind the nearest sofa. There is an enormous tentacle somewhere in these pages.

Many of these stories end badly for at least one of the people in them. Consider yourself warned.

II. PRE-FLIGHT SAFETY DEMONSTRATION

Sometimes huge truths are uttered in unusual contexts. I fly too much, a concept and a sentence that would have been impossible for me to understand as a young man, when every plane journey was exciting and miraculous, when I would stare out of the window at the clouds below and imagine that they were a city, or a world, somewhere I could walk safely. Still, I find myself, at the start of each flight, meditating and pondering the wisdom offered by the flight attendants as if it were a koan or a tiny parable, or the high point of all wisdom.

This is what they say:

Secure your own mask before helping others.

And I think of us, all the people, and the masks we wear, the masks we hide behind and the masks that reveal. I imagine people pretending to be what they truly are, and discovering that other people are so much more and so much less than they imagined themselves to be or present themselves as. And then, I think about the need to help others, and how we mask ourselves to do it, and how unmasking makes us vulnerable . . .

We are all wearing masks. That is what makes us interesting.

These are stories about those masks, and the people we are underneath them.

We authors, who trade in fictions for a living, are a continuum of all that we have seen and heard, and most importantly, all that we have read.

I have friends who fulminate and bark and explode in frustration because people do not know the references, do not know what is being pointed at, have forgotten authors and stories and worlds. I tend to look at these things from another direction: I was once a blank piece of parchment too, waiting to be inscribed. I learned about things and people from stories, and I learned about other authors from stories.

Many, perhaps most, of the stories in this book are part of that same continuum. They exist because other authors, other voices, other minds, have existed. I hope you will not mind if, in this introduction, I take the opportunity to point you at some of the writers and places without whom these tales might not have ever seen the light.

III. THE LUCK OF THE DRAW

This is my third collection of short fiction, and I know just how lucky I am.

I grew up loving and respecting short stories. They seemed to me to be the purest and most perfect things people could make: not a word wasted, in the best of them. An author would wave her hand and suddenly there was a world, and people in it, and ideas. A beginning and a middle and an end that would take you across the universe and bring you back. I loved all kinds of short-story collections, from the anthologies of ghost and horror stories I'd pick up as a boy, to the single-author collections that would reshape the inside of my head.

My favorite collections would not just give me short stories but they would also tell me things I didn't know, about the stories in the book and the craft of writing. I would respect authors who did not write an introduction, but I could not truly love them as I loved the authors who made me realize that each of the stories in the anthology was written, actually made up word by word and written down, by someone human, who thought and breathed and walked and probably even sang in the shower, like me.

The wisdom in publishing is that short-story collections don't sell. All too often short-story collections are viewed as vanity projects or are published by small presses, are not seen as real in the way that novels are real. Still, for me, the short stories are the places where I get to fly, to experiment, to play. I get to make mistakes and to go on small adventures, and there is something about the process of putting together a collection like this that is both scary and eye-opening: when I put stories together themes reoccur, reshape and become clear. I learn what I've been writing about for the previous decade.

IV. GENERAL APOLOGY

I firmly believe that short-story collections should be the same sort of thing all the way through. They should not, hodgepodge and willy-nilly, assemble stories that were obviously not intended to sit between the same covers. They should not, in short, contain horror and ghost stories, science fiction and fairy tales, fabulism and poetry, all in the same place. They should be respectable.

This collection fails this test.

For this failure, as for so much, I request your indulgence and forgiveness, and hope only that somewhere in these pages you may encounter a story you might otherwise never have

read. Look. Here is a very small one, waiting for you now:

SHADDER

Some creatures hunt. Some creatures forage. The Shadder lurk. Sometimes, admittedly, they skulk. But mostly, they just lurk.

The Shadder do not make webs. The world is their web. The Shadder do not dig pits. If you are here you have already fallen.

There are animals that chase you down, run fast as the wind, tirelessly, to sink their fangs into you, to drag you down. The Shadder do not chase. They simply go to the place where you will be, when the chase is over, and they wait for you there, somewhere dark and indeterminate. They find the last place you would look, and abide there, as long as they need to abide, until it becomes the last place that you look and you see them.

You cannot hide from the Shadder. They were there first. You cannot outrun the Shadder. They are waiting at your journey's end. You cannot fight the Shadder, because they are patient, and they will tarry until the last day of all, the day that the fight has gone out of you, the day that you are done with fighting, the day the last punch has been thrown, the last knife-blow struck, the last cruel word spoken. Then, and only then, will the Shadder come out.

They eat nothing that is not ready to be eaten. Look behind you.

V. ABOUT THE CONTENT OF THIS BOOK

Welcome to these pages. You can read about the stories you will encounter here, or you can skip this and come back and see what I have to say after you've read the stories. I'm easy.

Making a Chair

Some days the words won't come. On those days, I normally try to revise something that already exists. On that day, I made a chair.

A Lunar Labyrinth

I met Gene Wolfe over thirty years ago, when I was a twenty-two-year-old journalist, and I interviewed him about his four-part novel, *The Book of the New Sun*. Over the next five years we became friends, and we have been friends ever since. He is a good man and a fine, deep writer, always tricky, always wise. His third novel, *Peace*, written when I was almost a boy, is one of my favorite books. His most recent novel, *The Land Across*, was the book I read with the most enjoyment this year, and is as deceptive and dangerous as any book he has written.

One of Gene's finest short stories is called "A Solar Labyrinth." It's about a labyrinth made of shadows and is a darker story than it seems on the surface.

I wrote this story for Gene. If there are solar labyrinths, there should be lunar ones too, after all, and a Wolfe to bay at the moon.

The Thing About Cassandra

When I was about fourteen, it seemed much easier to imagine a girlfriend than to have one—that would involve actually talking to a girl, after all. So I would, I decided, write a girl's name on the cover of my exercise books and deny all knowledge of her when asked, thus, I fondly imagined, causing everyone to think that I actually had a girlfriend. I do not believe it worked. I never actually got around to imagining anything about her but the name.

I wrote this story in August of 2009, on the Isle of Skye, while my then-girlfriend Amanda had flu and tried to sleep it off. When she woke I would bring her soup and honeyed drinks, then read her what I had written of the story. I am not certain how much of it she remembers.

I gave the story to Gardner Dozois and George R. R. Martin for their anthology *Songs of Love and Death*, and was inordinately relieved when they liked it.

Down to a Sunless Sea

The *Guardian* newspaper was celebrating World Water Day with a week of stories about water. I was in Austin, Texas, during the South by Southwest Festival, where I was recording the audiobooks of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* and my first short-story collection, *Smoke and Mirrors*.

I was thinking of Grand Guignol, of heartbreaking monologues whispered by lonely performers to a captive audience, and remembering some of the more painful tales from *The Newgate Calendar*. And London, in the rain, a long long way from Texas.

“The Truth Is a Cave in the Black Mountains . . .”

There are stories you build, and there are stories you construct, then there are stories that you hack out of rock, removing all the things that are not the story.

I wanted to edit an anthology of stories which were cracking good reads with, perhaps, a fantasy or SF edge, but mostly that simply kept people turning the pages. Al Sarrantonio became my coeditor on the project. We called the book *Stories*, which might have been a good title for it, before Google. It was not enough to edit the book. I had to write a story for it.

I have visited many peculiar places in the world, places that can hold your mind and your soul tightly and will not let them go. Some of those places are exotic and unusual, some are mundane. The strangest of all of them, at least for me, is the Isle of Skye, off the west coast of Scotland. I know I am not alone in this. There are people who discover Skye and will not leave, and even for those of us who do leave, the misty island haunts us and holds us in its own way. It is where I am happiest and where I am most alone.

Otta F. Swire wrote books about the Hebrides and about Skye in particular, and she filled her books with strange and arcane knowledge. (Did you know May the third was the day that

the devil was cast out of heaven, and thus the day on which it is unpardonable to commit a crime? I learned that in her book on the myths of the Hebrides.) And in one of her books, she mentioned the cave in the Black Cuillins where you could go, if you were brave, and get gold, with no cost, but each visit you paid to the cave would make you more evil, would eat your soul.

And that cave, and its promise, began to haunt me.

I took several true stories (or stories that are said to be true, which is almost the same thing) and gave them to two men, set them in a world that was almost, but not quite, ours, and told a story of revenge and of travel, of desire for gold and of secrets. It won the Shirley Jackson Award for Best Novelette (*Stories* won for Best Anthology) and the Locus Award for Best Novelette, and I was very proud of it, my story.

Before it was published, I was set to appear on the stage of the Sydney Opera House and was asked if I could do something with Australian string quartet FourPlay (they are the rock band of string quartets, an amazing, versatile bunch with a cult following): perhaps something with art that could be projected onto the stage.

I thought about “‘The Truth Is a Cave in the Black Mountains . . .’”: it would take about seventy minutes to read. I wondered what would happen if a string quartet created a moody and glorious soundtrack while I told the story, as if it were a movie. And what if Scottish artist Eddie Campbell, he who drew Alan Moore’s *From Hell*, writer and artist of *Alec*, my favorite comic, created illustrations for this most Scottish of my stories and projected them above me while I read?

I was scared, going out onto the stage of the Sydney Opera House, but the experience was amazing: the story was received with a standing ovation, and we followed it with an interview (artist Eddie Campbell was the interviewer) and a poem, also with FourPlay.

Six months later, we performed it again, with more paintings by Eddie, in Hobart, Tasmania, in front of three thousand people, in a huge shed at a festival, and again, they loved it.

Now we had a problem. The only people who had ever seen the show were in Australia. It seemed unfair, somehow. We needed an excuse to travel, to bring the FourPlay string quartet across the world (pop-culture-literate and brilliant musicians, they are: I fell in love with their version of the *Doctor Who* theme before I ever knew them). Fortunately, Eddie Campbell had taken his paintings, and done many more, and then laid out the text into something halfway between an illustrated story and a graphic novel, and HarperCollins were publishing it in the U.S. and Headline publishing it in the UK.

We went on tour, FourPlay and Eddie and me, to San Francisco, to New York, to London and to Edinburgh. We got a standing ovation at Carnegie Hall, and it doesn’t get much better than that.

And still I wonder how much of the story I wrote, and how much was simply waiting there for me, like the gray rocks that sit like bones on the low hills of Skye.

My Last Landlady

This was written for a publication of the World Horror Convention. That year, it was in Brighton. Brighton these days is a bustling, arty, go-ahead, exciting seaside metropolis. When I was a boy, though, we would go to Brighton out of season, and it was dreary and cold and murderous.

Obviously, this story is set in that long-gone Brighton and not the current one. You have nothing to be scared of if you stay in a bed-and-breakfast there now.

Adventure Story

I was asked to write this story by Ira Glass for his *This American Life* radio show. He liked it, but his producers didn't, so I wrote them an op-ed instead, about how "adventures are all very well in their place, but there is a lot to be said for regular meals and freedom from pain," and this story went on to be published in *McSweeney's Quarterly*.

I had been thinking a lot about death, and the way that when people die they take their stories with them. It's a sort of companion piece to my novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, I think, at least in that respect.

Orange

Jonathan Strahan is a nice man and a good editor. He lives in Perth, Western Australia. I have a bad habit of breaking his heart by writing something for an anthology he is editing and then taking it away. I always try and mend his broken heart by writing something else, though. This is one of those something elses.

The way a story is told is as important as the story being told, although the way that the story is told is usually a little less obvious than it is here. I had a story in my head, but it wasn't until I thought of the questionnaire format that it all fell into place. I wrote the story in airports and on the plane to Australia, where I was going to be attending the Sydney Writers' Festival, and read it a day or so after I had landed to an audience of many people and to my pale and scary goddaughter, Hayley Campbell, whose grumblings about orange tan smears on the fridge might have inspired the story in the first place.

A Calendar of Tales

This was one of the oddest and most pleasant things I've done in the last few years.

When I was young, I would read Harlan Ellison's short-story collections with delight. I loved the stories, and I loved his accounts of how the stories had come to be written just as much. I learned many things from Harlan, but the thing that I took away from his introductions that made the most impact was just the idea that the way that you wrote the stories was, you did the work. You showed up, and you did it.

And that never seemed more clear or obvious than when Harlan would explain that he had written such and such a short story in a bookshop window, or live on air on the radio, or in a similar situation. That people had suggested titles or words. He was demonstrating to the world that writing was a craft, that it was not an act of magic. Somewhere, a writer was sitting down and writing. I loved the idea of trying to write in a shop window.

But, I thought, the world had changed. You could now have a shop window that allowed hundreds of thousands of people to press their faces to the glass and watch.

BlackBerry came to me and asked if I would be willing to do a social media project, anything I wanted, and seemed perfectly happy when I suggested that I'd like to write "A Calendar of Tales," each story spinning off a reply to a tweet about the months of the year—questions like "Why is January dangerous?" "What's the strangest thing you've ever seen in July?" (Someone named @mendozacarla replied, "An Igloo made of books," and I knew what my story would be.) "Who would you like to see again in December?"

I asked the questions, got tens of thousands of replies, and chose twelve.

I wrote the twelve stories (March was the first, December the last), then invited people to make their own art based on the stories. Five short films were made about the process, and the whole thing was blogged, tweeted, and put out into the world, for free, on the Web. It was a joy to make stories in public. Harlan Ellison isn't a big fan of things like Twitter, but I phoned him when the project was over, and I told him it was his fault and that I hoped it would inspire someone who had been following it, as much as his bookshop window tales had inspired me.

(My most grateful thanks to @zyblonius, @TheAstralGypsy, @MorgueHumor, @_NikkiLS_, @StarlingV, @DKSakar, @mendozacarla, @gabiottasnest, @TheGhostRegion, @elainelowe, @MeiLinMiranda, and @Geminitm for their inspirational tweets.)

The Case of Death and Honey

I encountered the Sherlock Holmes stories as a boy, and fell in love, and never forgot Holmes or the redoubtable Dr. Watson who chronicled his detective work; Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock's brother; or Arthur Conan Doyle, the mind behind it all. I loved the rationalism, the idea that an intelligent, observant person could take a handful of clues and build them up into a world. I loved learning who these people were, a story at a time.

Holmes colored things. When I began to keep bees, I was always aware that I was merely following in Holmes's footsteps. But then I would wonder why Holmes had taken up beekeeping. After all, it's not the most labor intensive of retirement hobbies. And Sherlock Holmes was never happy unless he was working on a case: indolence and inactivity were death to him.

I met Les Klinger at the first meeting of the Baker Street Irregulars I attended, in 2002. I liked him very much. (I liked all the people there: grown-up women and men who, when not being eminent jurists, journalists, surgeons, and wastrels, had elected to believe that somewhere it was always 1889 in 221b Baker Street, and Mrs. Hudson would soon be bringing up both the tea and an eminent client.)

This story was written for Les and for Laurie King for their collection *A Study in Sherlock*. It was inspired by a jar of snow-white honey I was offered on the side of a mountain in China.

I wrote this story over a week in a hotel room, while my wife and my youngest daughter and her friend were at the beach.

"The Case of Death and Honey" was nominated for an Anthony Award, an Edgar Award, and a Crime Writers' Association Silver Dagger Award. That it didn't win any of them made me no less happy: I'd never been nominated for a crime-writing award before, probably never would again.

The Man Who Forgot Ray Bradbury

I forgot my friend. Or rather, I remembered everything about him except his name. He had died over a decade before. I remembered our phone conversations, our time together, the way he talked and gestured, the books he had written. I resolved that I would not go to the Internet and look. I would simply remember his name. I would walk around trying to remember his name, and began to be haunted by the idea that if I could not remember his name he would never have existed. Foolishness, I knew, but still . . .

I wrote “The Man Who Forgot Ray Bradbury” as a ninetieth-birthday present for Ray Bradbury, and as a way of talking about the impact that Ray Bradbury had on me as a boy, and as an adult, and, as far as I could, about what he had done to the world. I wrote it as a love letter and as a thank-you and as a birthday present for an author who made me dream, taught me about words and what they could accomplish, and who never let me down as a reader or as a person as I grew up.

My editor at William Morrow, Jennifer Brehl (she edited this book, and everything I’ve done for adults since *Anansi Boys*), went to his bedside and read the story to him. The thank-you message he sent me by video meant the world to me.

My friend Mark Evanier told me that he met Ray Bradbury when he was a boy of eleven or twelve. When Bradbury found out that Mark wanted to be a writer, he invited him to his office and spent half a day telling him the important stuff: If you want to be a writer, you have to write. Every day. Whether you feel like it or not. That you can’t just write one book and stop. That it’s work, but the best kind of work. Mark grew up to be a writer, the kind who writes and supports himself through writing.

Ray Bradbury was the kind of person who would give half a day to a kid who wanted to be a writer when he grew up.

I encountered Ray Bradbury’s stories as a boy. The first one I read was “Homecoming,” about a human child in a world of *Addams Family*-style monsters, who wanted to fit in. It was the first time anyone had ever written a story that spoke to me personally. There was a copy of *The Silver Locusts* (the UK title of *The Martian Chronicles*) knocking about my house. I read it, loved it, and bought all the Bradbury books I could from the traveling bookshop that set up once a term in my school. I learned about Poe from Bradbury. There was poetry in the short stories, and it didn’t matter that I was missing so much: what I took from the stories was enough.

Some authors I read and loved as a boy disappointed me as I aged. Bradbury never did. His horror stories remained as chilling, his dark fantasies as darkly fantastic, his science fiction (he never cared about the science, only about the people, which was why the stories worked so well) as much of an exploration of the sense of wonder as they had been when I was a child.

He was a good writer, and he wrote well in many disciplines. He was one of the first science fiction writers to escape the “pulp” magazines and to be published in the “slicks.” He wrote scripts for Hollywood films. Good films were made from his novels and stories. Long before I was a writer Bradbury was one of the writers that other writers aspired to become.

A Ray Bradbury story meant something on its own—it told you nothing of what the story would be about, but it told you about atmosphere, about language, about some sort of magic escaping into the world. *Death Is a Lonely Business*, his detective novel, is as much a Bradbury story as *Something Wicked This Way Comes* or *Fahrenheit 451* or any of the horror, or science fiction, or magical realism, or realism you’ll find in the short-story collections. He was a genre on his own, and on his own terms. A young man from Waukegan, Illinois, who went to Los Angeles, educated himself in libraries, and wrote until he got good, then transcended genre and became a genre of one, often emulated, absolutely inimitable.

I met him first when I was a young writer and he was in the UK for his seventieth-birthday celebrations, held at the Natural History Museum. We became friends in an odd, upside-down way, sitting beside each other at book signings, at events. I would be there when Ray spoke in public over the years. Sometimes I'd introduce him to the audience. I was the master of ceremonies when Ray was given his Grand Master Award by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America: he told them about a child he had watched, teased by his friends for wanting to enter a toy shop because they said it was too young for him, and how much Ray had wanted to persuade the child to ignore his friends and play with the toys.

He'd speak about the practicalities of a writer's life ("You have to write!" he would tell people. "You have to write every day! I still write every day!") and about being a child inside (he said he had a photographic memory, going back to babyhood, and perhaps he did), about joy, about love.

He was kind, and gentle, with that midwestern niceness that's a positive thing rather than an absence of character. He was enthusiastic, and it seemed that that enthusiasm would keep him going forever. He genuinely liked people. He left the world a better place, and left better places in it: the red sands and canals of Mars, the midwestern Hallowe'ens and small towns and dark carnivals. And he kept writing.

"Looking back over a lifetime, you see that love was the answer to everything," Ray said once, in an interview.

He gave people so many reasons to love him. We did. And, so far, we have not forgotten.

Jerusalem

This story was commissioned by the BBC for its William Blake Week. They asked if I could write a story to be read on Radio Four, inspired by a Blake poem.

I had recently visited Jerusalem, and wondered what it would actually take to build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land. And what kind of person would want to.

I make many things up, but Jerusalem syndrome is a real thing.

Click-Clack the Rattlebag

I wrote this in the house of my friends Peter Nicholls and Clare Coney, in Surrey Hills, Melbourne, Australia. It was Christmas. Oddly enough, despite the sweltering temperatures, it was a white Christmas: thick, marble-sized hail fell during our Christmas dinner and blanketed the Coney-Nicholls lawn. I wrote it for a book of new monsters, edited by Kasey Lansdale, but it was first published as an audiobook by Audible in the U.S. and the UK. They gave it away for free, for Hallowe'en, and gave money to good causes for each person who downloaded it. So everyone was happy, except the people who had downloaded the story, and listened to it late at night, and then had to go around turning all the lights on.

The house in the story is based on my friend Tori's house in Kinsale, Ireland, which is obviously not actually haunted, and the sound of people upstairs moving wardrobes around when you are downstairs there and alone is probably just something that old houses do when they think they are unobserved.

An Invocation of Incuriosity

Children are driven by a sense of injustice, and it sticks around as we age, bury it however we try. It still rankles that, almost forty years ago, when I was fifteen, I wrote a short story for my mock English O level that was graded down from an A to a C with an explanatory comment from the teacher that it “was too original. Must obviously have copied it from somewhere.” Many years later, I took my favorite idea from that tale and put it into this. I’m pretty sure that the idea was original, but it gave me pleasure to put it into a story dedicated to Jack Vance and set in the world of *The Dying Earth*.

Writers live in houses other people built.

They were giants, the men and the women who made the houses we inhabit. They started with a barren place and they built Speculative Fiction, always leaving the building unfinished so the people who came by after they were gone could put on another room, or another story. Clark Ashton Smith dug the foundations of the *Dying Earth* stories, and Jack Vance came along and built them high and glorious, as he made so much high and glorious, and built a world in which all science is now magic, at the very end of the world, when the sun is dim and preparing to go out.

I discovered *The Dying Earth* when I was thirteen, in an anthology called *Flashing Swords*. The story was called “Morreion,” and it started me dreaming. I found a British paperback copy of *The Dying Earth*, filled with strange misprints, but the stories were there and they were as magical as “Morreion” had been. In a dark secondhand book shop where men in overcoats bought used pornography I found a copy of *The Eyes of the Overworld* and then tiny dusty books of short stories—“The Moon Moth” is, I felt then and feel now, the most perfectly built SF short story that anyone has ever written—and around that point Jack Vance books began to be published in the UK and suddenly all I had to do to read Jack Vance books was buy them. And I did: *The Demon Princes*, the *Alastor* trilogy, and the rest. I loved the way he would digress, I loved the way he would imagine, and most of all I loved the way he wrote it all down: wryly, gently, amused, like a god would be amused, but never in a way that made less of what he wrote, like James Branch Cabell but with a heart as well as a brain.

Every now and again I’ve noticed myself crafting a Vance sentence, and it always makes me happy when I do—but he’s not a writer I’d ever dare to imitate. I don’t think he’s imitable. There are few enough of the writers I loved when I was thirteen I can see myself going back to twenty years from now. Jack Vance I will reread forever.

“An Invocation of Incuriosity” won the Locus Award for Best Short Story, which delighted me, although I considered it as much an award for Jack Vance as for my tale, and it thrilled and vindicated my inner mock-O-level-taking teenager.

“And Weep, Like Alexander”

It has long been a source of puzzlement to me that none of the inventions we were promised when I was a boy, the ones that were due to make our lives much more fun and interesting in the world to come, ever arrived. We got computers, and phones which do everything that computers used to do, but no flying cars, no glorious spaceships, no easy travel to other planets (as Ted Mooney put it).

This story was written as part of a fund-raising book for the Arthur C. Clarke Awards. The book, *Fables from the Fountain*, edited by Ian Whates, was based on Arthur C. Clarke's *Tales from the White Hart*, itself modeled on the club stories of the early twentieth century. (Lord Dunsany's stories of Mr. Joseph Jorkens are my favorite club stories.) I took the name Obediah Polkinghorn from one of Arthur C. Clarke's stories, as a tribute to Clarke himself. (I met and interviewed him, back in 1985. I remember being surprised by the West Country burr in his voice.)

It is a very silly story, so I gave it a slightly pompous title.

Nothing O'Clock

I have wholeheartedly and unashamedly loved the television series *Doctor Who* since I was a three-year-old boy at Mrs. Pepper's School in Portsmouth, and William Hartnell was the Doctor. Writing actual episodes of the show, almost fifty years later, was one of the most fun things I've done. (One of them even won a Hugo Award.) By this time Matt Smith played the eleventh Doctor. Puffin Books asked if I would write a story for their book *Doctor Who: 11 Doctors, 11 Stories*. I chose to set the story during the first season of Matt's run.

You might think you need to know a lot about *Doctor Who*, given that it is a fifty-year-old show, to enjoy this story, but you don't need to know much. The Doctor is an alien, a Time Lord, the last of his race, who travels through time and space in a blue box that is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. It sometimes lands where he wanted to go. If there's something wrong, he may well sort it out. He's very clever.

There is a game in England, or there was when I was growing up, called What's the Time, Mister Wolf? It's a fun game. Sometimes Mister Wolf tells you the time. Sometimes he tells you something much more disquieting.

Diamonds and Pearls: A Fairy Tale

I first spent time with the woman who would become my wife because she wanted to make a book of photographs of herself dead, to accompany her album *Who Killed Amanda Palmer?* She had been taking photographs of herself dead since she was eighteen. She wrote to me and pointed out that nobody was going to buy a book of photos of a dead woman who wasn't even actually dead, but perhaps if I wrote some captions they might.

Photographer Kyle Cassidy and Amanda and I gathered in Boston for a few days of making art. The photographs Kyle took were like stills from lost films, and I would write stories to accompany them. Unfortunately, most of the stories don't work when separated from their photographs. (My favorite was a murder mystery, involving a woman killed by a typewriter.)

I like this one, though, and you do not need the photograph (of young Amanda with her mouth open and a floor covered with costume jewelry) to understand it.

The Return of the Thin White Duke

The title is a quote from a David Bowie song, and the story began, some years ago, with a fashion magazine asking the remarkable Japanese artist Yoshitaka Amano to do some fashion drawings of Bowie and his wife, Iman. Mr. Amano asked if I would like to write a story to accompany them. I wrote the first half of a story, with plans to conclude it in the next issue of the magazine. But the magazine lost interest before they had published the first part, and the story was forgotten. For this anthology I thought it would be an adventure to finish it, and find out what was going to happen, and where it was all heading. If I had known once (*I must have known once*), I still found myself reading the story like a stranger, and walking alone into the mist to learn where it was going.

Feminine Endings

Life imitates art, but clumsily, copying its movements when it thinks it isn't looking.

There are stories it feels almost impious to put on paper, for fear of allowing the things in the story to begin to influence the real world.

I was asked to write a love letter, for a book of love letters. I remembered a human statue I had seen in the square in Kraków, a city with a smoke dragon beneath it.

When I met the woman I would one day marry, we traded stories of our lives. She had once, she told me, been a human statue. I sent her this story, and it did not frighten her away.

For my birthday, shortly after we met, she surprised me in a park in her human-statue incarnation. As a human statue she wore a wedding dress that she had bought for \$20, and stood on a box. They called her the Eight-Foot Bride. She wore the wedding dress she had been a statue in on the day we were married. Nobody has seen the dress since that day.

Observing the Formalities

I am not scared of bad people, of wicked evildoers, of monsters and creatures of the night.

The people who scare me are the ones who are certain of their own rightness. The ones who know how to behave, and what their neighbors need to do to be on the side of the good.

We are all the heroes of our own stories.

In this case, *Sleeping Beauty*. Which, seen from another direction, is also the subject of . . .

The Sleeper and the Spindle

Written for Melissa Marr and Tim Pratt's anthology *Rags and Bones*, subtitled *New Twists on Timeless Tales*. They asked a few writers to create stories based on stories that had influenced us. I chose two fairy tales.

I love fairy tales. I remember the first one I encountered, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," in a beautiful illustrated book my mother would read to me when I was two. I loved everything about that story and those pictures. She read it to me, and soon enough I was reading it to myself. It wasn't until I was older that I started pondering the stranger parts of the story, and I wrote "Snow, Glass, Apples" (in *Smoke and Mirrors*).

I loved *Sleeping Beauty* too, in all her incarnations. When I was a young journalist I read a dozen thick bestsellers, and realized I could retell the story of *Sleeping Beauty* as a huge, sex-and-shopping blockbuster, complete with an evil multinational corporation, a noble young scientist, and a young girl in a mysterious coma. I decided not to write it: it seemed too calculated, and the sort of thing that might actually put me off the writing career I was hoping for.

When Melissa and Tim asked me for a story, I had been pondering what would happen if two stories were happening at the same time. And what if the women who were already the subjects of the stories had a little more to do, and were active and not passive . . . ?

I love this story more than, perhaps, I should. (It is now available in the UK as an illustrated storybook in its own right, pictures by the redoubtable Chris Riddell and at the end of 2015 in the U.S.)

Witch Work

When I was a child and read books of poems I would wonder more than was healthy about the person telling the story. I still do, even with my own poems. In this case there is a witch, and there is a watcher. This was also written as an apologetic gift for Jonathan Strahan, after I realized that *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* was turning into a novel.

In Relig Odhráin

This is a true story. Well, as true as any story about a sixth-century Irish saint can be. The churchyard is there, on Iona. You can even visit it.

I didn't mean to write this as a poem, but the meter turned up in my head and after that I simply had no say in the matter.

They used to bury people alive in the walls or the foundations, to ensure that buildings remained standing. Even saints.

Black Dog

We first met Baldur "Shadow" Moon in *American Gods*, in which he gets caught up in a war between gods in America. In "The Monarch of the Glen," a story in the *Fragile Things* collection, Shadow found himself a bouncer at a party in northern Scotland.

He is on his way back to America, but in this story has only made it as far as Derbyshire's Peak District. (This was the very last of the stories in this book to be written and is, as they say on the book jackets, original to this collection.)

I want to thank my friends Colin Greenland and Susanna Clarke for taking me to the Three Stags Heads pub in Wardlow, which, cat, lurchers and all, inspired the opening, and to Colin for telling me that Black Shuck walked Trot Lane, when I asked him about black dogs.

There is one last story to be told, about what happens to Shadow when he reaches London. And then, if he survives that, it will be time to send him back to America. So much has

changed, after all, since he went away.

VI. FINAL WARNING

There are monsters in these pages, but as Ogden Nash pointed out in my first short-story collection, *Smoke and Mirrors*, where there's a monster, there's also a miracle.

There are some long stories and some short ones. There are a handful of poems, which perhaps might need their own warning for the people who are frightened, disturbed, or terminally puzzled by poetry. (In my second short-story collection, *Fragile Things*, I tried to explain that the poems come free. They are bonuses for the kind of people who do not need to worry about sneaky and occasional poems lurking inside their short-story collections.)

There. Consider yourself warned. There are so many little triggers out there, being squeezed in the darkness even as I write this. This book is correctly labeled. Now all we have to worry about is all the other books, and, of course, life, which is huge and complicated and will not warn you before it hurts you.

Thank you for coming. Enjoy the things that never happened. Secure your own mask again after you read these stories, but do not forget to help others.

NEIL GAIMAN

In a cabin in the dark woods, 2014