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# GODS & *Tulips*

1637-1993

**NEIL GAIMAN**

on writing, signings, and selling good comics

# GOOD COMICS

and why you should sell them

*in which Mr. Gaiman discusses the tulip boom and bust in 16th century Holland, its relationship to comics, and a possible solution for the depression in the comics trade.*

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# ON SIGNINGS

*in which Mr. Gaiman discusses the reasons for a comic book shop to host a creator signing, the best way to hold such a signing, and the pitfalls of the same.*

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# WRITING

(the PRO/con speech)

*in which Mr. Gaiman instructs readers on the differences among different media vis-à-vis writing, as well as advising readers on writing for comics in particular.*

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# GOOD COMICS

## and why you should sell them

At the Diamond Comic Distributors 10th Annual Retailers Seminar, Neil Gaiman gave the following speech. The year was 1993 and the world of comics was at the height of an unprecedented boom, a year away from diving into a recession that it has yet to truly recover from. Gaiman's speech was a warning of the problems to come and a suggestion for a way out. He tells us that he did not come to "play Cassandra," but in some ways that is just what he did. Like Cassandra, his warnings were mostly ignored and his direst prediction came true. (Gaiman didn't quite have it as bad as Cassandra—he wasn't taken as war booty by a Greek king and subsequently murdered by the queen. At least, not yet.) His advice on weathering the storm is as true today as it was six years ago.



This is Rise and Shine with Neil Gaiman, which is something of a contradiction in terms. I am not a morning person. I am not a morning person the same way that Carl Barks is not unimportant to the history of comics.

So, pretty much for the first time ever, I wrote a speech, and I don't do that; I just get up and talk like this. But I figured no, I did that once at a breakfast event . . . and it was terrible. People still talk about it—this white thing that got up there, and said something and nobody knew what it was, and I got down again.

I want to talk about comics. I want to talk about good comics and why you should do what you can to sell more of them. But first I want to talk about tulips.

I am often asked via letters to the editor and at signings to suggest interesting books to the world or assemble a reading

list for the letters column, and I never seem to quite get around to it. Well, one of my favorite old books is the remarkable volume called *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, written almost 150 years ago by a gentleman named Charles McKay. In it, he details many of the pursuits, wise and otherwise, to which people have given their lives. He devotes chapters to such diverse subjects as, for example, alchemists, haunted houses, the slow poisoners, the great Louisiana land swindle, and the popular street cries of Victorian London—of which my favorite was "tuppence more and up goes the donkey." Nobody ever knew what it meant, but they used to shout it at each other.

It's a book with a huge cast of characters within its pages that includes such luminaries as Matthew Hopkins, the self-proclaimed Witch-Finder General, who wandered around England in the early 1640s finding witches. He charged each village 20 shillings for the privilege of

having him turn up and make them all feel really uncomfortable and another 20 shillings a head for each witch discovered and disposed of. He was turning a merry profit finding witches and sending them to meet their maker until one day he went to find witches in a little village in Suffolk, the elders of which were nobody's fools, pointed out to him that no man could find as many witches as he had unless he was getting his infernally accurate information from Beelzebub. Before Mr. Hopkins could come up with an adequate response to this, he was put to the test and was a former Witch-Finder General. The moral of which, I suppose, is that it can be unwise to start witch hunts. But I didn't come here to talk about witches, who after all have little enough to do with the vitally important business in front of us, which is that of comics and the retailing thereof.

Now, as I said, I want to talk to you about something far more germane to the world we all share of four-color funnies:

#### Tulips.

Picture the scene: 17th century Holland. Imagine the screen going all wavy at this point and a hasty montage of wooden clogs and windmills and dikes with fingers in them, and red-wax wrapped cheeses that taste more or less like yellow rubber. And one thing is missing. Tulips. Now the first

tulips—this is all true, terrifying, but true—arrived from the East in the late 16th century and became very popular in Holland. Very, very popular. As Mr. McKay tells us in his book:

*In 1634, the rage among the Dutch to possess them [tulips] was so great that the ordinary industry of the country was neglected, and the population, even to the lowest dregs, embarked on the tulip trade. As the mania increased, prices augmented until in the year 1635, it became necessary to sell tulips bulbs by their weight in perets, a small weight, less than a grain.*

This is true. The Dutch were very, very keen on tulip bulbs. One tulip bulb sold for 12 acres of prime building land in Holland, another sold for 4,600 florins, which is about \$100,000 in modern money, plus a new carriage, two gray horses, and a complete set of harnesses.

“One tulip bulb sold for 12 acres of prime building land in Holland, another sold for 4,600 florins, which is about \$100,000 in modern money.”

There's a strange story about a wealthy merchant who received a foreign sailor one morning who came with news and was given, for giving the news, a smoked herring for his breakfast. The sailor, who knew nothing of tulips, also took with him when he left something he thought was an onion. And when he returned to his ship, he sliced it and ate it with his herring. And

he'd eaten a 3,000 florins tulip bulb and, following a hunt, was caught and sentenced to prison. By 1636, there were tulip exchanges in every major town in Holland. These functioned as stock exchanges. I'll quote from McKay's book again:

*The tulip jobbers speculated in the rise and fall of the tulip stock*

*and made large profits. Many individuals grew suddenly rich. Everyone imagined the passion for tulips would last forever and that the wealthy from every part of the world would send to Holland and pay whatever prices were asked for them. The riches of Europe would be concentrated on the banks of the Zuyder Zee River and poverty banished from the favorite clime of Holland. Noble citizens, farmers, mechanics, seamen, footmen, maid servants, even chimney sweeps and old clothes women dabbled in tulips. People of all grades converted their property into cash and invested it in flowers. Houses and land were offered for sale at ruinously low prices.*

You had an entire country obsessed with getting rich and convinced that it was impossible that tulips could ever be less than the ultimate, perfect investment object.

After all, when the rest of the world caught up with the Dutch, the Dutch would have all the tulips, and they'd be even richer than they were already. And instead, the rest of the world stared blankly at the Dutch for fussing foolishly after something that was, after all, only a tulip. The entire economy of Holland was destroyed. I wish I were exaggerating, but I'm not.

*I think any organization or store that pushes comics as investment items is at best short-sighted and foolish, and, at worst, immoral and dumb.*

There was a madness and a foolishness that seems pretty apparent to an outside observer. Now, not being Dutch, it's very easy for me to feel very smug about this. But something very similar happened 100 years later when the South Sea Company infected all of England with the joy of investing. At the height of the craze—the so-called “South Sea Bubble”—you got share certificates being traded. At one point, there was an alley-way they were being traded on and the same share certificate would go down the alley going up in price as people

bought it from each other. And eventually a lot of people were wiped out, fortunes were lost, and a lot of people were made very miserable—and at least the Dutch had been able to eat the unwanted tulips bulbs.

And if you think this has nothing to do with you, well, it does. Too many comic stores are trading in “bubbles” and tulips.

I'm not here to play Cassandra. I do not have the figure and I do not have the legs. I merely point this out.

Personally, I think any comic shop that sells multiple copies of the same comic to any child under, say, sixteen, because that child has somehow been given the impression that he or she has been handed a license to print money, should, if nothing else, get the child to read a form explaining that comic values can go down as well as up and require it to be signed by a parent or guardian.

I think any organization or store that pushes comics as investment items is at best short-sighted and foolish, and, at worst, immoral and dumb. You can sell lots of the same comic to the same person—especially if you tell them they're investing money for high guaranteed returns. But you're selling bubbles and tulips. One day the bubbles will burst and the tulips will rot in the warehouse.

Which is why I want to talk about good comics. Now I have a vested interest here. I write—or try to write—or when I'm doing well, I write good comics. I don't write collectibles nor do I write investment items. I write stories. I write the best I can. I write stories for people to read.

Now, a little digression here. Before I wrote comics, I was a journalist. Like writing comics, journalism is another

profession that usually doesn't involve getting up in the morning. And as a journalist I used to write—whenever people would let me—about comics. The high point of this—for me—was in 1986 when I was commissioned by the prestigious *Sunday Times Magazine* in England to do a feature article on comics. I interviewed a number of people for it, I interviewed Alan Moore, Frank Miller, Dave Sim, Brian Bolland, and many, many others. I worked really hard on it. This was going to be the first major national magazine article promoting comics as a medium in

England. I sent the article to the editorial gentleman who had commissioned it and heard. . . nothing. Not a sausage. So after a couple of weeks, I rang him up and he sounded very subdued.

"How's the article?" I asked. He said he had a problem or two with it. This is always what they say. They never say, "I don't like it." They say, "Well, I have a problem with it." And I suggested he tell me

what the problem was so I could rewrite it and get better.

"Well," he said, "it lacks balance."

"In what way?"

"These comics," he paused, and then he spat out, "You seem to think they're a *good* thing!"

Now he'd been hoping for something that Fredric Wertham would have been proud of, and that wasn't what he got. But we agreed I had no

*"These comics,"  
he paused,  
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thing!"*

plans to rewrite it to give it the balance he felt it lacked, and he sent me a kill fee for that article which was twice what I got for getting articles printed anywhere else. This huge check for this thing that never got published. I would much rather have had the article printed than the money, because I *do* believe that comics are a good thing.

If I didn't, I'd still be a journalist, or I'd be writing unproduced screen plays for mind-boggling sums in Hollywood. Or I'd be growing tulips.

We're living in what the Chinese curse described as "interesting times." And I like that. The landscape is changing and erupting and exploding. New lines and publishers and titles and universes appear and vanish. Some comics are selling in numbers undreamed of in 1986. Stores spring up like mushrooms after a heavy rain. And it's hard to tell what things are going to be like in five years' time.

But I'll tell you this: stores that sell and push good comics will still be around because people who read will still be with us and they will want comics.

Another flashback. Philadelphia, 1990, and I'm attending a small

American convention which was followed by a meeting of the CBRI, and I was asked to stay on and attend a panel discussion. The panel consisted of marketing reps from all the major publishers at the time, someone from Diamond, and right down at the end more than a little bemused, and rather puzzled about what I was doing

there—me. Literally, actually. Everybody down the line, right at the end there's me, looking at everyone. First of all, everyone talked about bar codes and comics and I learned more than a human being would ever wish to know about putting bar codes on comics. And then they talked about racking, and then they talked about pricing and then they talked about bar codes again. I was starting to wonder really what am I doing here on a really existential level. And Steve Gursky, who was presiding over the whole shebang, might have thought the same thing. He stood and he said, "We have a creator here. Does anyone want to ask

the creator anything? Ask him a creator question."

There was no sea of hands, no forest of waving arms. There were some very puzzled looking faces, and eventually someone took pity on me and put up their hand and asked a question.

*“And then they talked about racking, and then they talked about pricing and then they talked about bar codes again. I was starting to wonder really what am I doing here.”*

"As a creator," he asked, "what's the difference between creating high-ticket items and low-ticket items?"

I supposed he wanted to be reassured I was putting an extra three or four dollars worth of verbs and adjectives into the high-ticket items. I really don't know.

I said, "Look, there's no difference. What I try to do is write good comics."

There was a silence and—made bold by this—I added, "And I wish you people would do more to push good comics."

Three hundred retailing eyes looked very puzzled indeed. Now many of these retailers have since come up to me and told me proudly of the efforts they've made since then in that direction and the success they've had. Someone wisely asked me what I meant by the good stuff, and I told them. And someone else asked what I meant by pushing it, and I told them as I will tell you.

What I mean by the good stuff is the comics you enjoy. If you, yourself, have stopped reading comics, and sad to say many retailers have—there's too much out there, or one day they found they no longer enjoyed *West Coast Avengers* and gave up on the whole thing, disillusioned—then browse

around. Ask friends. Ask your staff. Ask your customers. But most of you have comics you like, and you should be pushing them.

How? It doesn't involve much. You can put a rack near the door of things you're proud of selling. You can order just a few more copies of things you think are really good and try and sell them. You could offer a money-back guarantee to anyone buying something you have faith in. It's not a hard thing to do; it tends to work. Pick a "comic of the week" and push it. Suggest to the customers who don't read what they buy that maybe they should read these things instead of just bagging them.

Try to familiarize yourselves with what's out there, and let your tastes influence your customers.

If your customers are mostly adolescent boys who go away when they tire of childish things, well, make sure they know there is life after Spiderman. Put a little effort in and

you may have a customer for life. This is a good thing.

We are living in a remarkable time for comics. There is more exciting material available now than ever before. I mean it. There's more excellent material currently in print and available going all the way back to *Little Nemo* than at any other time. This is also a really good thing.

*"If your customers are mostly adolescent boys who go away when they tire of childish things, make sure they know there is life after Spiderman."*

Do I want any of you to make less money? Of course not.

I want you all to have Jacuzzis in your Cadillacs, more stores than you can shake a stick at—or sticks than you can shake a store at, if that's your idea of fun. And while we're at it, I would like you to be happy, healthy, and never again bothered by telephone sales people—may your luggage always be the first on the airport carousel, and may your pets never spontaneously combust.

All these things I wish you. But remember what it is that you're selling people.

Now, when I go on tour, I like to ask people how they started reading my stuff. And mostly it's word of mouth. Friends tell friends. Friends force friends to sit and read it. And, in a lot of cases, store assistants tell customers they'd like it. Sometimes it's sexually transmitted. In stores where the sales people like *Sandman* and push it hard, we consistently equal or outsell whatever's hot. The people who read *Sandman* buy a copy and lend it round, and we get new readers. And the new readers go back to the comic store and buy all the trade paperbacks to catch up on the story so far. And they buy an extra copy to give to their friends.

I have no desire to enforce my tastes on any of you. If I ran a comic store, I'd

be pushing *Bone*, and *Cerebus*, and *Love and Rockets*, *Sandman Mystery Theater*, and *Animal Man*, *Madman*, and *Cages*, *Yummy Fur*, *Peepshow*, *Gregory*, and *Groo*, to pick a few examples from the stuff I happen to like.

And I'm not telling you to push those titles, although I wouldn't mind if you did. I want you to push the stuff you think is good.

“Do I want  
any of you  
to make less  
money?  
Of course not.  
I want you  
all to have  
Jacuzzis  
in your  
Cadillacs.”

Push children's comics to children, and good superhero comics to people who like them, and good grown-up comics to adults. I'm really just asking you to think of comics as a reading material. Think of comics as an entertainment. Think of comics as stories.

You aren't selling investment items, you're selling dreams.

Never forget that.

Comics are for reading and enjoying, like tulips are for planting and blossoming and appreciating. And the next time someone tells you about comics as the hot investment item of the nineties, do me a favor and tell them about the tulips.



# ON SIGNINGS

*I began this essay in July 1991, planning to do it as a pamphlet for the CBLDF. Life got in the way, however I tidied it up in about 1994 prior to the Mr. Punch tour. You may notice that it's slightly dated, and the last few book signing tours I've done we've tended to limit signing to a certain number with a lot more vigor. It also, as you will observe as it gets toward the end, simply stops, rather abruptly. I think I was scared it was going to turn into a novel. My only regret is that I didn't get to talk about the two Dutch signings, where the promoter was so convinced I was going to cancel my visit to Holland that he didn't do anything to promote it at all, to avoid the potential embarrassment of people turning up and me not being there.*



I've now signed in more stores than I've (and you can insert your own metaphor that implies we're talking about, hmm,

I don't know, maybe two hundred different book and comic stores internationally, maybe somewhat more, here) which means that, at least as a creator, I know what I'm talking about here. As much as anyone does.

The idea for writing this came after doing some signings in Australia, particularly signing in stores who'd never done signings before, and watching them make some interesting goofs. Don't think I'm in any way down on the Aussie stores: I'm not. They were good stores staffed and run by smart nice people, each of which sells more *Sandmans* and *Cerebuses* than 95% of US comic stores (which tells you they're clean, accessible stores with a solid older-than-15 clientele), and each store was incredibly eager to get it right.

Now, this isn't an article about signing

horror stories, or indeed, signing-horror stores (although I may use a few in illustration as we go). (And I'd especially like to mention a store in Connecticut where I sat undisturbed for an hour, save only for the presence of a bright fourteen year old with five copies of *Miracleman* no. 17 who wanted to know by exactly how much my signing the comic would raise its value. I told him that writing all over comics stops them being mint, but after conferring with his mom he had me sign them anyway. I nearly drew mustaches on the covers but the kid looked like he had a good lawyer. Or would grow up to be one. . .)

Enough prattling. You may wonder why I called you all here tonight.

A little catechism: Signings. Ungh. What are they good for?

This question is easily answered. More difficult to answer by far is the vexing question of why creators do signings.<sup>1</sup> As far as I can make out, signings are good

<sup>1</sup>It gets us out of the house.

for three things—ranked here in order of importance.

- 1) THEY GET NEW PEOPLE INTO YOUR STORE.
- 2) THEY GENERATE GOODWILL AMONGST YOUR EXISTING CLIENTELE.
- 3) YOU GET TO SELL STUFF.

A store signing is not a convention signing (at which the objective for the person signing is to sign for the maximum number of people, thus justifying to the world their entrance fee, and to promote either the con or a publisher, and maybe to shill for your latest title in the bargain). They are two completely different classes of thing, which can be confused.

I've promised myself I won't let this turn into a list of Weird Signing Stories. But before I go back and look at the reasons for doing signings I listed above, I think I'll mention a few reasons for *not* doing signings.

Do not organize a signing if:

- 1) THERE SIMPLY ISN'T ROOM IN YOUR STORE, OR ADEQUATE SPACE VERY NEARBY.
- 2) THERE ISN'T GOING TO BE ANY DEMAND.

If your store sells nothing but *X-men*, and the three copies of *Love and Rockets* you get in are for you, your store manager, and the guy who comes in to help out on Saturday, then... Well, don't get Los Bros Hernandez to come down to your store just because it would be, like, way cool to meet them, and you know no-one's going to be interested so you'll like, get to hang out with them and maybe Jaime'll draw a neat picture of you in bed with Hopey.

(I picked Los Bros pretty much at random, and will continue to pick people at random through this article; and if certain comic writers and artists come up to me in stunned amazement over the coming years saying 'How did you know?' it's because certain part of the human experience, like sex or hanging around at airports, are pretty much universal, and not because I've been bugging anyone's phone.)

- 3) YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO PROMOTE IT.

Writing "MARC HEMPEL who draws GREGERY will be hear saturday 12:00" on a small piece of cardboard and pinning it up behind the counter will not pack the store. And different people need different methods of promotion. Newspapers may be good for some, less good for others, fly-posters ditto. Putting up posters in your local grade school advertising a Dan Clowes signing will do little good; neither will putting an advert in your local literary magazine pack in the Rob Leifeld fans. Target your market. This has nothing to do with how much money you spend—more on where you put your promotional money.

- 4) YOU DON'T HAVE TIME TO PROMOTE IT.

Whether it's Jim Lee or Matt Groening, Stan Lee or Matt Wagner, you still won't get that many people in if you announce it the day before the signing. Instead, set it up as early as you can and announce it as soon as you know it's happening—even if you don't have a date. A big sign saying "Jerry Ordway will be signing here in September" is better than waiting until August 31st to mention that he'll be in on September the 3rd.

Let's go back to why you do signings again.

*It's good manners  
after they've been doing it for  
a couple of hours to inquire if they'd  
like to have a coffee, coke or beer, or  
possibly brave your bathroom facilities.*



*'Okay, now you just go down the  
stairs until you can't go any more then  
push forward to your right until you  
get to a door. The wood's a little  
mushy so don't push too hard. . .'*

### 1) TO GET NEW PEOPLE INTO YOUR STORE.

This is the big one. If a store can get someone in who's never been in before because Dave Sim is appearing there, and presuming it's a nice store and it's got a fair range of material and you've swept the floor (and if it's a woman you and your pals don't start making loud comments about how rarely you see gals in the store and so forth), why, then you've probably got a new customer.

Unless you have some clearly defined, albeit perverse, ambition to sell comics to a gradually shrinking audience, then getting new people who already buy comics into your store is a good idea. This is where the largest portion of your promotional budget should go. But spread it around—and make sure you find out which ads or promotional actions got the people into the store.

### 2) GOODWILL.

These are your regular customers. You're showing them how right they are to shop at your store rather than at "Greasy Joe's Comics Store and Yak Restaurant" down the street. These are the guys you get with the BIG notices in the store and the window, and by telling each person who gets to the cash register "Here are your comics and by the way Peter Bagge will be signing here next week." You also do leaflets which you don't just leave in a pile by the till.

(Smart stores often put a leaflet inside each of their racked comics, to act as a pleasant surprise for the purchaser. This works if you're selling comics to people who read them; and if you only sell new comics to people who don't read them for "investment" purposes, why, you're lower than pond-scum, and I hope your store gets repossessed. I say this as a friend.)

It's probably worth mentioning that

no matter what you do on this, a dozen of your regular customers will, over the week after the signing, come up to you and say "Peter David was here last week? Why didn't you tell anyone?" This is just how it is.

For both of the above reasons—Goodwill, and New Customers—a store is cutting its own throat if it prevents people bringing stuff they bought elsewhere, or bought in your store earlier, to be signed. But that doesn't mean you can forget all about. . .

### 3) SELLING MERCHANDISE.

This is a good reason for doing a signing too. It's not the only one. The two reasons above are more important, but it's a good reason. It's fairly easy to do providing you follow these two rules.

#### a) HAVE THE MERCHANDISE.

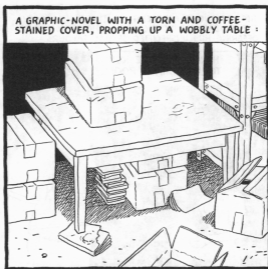
Stop smirking. I mean it. Or, to put it another way, panic early. It is not unknown for distributors to forget to process your order for 100 graphic novels, because they are busy people who have important things to do. Panic in enough time to get whatever you need from an alternative source, from another store, from the publishers; panic in enough time that the distributors can get your books or comics shipped in from somewhere else in time.

Some stores flourish in adversity of this kind. One particularly bright store got me and an artist to sign bookplates for a book that hadn't arrived in time for the signing. Most just look really embarrassed and upset.

(It's not always the distributors' or publishers' fault: I suspect from time to time that stores blame them for the fact the store only had three copies of your latest comic in the store and one graphic novel with a torn and coffee-stained cover

*Panic early.*

*It is not unknown for distributors to forget to process your order for 100 graphic novels, because they are busy people*



*who have important things to do. Panic in enough time to get whatever you need from an alternative source, from another store, from the publishers.*

“It is possible that the creator may not want to be your best friend on immediate acquaintance.”



It may take a little time, so take it gently. Oh, and a corollary to the above. The creator probably doesn't want to have sexual relations with you.”

that until recently had propped up a wobbly table out the back.)

So have the merchandise. Some—not all—publishers will ship out stuff on consignment. But either way, it's probably good to have a little too much than a little too little. Personally, I've never minded signing stock for a store after a signing's over. (For a start, it helps the store when the few people who wouldn't notice if the announcement of the signing was made in letters of fire ten feet high or sung loudly at their bedroom door each morning by a choir of angels come in and complain nobody told them.)

And after you have the merchandise, the next thing to do is. . .

#### b) SELL IT.

This may seem obvious (hell, all this stuff seems obvious) but you'd be surprised at the ways a store can find to get around it. A few from my experience include: announcing a limit of one item to be signed per customer (and then wondering why those customers who hadn't brought something to the signing only bought a comic, leaving them with mounds of unsold graphic novels); and setting up the signing somewhere other than the store (for reasons of space) and not thinking to bring any merchandise to the place of signing; and even the rather more complicated one of simply arranging the signing lines in such a way that people couldn't make impulse purchases ("What the heck—I think I'll buy a dozen copies of this here *Zot!* graphic novel, get Scott McCloud to sign them, and give them out as Christmas presents").

Now all the above demand a certain amount of common sense in their application. I, for example, will sign pretty much anything I've written at a signing—just because it's officially a signing—for *Sandman* doesn't mean I won't sign *Miracleman* or *Violent Cases*. People turn

up at signings with the strangest things for me to sign, like the *Tori Amos* LP and a box of *Sandman* brand herbal tea. I've signed statues and body parts and even, once, someone's bicycle.

There's nothing wrong with limiting the number of things that can be signed, though. It will probably be necessary if you have a big crowd for a popular creator. But it can be unwise to do it ahead of time. If a store's limited the signing to two signed articles per customer and twenty people show then you're going to have to work really hard to stretch that over two hours. And there's nothing sadder than the sight of a beleaguered creator sitting in a store alone, trying to explain to a puzzled customer that he or she doesn't actually work there.

Retailers who have run, and often consistently run, successful signings are better qualified than I am to talk about the logistics—which change anyway, depending on the shape and nature of where you hold the signing.

Finally, a few common-sense suggestions. (Most stores do all these things really well; but it's always sensible to state the obvious from time to time). . .

Make sure that the signer is being looked after. Do they need something to eat or drink, or a bathroom break? If it's been going for two hours with two hours to go, then would they like ten minutes to hide in the back, or stretch their legs, have a cigarette or just lock themselves in a dark place and shiver convulsively? Find out.

It's good manners after they've been doing it for a couple of hours to inquire if they'd like to have a coffee, coke or beer, or possibly brave your bathroom facilities. ("Okay, now you just go down the stairs until you can't go any more then push forward to your right until you get to a door. The wood's a little mushy so don't push too hard. . .")

(Personally I'd like a chicken sandwich, please. And flavored fizzy water.)

Have someone keeping an eye on things near the creator. While it is indeed unlikely that The Mad Fan With The Gun will shoot Frank Miller in your store, it would be extremely embarrassing for you if he did. Likewise Chris Claremont might appreciate being rescued from the Strange Guy Who Drools, and Jim Lee might appreciate a little help with the 13-year-old young lady in the push-up bra who seems to be offering him unspecified sexual favors in return for putting her into a comic.

It is possible that the creator may not want to be your best friend on immediate acquaintance. It may take a little time, so take it gently. Oh, and a corollary to the above. The creator probably doesn't want to have sexual relations with you. (This is one that probably applies mostly to female creators, admittedly. But not exclusively.)

Having said that, if you've brought a creator a long way from home, it's also wise to find out if they need any help finding their way around the city, or want to do any sightseeing or bar-crawling. Most comics people need no assistance in the latter, but you should probably at least make the offer.

It is often wise to make contact directly with someone who'll be signing in your store: publishers are not always the most reliable of organizations, and it can be discomfiting for a creator to get off a plane at 1:30 am to find no-one waiting for him or her, and without any information as to what they're meant to do next. (When this happened to me I just found a good hotel and was incredibly rude to the people who ran the book shop and were organizing things the following day. But do this to the likes of Colleen Doran or Charles Vess and they'll be over to your house the next day with baseball bats, and if you're really lucky they'll only break your windows.)

Get them a fairly comfortable chair, and somewhere to sign away from the cash-register. (The signing line should never become confused with the people buying stuff line.)

Pens: lay in a stock of enough pens. If you can, find out what kind of pens they prefer ahead of time. Personally I like to have a stock of fiber-tipped gold and silver pens, for signing covers (not the kind with the slim metal or plastic nozzle-nibs. They clog up or puddle after about 15 minutes), and some black fiber tips, for signing white paper. (A supply of white paper, or white card, might be a good idea for artists, if they want to do sketches.)

And what else? Well, that's up to you. Use your imagination—for example, one store I know had a writer-artist in for a signing. They wanted a successful signing, although they knew the creator didn't yet have a huge fan following in the area. So they contacted one of his publishers, and for the cost of shipping, obtained free copies of an earlier series he had done, and gave them out.

I did a couple of signings in 1989 that proved memorable in that regard. DC's marketing department sent out some boxes of *Sandman* no. 8 that had been sitting around the office to the two stores I was signing at, to be given away free to people who got stuff signed. The two stores opened the boxes and discovered the rare variant copies of *Sandman* no. 8, which we hadn't know existed until then. We knew we had a collectors' item on our hands: and we gave them away at the signings, one to a customer.

After the signing, the second of the stores (Comix Experience, in San Francisco) kept giving them out for free. The other store used them to solve its cash-flow problem. Comix Experience is still going from strength to strength, and the second, still had cash flow problems until it closed its doors.

Another  
rule-of-thumb  
observation: don't have a  
creator do two signings in a  
day in both of your stores,



if you have more than one in  
one city. No matter how well  
you've been promoting, one  
signing will always  
be a bust.

I'd especially like to mention a store in Connecticut where I sat undisturbed for an hour, save only for the presence of a bright



fourteen year old with five copies of Miracleman no. 17 who wanted to know by exactly how much my signing the comic would raise its value.

If you have a number of people standing outside your store in very hot weather it can be a nice gesture to hand out cold drinks, and can stop some people passing out.

Another odd observation: with signings, sometimes less is more. Some stores assume that if Creator A—let us pick people from outside the world of comics for a moment. Steven King, say?—could get 1,000 people into a store, and Clive Barker could also get 1,000 people into a store, that Barker and King together could get 2,000 in. And you would be surprised when only 800 show up. And if you add Anne Rice to the signing you'll be down to 500 people. . . . Giant events with lots of people signing do not always get more customers in. It gives them a reason not to go, if anything. Odd, isn't it? You can get a signing line-up in your store that any convention would be proud to have and it won't work. It's better to spread people out. My only theory on this is that people who want to meet a creator don't want to meet a crowd of creators. I could be wrong on the reason, but I'm right in practice.

And another rule-of-thumb observation: don't have a creator do two signings in a day in both of your stores, if you have more than one in one city. No matter how well you've been promoting, one signing will always be a bust. I suspect the problem is giving people a choice. But it's happened too many times to me, and to other people, for me to assume that the cry of "Well, downtown was great, but then we went up to the midtown store, and only one guy came in the whole hour and a half, and he only wanted change for the parking meter. . ." was a coincidence. And the corollary applies: if the creator is doing a number of other signings in your area over the same period of time, people won't turn up. Were even Todd McFarlane to do five signings over a couple days in the Seattle area, by the fourth he'll be wandering

around an empty store, flicking through comics to kill time.

Correct estimation of the length of the signing will make things easier on everyone. It is as hard to sign for a dozen people in six hours as it is to sign for five hundred people in an hour.

Establish early on what the "end of signing time" means. If I'm advertised as signing somewhere from 3:00 to 5:00, I tend to interpret that as meaning that no one is allowed to join the line after 5:00, and I will stay and sign for everyone in the line after that. That's how I see it. Other creators see it differently, and might assume that they'll be out the door at 5:05, whether there are people in the line or not.

The things that can go wrong with a signing are, in the main, not small and fiddly. They're big and obvious, and most of them are listed here.

Well run, signings can be enormous fun for the staff, the customers and even the creators. Badly run, they can feel like a day-trip to the pits of Hell for all concerned. And assuming a creator who is more or less helpful and involved (most of us are) how well or badly the signing goes is really up to you, the retailer.

Now this was a pretty basic guide. There's a lot more that can be written and said about running signings; and I could write another essay about signings from the point of view of the person doing the signing, but that's probably enough for everyone to be going on with.

I hope it helps.




*The author would like to thank Mr. Chester Brown for his interpretive illustrations.*

# WRITING

(the PRO/con speech)

*In 1997, Neil Gaiman was asked to make another speech to a room full of comics professionals at PRO/con in Oakland. The annual PRO/con keynote speech is a chance for comics professionals to network with each other and with publishers, as well as to attend seminars on both the business and craft of comics. Gaiman addresses both these topics in this speech—discussing the ins and outs of writing movies, television scripts, radio plays, novels, and, of course, comics.*

o begin with, a confession. I hate writing speeches. When I was asked to give this one, my immediate thought was that maybe I could give a speech I'd already written, and no-one would notice. Unfortunately I've only ever written one speech before, which I gave in the Spring of 1993, and which compared the "investors boom" then going on with the seventeenth century Dutch Tulip Craze and warned an audience of assembled retailers that if this kept on there was going to be trouble.

And while events unfortunately proved me right, I really didn't think that I'd get away with repeating that speech today.

When I was originally asked to come here and deliver the keynote address, I declined. I said I'd feel embarrassed and out of place. Right now—for the last 15 months, in fact, since I finished writing *Sandman*, with

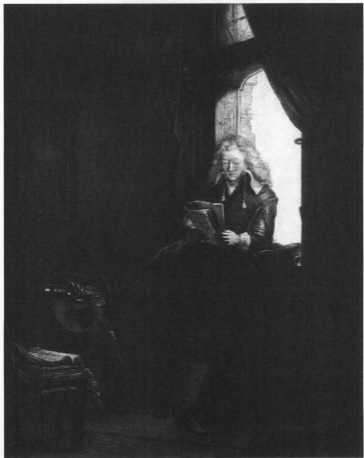
the exception of a couple of short stories—I've stopped writing comics. I told the person who phoned me that I'd feel like the kind of girl who dropped out of high school under dubious circumstances and was now returning, in a pink Cadillac, with big blonde hair and far too much make up, to give a graduating speech on the value of sticking to it and hard work.

And the person on the phone—it was Larry Marder—said, "Well, these are weird times. A lot of comics pros are looking at the world outside comics and wondering if that's where they'll be making their living in a year or so. You could at least tell them what's waiting for them out there."

And I thought, "Well, he's got a point."

And, after I put down the phone, I thought, it's also the prerogative of the elderly and the retired to share their knowledge, to drive from the back seat, and to offer unsolicited advice. "To," as a poet put it, "being good for





nothing else, be wise." And there are certainly a number of things I've learned in the decade I was actively working in comics.

So that's what we're going to talk about. Other media, and comics.

Many of you have done comics for longer than I have, and have experiences or knowledge that contradict mine. Many of you will have toiled in the vineyards beyond comics and may have had diametrically opposite experiences to mine. So these thoughts are being offered as one set of opinions.

I began doing comics, continued doing comics, and finished doing comics for the wrong reason. It's a foolish reason, and a strange one. I didn't do comics to have a career, nor to make money, nor to support my family. I certainly didn't do comics for awards or for notoriety.

I began doing comics because it fulfilled some kind of childhood dream and because it was truly the most exciting and delightful thing I could imagine anyone doing. I continued doing comics because it was fun, and because I discovered I loved the medium, and because I felt like I was getting to do things that were completely new, that, good or bad, no one had done before. And I stopped doing comics because I wanted it to continue being fun. I wanted to continue to love and care for comics, and I wanted to leave while I was still in love.

When I began writing *Sandman*, it would take me a couple of weeks to write a script, leaving me with two weeks each month to do other things. As time went by I got slower and slower, until a script was taking me about eight weeks a month to write. Which didn't leave much time for other things.

So there were a number of projects I wanted to do that I simply didn't get the chance to. Which meant that once *Sandman* was done I could throw myself into them headfirst.

My experiences with the world outside comics so far since finishing *Sandman*—I've written a best-selling novel and a children's book, written and co-created a not wholly satisfactory six-part BBC TV series, and had lunch with an enormous number of people from Hollywood. I wrote the British Radio 3 adaptation of *Signal To Noise*, currently nominated for a Sony Award as best radio drama. I'm currently working on a bunch of stuff, including a couple of movies, a TV series I've been approached about based on my short fiction, and a radio drama series.

Bear in mind that these are not the opinions of someone who feels that any medium is more legitimate than any other, or that film or print somehow sanctifies or confers respectability on something otherwise grubby or unreal.

One of the delights of comics is that the price of ink and paper remain pretty constant, no matter what you're drawing. Film and television are expensive media. Even cheap productions cost unimaginable amounts of money.

Comics, on the other hand, are cheap. If you have an idea for a comic, the odds are good that someone will publish it. And if they won't, and you believe in it strongly, why, then publish it yourself. You may not get rich, but you will get read.

I have a friend who had an idea for a comic, self-published it for a while, and certainly didn't lose any money, and had, at the end, a dozen or so issues of his comic, which he was fairly proud of. Then he decided to try the

same tack with film-making, with a cast of enthusiastic amateurs, borrowed money, and a willingness to max out his credit cards. At the point where the production crumbled, he had 11 minutes of film in the can and was forced to sell his house to stave off utter ruin.

Comics are unlikely to do that to you. Film is expensive. This is why it's such a crazy medium.

I remember an afternoon in London several years ago. I was staying in a friend's flat, overlooking a muddy canal. I was writing two different things that afternoon. One was a scene in which the Endless made a man out of clay, building him up from twigs and mud, and breathing life into him, before sending him to a hidden room in a monstrous underground necropolis. That was for *Sandman*. The other scene had an encounter, underneath a bridge in the fog, on a mud-bank, between three travelers and some monks, during the course of which one of the travelers was pushed into the mud.

A few days later I had Michael Zulli's pencils of the comics sequence pinned up on the wall, and they were exactly what I'd imagined, and just what I'd hoped for and called for in the script. A year later I found myself sitting in a freezing cellar, watching a dozen actors being frozen stiff, breathing thick smoke, while about fifty crew, including make-up people, lighting, electricians and so on, stood around shivering watching the actors doing take after take of getting knocked down into the mud.

I didn't have my bridge. It wasn't really the scene I'd had in my head, and mostly I just felt guilty that real people were being put to so much trouble for something that had seemed like a good idea in a warm room a year before.

In comics you are unlikely to be forced to lose a character half-way through the comic because he broke his leg. You won't lose locations the night before you're meant to be shooting. You won't hand in a 24-page script, and then be told that the artist drew it as a 37 page script, so 13 pages have randomly been removed.

Most important, in comics there's one of you, or at most two or three people, with one vision. As a writer I think I'd been spoiled by the "because I say so" factor. The point I realized that wasn't there in the TV show was the point I looked at the costume sketches and realized that they bore no relation to what was called for in the script.

I think one reason one becomes a writer may well be to have a certain amount of control over a vision, and unless you are working with a director whose vision parallels yours, then the odds are probably against you.

And bear in mind that the TV series is from a show that everyone was at least on the same page about. The *Sandman* film, which I am happily not involved with, has gone through 8 script drafts, 3 writers, and a director so far. And I heard the other day that they're about to hire a new writer with instructions to make it a romance.

After *Neverwhere* was done, I told my agent to pull out of another TV series I was creating for the UK, because I didn't want to do it unless I had more control than you usually get as a writer: in fantasy, the tone of voice, the look and feel, the way something is shot and edited, is vital, and I wanted to be able to be in charge of that.

I've agreed to work on the *Death* movie with the carrot being dangled in front of me that I could direct it.

And we'll see if that happens, and if I'm a good director or not when the time comes.

So that's my wisdom on movies. Books are a bit more straightforward.

A few years ago, when I still hung out on bulletin boards, I was on CompuServe's comics forum, and I read a message by a writer of comics announcing petulantly that he was going to go and write real prose books because he wanted "an audience."

I told him his audience writing comics was much higher than he would have, barring some exceptional circumstances, for a first novel in prose. He took this as an attack on his as-yet-unproven abilities as a writer of prose, which it wasn't meant to be. It was simply a flat statement that in those days—and even in these dark days—any fairly healthy comic sells in numbers that most prose authors would be very happy to get.

For me, though, comics are much more interesting than prose, at least as a creator. One has greater control of how the information is received in comics than you do in prose—whether it's keeping control of the reader's eye to stop them skipping ahead, or simply making sure that they see the same character in their heads that you do in yours.

And comics have the joy that you never see in prose: the joy of being able to enjoy your own stuff. I can't enjoy a prose story I wrote, but I can enjoy what Dave McKean or Charles Vess or John Jay Muth or P. Craig Russell does to one of my stories.

Prose has its advantages. You can give it to relatives without worrying about hearing "Oh... I don't... read comics... dear." And you can buy it in airport bookstores. And book companies are more prone to advertise outside the comics world than comics publishers are. But for anyone who's doing this because they want to collaborate, comics are more fun.

Radio—I love radio drama. For a writer it's strangely close to comics: in one medium you're telling a story with pictures, in the other you're writing for everything but pictures. It's close to your vision, it's cheap, it's easy, there isn't any radio drama in America and the only way I could afford to do it regularly in England is by sending the children out to dance for pennies on the streets. It's also not a medium I particularly recommend for artists who don't write.

So those are my words of wisdom on the media outside comics. Now for my decades of wisdom on the world inside comics.

*"If you have an idea for a comic, the odds are good that someone will publish it. And if they won't, and you believe in it strongly, why, then publish it yourself."*

So here, in no particular order are the things I've learned.

1) BIG IS NOT NECESSARILY BAD.  
SMALL IS NOT NECESSARILY GOOD.

Comics creators are an individualistic, unique and bolshy lot. A punch line of a comic I wrote once was "try getting a thousand cats to agree on anything at the same time," and cats are a pushover compared to comics creators. They do not organize, do not trust organizations. It's a wonder as many of you are here as there are. Certainly every shade of opinion, politics and belief is represented here.

It used to be, it may still be, an item of belief in comics that all organizations are inherently dodgy. And that, where companies are concerned, smaller is inherently better. Independence, however that's defined, is vital.

And if you're a Dave Sim or a Jeff Smith, your own publisher and a fine artist and writer, with complete control over your own destiny, then you have independence, or as much independence as the market will allow you.

Corporations are huge, slow, stupid lumbering things with brains in their tails. This may be true. But they do appear capable of learning and changing.

You are no more likely to get screwed over by a huge company than you are by a small one. I'm not saying you won't get screwed over. I'm saying that there is no moral imperative towards smaller companies not screwing you.

This really is something it took me ages to learn. I kept doing projects or books for small, more independent companies because it seemed like the right thing to do, and because I was

convinced that, in my case, DC Comics was a monolithic and ultimately evil organization that was just waiting for me to lower my guard before they screwed me like they screwed Siegel and Shuster.

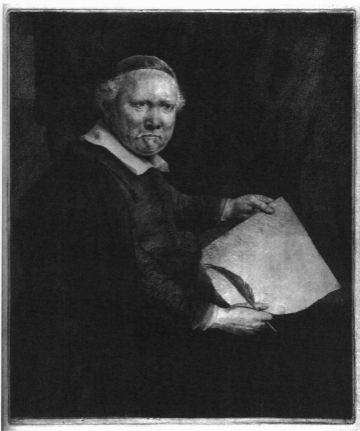
It didn't happen. DC were easily the most amenable to reason, accessible, and financially reliable of all the publishers I've dealt with. Which is not to say there was not and sometimes still is a great deal of frustration in dealing with some of the departments at DC. This is to say that their royalty statements arrive on time, are comprehensible, and if one notices something bizarre, one is encouraged to phone the accounting department who will either explain to you what they're doing, or apologize for having messed up and fix it. For this, one can forgive many things.

In retrospect my one regret with Eclipse was that I didn't audit their accounts years before they went under. Their figures made no sense, and they would only send out royalties if threatened. On some level I knew that there had to be fraud of some kind going on, but Eclipse was only caught when Toren Smith moved his comics from Eclipse to Dark Horse, and his royalties shot up, despite the fact the deal was the same and the sales were constant.

I honestly do not believe there is any moral superiority to a large corporation or to one man working out of his kitchen. What matters is answerability, and honesty, and, above all, competence.

2) LEARN HOW TO SAY NO.

This is still the one I have the hardest time with. I think it's part of the freelance mentality: we are so used to hustling, to going out and



Portrait of an Elderly Woman in a Black Dress, by Johannes Vermeer, 1665. Oil on canvas, 46.5 x 39.5 cm. The painting depicts an elderly woman seated at a desk, holding a quill pen and a large sheet of paper. She is wearing a dark dress with a white collar and a headband. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting her face and hands.

desperately peddling our talents, hoping that someone will be impressed enough by our skills or moved to raw pity enough by our plight to give us work, that we learn to say yes to everything.

I remember, as a starving freelance writer, in the early '80s, I would blithely proclaim competence in anything, if there was a check attached. Which meant I often found myself utterly out of my depth, interviewing the head of NASA or, for one very odd week, editing *Fitness* magazine—I don't remember, but I imagine that the phone call for that would have gone something along the lines of:

"Neil, can you edit a magazine?"

"Can I edit a magazine?"

"Silly question. Well, do you know anything about *Fitness*?"

"Do I know about *Fitness*?" (Sort of implication there that anything I didn't know about gyms and leotards and suchlike probably wasn't worth knowing. Note the way I didn't say "Well, I went into the gym a couple of times when I was at school. And I saw *Pumping Iron 2—The Women*." This was because I was a hungry freelance writer, and I said "Yes" a lot.)

As a comics professional, it's too easy to say yes.

Most of the things I've done that, in retrospect, were astonishingly stupid ideas (as, often, my friends were ready to point out immediately) I did because someone asked me to do something, and, hell, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Next thing you know there are unreadable, even offensive comics with your name on them that you never

wrote in the world. Or whatever.

I learned early on that most of the people at the top of their professions—and I'm not talking about comics here, I'm talking about everything—were the nicest people, easy to deal with, and with little side to them. And I also learned that the people who were most insistent on having VIP status, on making a loud noise about everything—the kind of people who would actually say things like "Do you know who I am?"—were the second division talents, the ones who hadn't made it, the ones who never would.

It took me longer to learn that you can say "no." And it's an easy thing to say. It helps define your boundaries.

#### 3) GET IT IN WRITING. OR PUT IT IN WRITING.

This is important. And on those few times I haven't put something in writing, I've regretted it. Right now I'm locked in a fairly heated and as yet unresolved situation with one publisher about payments for characters, for toys, spin-off comics, and other use of a bunch of characters I made up for this publisher. And part of our dispute is over verbal agreements made on the phone four years ago. If we'd put it in writing then—I'm not even talking about contracts, I'm talking about my writing down what was said and faxing him a copy with a "just to confirm this was what we said"—life would be easier now.

#### 4) EVERYTHING IS NEGOTIABLE.

If someone sends you a contract, whether you are dealing with it yourself or getting someone else—an attorney or agent or someone—to vet your contracts, remember that absolutely everything is negotiable.

In the early days I used to think that contracts were a take it or leave it proposition. And they aren't.

And, by the same token, contracts are renegotiable, something that I first discovered after the first year of *Sandman*. I wanted a creator credit and a creator share of the character, which, according to DC's original "take it or leave it" contract, was entirely theirs. And I wrote a long, sensible, perfectly friendly letter to Paul Levitz explaining why this was a good idea, demonstrating that the Sandman character that I'd created was no more the Simon and Kirby Sandman than it was the Lee and Ditko Sandman. And, after some to-ing and fro-ing, a new contract was issued, giving me a share of the character.

One reason I did it this way was that I'd observed over the previous few years that when people gave DC Comics ultimata, whether DC were right or wrong, they would become inflexible. Corporate history perhaps: Siegel and Shuster wanted the rights to Superman back, and were shafted, and left with only the rights to Superboy. They went back for another legal go-around, and lost even that. Meanwhile Bob Kane was "taken care of."

Do not be afraid to negotiate. And if you have people whose job it is to negotiate on your behalf don't be afraid to use them. Nor to accept input. You are not looking a gift horse in the mouth, nor is the contract going to go away because you got someone to look it over.

This is speaking as someone who has been, from time to time, screwed over by overlooked clauses in otherwise pretty good contracts, and who has, from time to time,

been astonished by what, in a contract, the other party let slide.

#### 5) TRUST YOUR OBSESSIONS.

I remember Alan Moore in the late 1980s telling me about a documentary he'd seen on TV about Jack the Ripper. And then, over the course of the next few months, telling me about Jack the Ripper books he'd read. By the point where he was asking me to go and find rare and forgotten biographies of possible Ripper suspects at the British Museum, I thought it quite possible that a Jack the Ripper comic would be in the offing. *From Hell* didn't start with Alan going "I wonder what I'll write about today." It started as an obsession.

Trust your obsessions. This is one I learned more or less accidentally. People sometimes ask whether the research or the idea for the story comes first for me. And I tell them, normally the first thing that turns up is the obsession: for example, all of a sudden I notice that I'm reading nothing but English 17th century metaphysical verse. And I know it'll show up somewhere—whether I'll name a character after one of those poets, or use that time period, or use the poetry, I have no idea. But I know one day it'll be there waiting for me.

You don't always use your obsessions. Sometimes you stick them onto the compost heap in the back of your head, where they rot down, and attach to other things, and get half-forgotten, and will, one day, turn into something completely usable.

Go where your obsessions take you. Write the things you must. Draw the things you must. Your obsessions may not always take you



to commercial places, or apparently commercial places. But trust them.

A footnote to this, for writers: when I was working with new artists on *Sandman*, the first question I would ask was "What kind of stuff do you want to draw?" The second was often "What don't you like to draw?" I found both of these pieces of information astonishingly useful, and often very surprising. Play to an artist's strengths, it makes you look good. Play to your own strengths if you're an artist—but don't relax into schtick or into the dozen things that you do.

#### 6) DON'T STOP LEARNING.

It's too easy to achieve a level of competence in your field, whatever it is, and to stop there. Competence is one thing, but writers and artists are like sharks: when we stop moving we die. (I got that piece of information from reading *Jaws* at a young age. I have no idea whether it's true that sharks die when they stop, or go into reverse, but I now believe it utterly, just as I know that double-bass music signals a shark attack.)

I tend to think of *technique* as the kind of gardening tools one keeps in the potting shed (an English expression that has no American equivalent that I know of) at the bottom of the garden, grabbing a garden fork, or a hoe, or one of those metal things you find hanging from a hook that the previous owner left behind and no-one ever quite knows what to do with.

At Will Eisner's 80th birthday bash several months ago, in Florida, I was most impressed by some lithographs Will had done recently, because these were the first lithographs he'd done since art college, over 60 years earlier, and he thought it was a technique he should master.

You never know what tool you'll need. Every now and then I'll set myself writing exercises—types of formal verse, or styles from other times and other places. Sometimes I surprise myself, and wind up with something wonderful. Sometimes I wind up with something that leaves me hoping I don't die before I get a chance to clean out that directory, because if it were published posthumously, it'd kill me. But either way I have, literally, learned something.

As an artist, study other artists to see what they do, then look at life and see how it does something. As a writer, read other writers, good writers, even writers who don't write the kind of stuff you like, and see how they do what they do. And then forget about fiction, and forget about comics, and read everything else. Learn.

#### 7) BE YOU. DON'T TRY TO BE SOMEONE ELSE MORE COMMERCIAL. DON'T TRY TO BE THAT OTHER GUY.

This is about art. It may be about commerce too, but for all our description of ourselves as an industry, we're also an art-form. We may have come into the field because of talent, but we're also here because we're artists. We are creators. When we begin, separately or together, there's a blank piece of paper. When we are done, we are giving people dreams and magic and journeys into minds and lives that they have never lived. And we must not forget that.

I don't want to sound like an inspirational speaker here. "Be you. Be the best you that you can be." But this is really important. It's something that we mostly lose track of when we start, because when we start in comics we're kids, and we have no idea who we are or what our voices are, as artists or as writers.

Young artists want to be Rob Leifeld, or Bernie Wrightson, or Frank Miller, just as young writers want to be Alan Moore, or Chris Claremont or, well, Frank Miller. You've seen their portfolios. You've read the scripts.

We all swipe when we start. We trace, we copy, we emulate. But the most important thing is to get to the place where you're telling your own stories, painting your own pictures, doing the stuff that no-one else could have done, but you. Dave McKean, when he was much younger, as a recent art-school graduate, took his portfolio to New York, and showed it to the head of an advertising agency. The guy looked at one of Dave's paintings—"That's a really good Bob Peake," he said. "But why would I want to hire you? If I have something I want done like that, I phone Bob Peake."

You may be able to draw kind of like Rob Leifeld, but the day may come, may have already come, when no-one wants a bargain basement Rob Leifeld clone any more. Learn to draw like you. And, as a writer, or as a storyteller, try to tell the stories that only you can tell. Try to tell the stories that you cannot help telling, the stories you would be telling yourself if you had no audience to listen. The ones that reveal a little too much about you to the world. It's the point I think of in writing as walking naked down the street: it has nothing to do with style, or with genre, it has to do with honesty. Honesty to yourself and to whatever you're doing.

Don't worry about trying to develop a style. Style is what you can't help doing. If you write enough, or draw enough, you'll have a style, whether you want it or not. Don't worry about whether you're "commercial. Tell

your own stories, draw your own pictures. Let other people follow you.

As a corollary to that, let me say something else. In this strange, small market we're in, no-one knows anything. All bets are off. The kind of comics which were sure-fire commercial certainties five years ago are as likely to tank as they are to succeed, while the kind of oddball cult comics which, five years ago, would never have registered on anyone's radar, are now solid commercial successes, or as solid as anything is these strange days.

If you believe in it, do it. If there's a comic or a project you've always wanted to do, go out there and give it a try. If you fail, you'll have given it a shot. If you succeed, then you succeeded with what you wanted to do.

8) AND LAST OF ALL, KNOW WHEN TO LEAVE THE STAGE.

I thank you.





**GODS**  
*& Tulips*

Neil Gaiman has made great contributions to comics as a writer. He has done more still as an advocate of the artform, particularly through his work for the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund.

The CBLDF is a non-profit organization protecting the First Amendment rights of the comics community. Our guiding principle is that comics deserve the same freedom of expression accorded film, literature, or any other media. We coordinate and fund the legal defense of comic book creators, publishers, and retailers whenever their rights to free speech are threatened. As you might imagine, this is a costly proposition.

Given this, the Fund is fortunate to have a friend in Neil. In putting together *Gods & Tulips*, not only did Neil offer us the opportunity to publish these previously uncollected speeches, but he actually gave them to us. The CBLDF owns the copyright, now and forever, to everything contained between these covers. For almost anyone else, this would be an extraordinary gesture. But for Neil, it's not.

In fact, what is truly extraordinary about *Gods & Tulips* is how typical it is, because Neil Gaiman has been uniquely generous with his time, his money, and (as you have seen here) his words since the Fund was incorporated. The benefit projects Neil has undertaken on our behalf are too numerous to list here, but it is worth noting that they have brought many tens of thousands of dollars to the CBLDF war chest. Moreover, Neil is one of our most eloquent spokesmen, and he has done more to raise awareness of the First Amendment issues facing comics than just about anyone else.

As the CBLDF's executive director, I know for a fact that Neil's generosity has set an example which has inspired many others to do what they can to support the Fund's mission. That leadership is the most valuable of all Neil's contributions to the CBLDF, because no matter how much Neil Gaiman (or Dave Sim or Frank Miller or Peter David or any other comics creator) does to sustain this organization, the CBLDF can only succeed in its mission with the support of the entire comics community—not just creators, publishers, or retailers, but comics readers as well.

We all have an obligation to maintain artistic freedom for comics. I'm just glad we have friends like Neil to remind us of that.

**Christopher Barr**

Executive Director  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund



**Neil Gaiman** was the creator and writer of *Sandman*, one of the most highly regarded comics of the '90s and winner of numerous industry awards. Ten collections of *Sandman* stories have been published in English. Other comic books from Gaiman include *Death: The High Cost of Living*, *Death: The Time of Your Life*, *Black Orchid*, *The Last Temptation*, and *Outrageous Tales*

*From the Old Testament*. He collaborated with Dave McKean on three graphic novels—*Violent Cases*, *Signal to Noise*, and *Mr. Punch*—and a children's book, *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish*. He is the author of *Angels and Visitations*, a collection of short fiction, prose and journalism, and a novel *Stardust* as well as co-author with Terry Pratchett of *Good Omens*. He created a TV series for the BBC in 1996 entitled *Neverwhere* which has since been broadcast on PBS in the United States. A novel of *Neverwhere* has been published in the U.S. and Britain. Gaiman is a tireless campaigner for the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, devoting a great deal of time and work to the cause of free expression in comics.



**Michael Wm. Kaluta** has created a legendary body of artwork. From his earliest work on DC horror and mystery titles to his elaborate comic space opera, *Starstruck* (co-created with Elaine Lee), to many of the most striking covers in the Vertigo line, Kaluta's delicate yet vigorous crowquill art has been a touchstone of fine fantasy art.

His work on *The Shadow* (starting in 1973 and continuing occasionally over the years since then) has been critical in reviving interest in that classic pulp character. His work includes covers for *Batman*, *Moon Knight*, *Conan the King*, *Books of Magic* and many others; an illustrated version of *Metropolis*; stories in *Epic Illustrated*, *Cheval Noir*, *Heavy Metal* and the *Rocketeer Adventure Magazine*; many book covers and calendar illustrations, including the 1994 Tolkien calendar; costume and set designs for the stage version of *Starstruck*; and much more. *Michael Wm. Kaluta Sketchbook*, a book of drawings and paintings was published in 1993.



**Chester Brown's** comic *Yummy Fur* (starting in 1986) broke more taboos than any comics since the heyday of the undergrounds (much of this material was collected in *Ed the Happy Clown*). Brown then switched his focus, publishing some of the most pitilessly objective autobiographical comics ever (collected in *The Playboy* and *I Never Loved You*). Many of his short stories

were collected in the book *The Little Man*. Recently he did the experimental comic series *Underwater* and has recently started a new series, *Louis Riel*, a story of revolution on the Canadian frontier in the 19th century. Also not yet collected into book form are Brown's provocative adaptations of the Gospels, which ran in *Yummy Fur* and *Underwater*. Brown's work has been censored, and he has been active in Canadian anti-censorship work through his contributions to *The True North*, a benefit book for the Comics Legends Legal Defense Fund. Brown's books can be ordered from Drawn & Quarterly (write for a free catalog to Drawn & Quarterly Publications, P.O. Box 48056, Montreal, Quebec, H2V 4S8, Canada).



**Chris Shadoian** began his official comic industry career in 1996 when he started working for Kitchen Sink Press as a graphic designer. During his two year tenure, Shadoian designed Scott McCloud's *Zot!* reprint collections and Jack Jackson's *Lost Cause*, designed and colored several issues of the award-winning *The Spirit: The New Adventures*, and contributed to the *R. Crumb*

*Coffee Table Art Book* team effort. This year, Shadoian received an Eisner award nomination for his design of "Superman: The Dailies." In terms of his own illustration work, Shadoian has only recently begun to test the water; last year, he self-published *Skin Eater Comics*, an anthology of bizarre stories inspired by a true skin-eating tale, and he recently contributed the art for *This Little Piggy*, written by Chris Bleistein, which will be published in the 1999 Small Press Expo collection. He also designed the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund's membership cards for both 1999 and 2000.

## Special Thanks

*Many people have donated time and labor to Gods & Tulips. First of all, we'd like to thank Neil Gaiman for donating these three essays, and thank as well Michael Wm. Kaluta, Chester Brown and Chris Shadoian for contributing artwork. Without their labors, you wouldn't be reading this now.*

*In addition, thanks must go out to Todd Scott, Lance Woods, Diamond Comic Distributors, Quebecor, Bob Schreck, and Andrea Drake for their help in making this happen.*

*Finally, thanks to all stores that ordered Gods & Tulips and all readers who bought copies. Your money helps fill the war chest of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, giving it the ability to carry on with its educational mission and to fight any legal battles necessary in the cause of freedom of the comics press.*

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The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization dedicated to defending the First Amendment rights exclusively for comic-book professionals and in comic books. If you are against censorship, especially in comics, say so by sending your individual expression of Freedom of Speech in "dollars" to the CBLDF. Tell them: "Frank made me do it."

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