



## Neil Gaiman on How Stories Last

“Stories ... are genuinely symbiotic organisms that we live with, that allow human beings to advance.”

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BY MARIA POPOVA

Stories have shapes, as Vonnegut believed, and they in turn give shape to our lives. But how do stories like the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm or Alice in Wonderland continue to enchant the popular imagination generation after generation — what is it that makes certain stories last?

That’s what the wise and wonderful **Neil Gaiman** explores in a fantastic lecture two and a half years in the making, part of the Long Now Foundation’s nourishing and necessary seminars on long-term thinking.

Nearly half a century after French molecular biologist Jacques Monod proposed what he called the “abstract kingdom” — a conceptual parallel to the biosphere, populated by ideas that propagate like organisms do in the natural world — and after Richard Dawkins built upon this concept to coin the word “meme,” Gaiman suggests stories are a life-form obeying the same rules of genesis, reproduction, and propagation that organic matter does.

Please enjoy, with transcribed highlights below.





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Considering the scientific definition of life as a process that “includes the capacity for growth, reproduction, functional activity, and continual change preceding death,” Gaiman argues that stories are alive — that they can, and do, outlive even the world’s oldest living trees by millennia:

Do stories grow? Pretty obviously — anybody who has ever heard a joke being passed on from one person to another knows that they can grow, they can change. Can stories reproduce? Well, yes. Not spontaneously, obviously — they tend to need people as vectors. We are the media in which they reproduce; we are their petri dishes... Stories grow, sometimes they shrink. And they reproduce — they inspire other stories. And, of course, if they do not change, stories die.

On story being the original and deepest creative act:

Pictures, I think, may have been a way of transmitting stories. The drawings on cave walls that we assume are acts of worship or of sympathetic magic, intended to bring hunters luck and good kills. I keep wondering if, actually, they’re just ways of telling

stories: “We came over that bridge and we saw a herd of woolly bisons.” And I wonder that because people tell stories — it’s an enormous part of what makes us human.

We will do an awful lot for stories — we will endure an awful lot for stories. And stories, in their turn — like some kind of symbiote — help us endure and make sense of our lives.

A lot of stories do appear to begin as intrinsic to religions and belief systems — a lot of the ones we have have gods or goddesses in them; they teach us how the world exists; they teach us the rules of living in the world. But they also have to come in an attractive enough package that we take pleasure from them and we want to help them propagate.

Gaiman illustrates this with the most breath-stopping testament to what we endure for stories as they in turn help us endure, by way of his 97-year-old cousin Helen, a Polish Holocaust survivor:

A few years ago, she started telling me this story of how, in the ghetto, they were not allowed books. If you had a book ... the Nazis could put a gun to your head and pull the trigger — books were forbidden. And she used to teach under the pretense of having a sewing class... a class of about twenty little girls, and they would come in for about an hour a day, and she would teach them maths, she’d teach them Polish, she’d teach them grammar...

One day, somebody slipped her a Polish translation of Margaret Mitchell’s novel *Gone with the Wind*. And Helen stayed up — she blacked out her window so she could stay up an extra hour, she read a chapter of *Gone with the Wind*. And when the girls came in the next day, instead of teaching them, she told them what happened in the book.

And each night, she’d stay up; and each day, she’d tell them the story.

And I said, “Why? Why would you risk death — for a story?”

And she said, “Because for an hour every day, those girls weren’t in the ghetto — they were in the American South; they were having adventures; they got away.

I think four out of those twenty girls survived the war. And she told me how, when she was an old woman, she found one of them, who was also an old woman. And they got together and called each other by names from *Gone with the Wind*...

We [writers] decry too easily what we do, as being kind of trivial — the creation of

stories as being a trivial thing. But the magic of escapist fiction ... is that it can actually offer you a genuine escape from a bad place and, in the process of escaping, it can furnish you with armor, with knowledge, with weapons, with tools you can take back into your life to help make it better... It's a real escape — and when you come back, you come back better-armed than when you left.

Helen's story is a true story, and this is what we learn from it — that stories are worth risking your life for; they're worth dying for. Written stories and oral stories both offer escape — escape from somewhere, escape to somewhere.

Remarking on how Helen's story changed him, he adds:

Stories should change you — *good* stories should change you.



Illustration by Maurice Sendak from 'The Big Green Book' by Robert Graves. Click image for more.

On how Douglas Adams predicted ebooks in the early 1990s and in the same prophetic breath made a confident case for the perseverance of physical books (which I too, being no Adams but as staunch a believer in the tenacity of the printed page, contemplated on a recent episode of WNYC's *Note to Self*):

Douglas Adams ... understood media, understood change. He essentially described the first ebooks long before most commuter trains were filled with people reading on them. And he also perceived why, even though most commuter trains are a hundred percent people with ebooks, there will always be physical books and a healthy market for physical books — because, Douglas told me, “books are sharks.”

[...]

There were sharks back when there were dinosaurs... And now, there are sharks. And the reason that there are still sharks — hundreds of millions of years after the

first sharks turned up — is that nothing has turned up that is better at being a shark than a shark is.

Ebooks are absolutely fantastic at being several books and a newspaper; they're really good portable bookshelves, that's why they're great on trains. But books are much better at being books...

I can guarantee that copy of the first *Sandman* omnibus still works.

But stories aren't books — books are just one of the many storage mechanisms in which stories can be kept. And, obviously, people are one of the other storage mechanisms.



Illustration by Jim Stoten from 'Mr. Tweed's Good Deeds.' Click image for details.

On how books, as much as they connect us to our all humanity, connect us to all humanity:

As individuals, we are cut off from humanity; as individuals, we are naked — we do not even know which plants will kill us. Without the mass of human knowledge accumulated over millennia to buoy us up, we are in big trouble; with it, we are warm, fed, we have popcorn, we are sitting in comfortable seats, and we are capable of arguing with each other about really stupid things on the internet.

Gaiman tells the story of how, in 1984, the Department of Energy hired the Hungarian-born American polymath Thomas Sebeok to devise a method of warning future generations not to mine or drill at repositories of nuclear waste, which have a half-life of 10,000 years — a method that would transmit information for at least as long:

Tom Sebeok concluded you couldn't actually create a story that would last 10,000

years; you could only create a story that would last for three generations — for ourselves, for our children, and for their children.

But what we can do, I think, is try and create stories that are interesting enough and important enough that our grandchildren might want to tell those stories to their grandchildren — because that's the purpose of stories, that's what they're for: They make life worth living and, sometimes, they keep us alive.

On how the internet is changing storytelling:

A lot more writing is happening because of the internet, and I think that bit is great — I just love the fact that more people are writing.

I think the biggest problem that we have ... is that we have gone from a scarcity-based information economy to a glut information economy. In the old days, finding the thing that you needed was like finding the flower in the desert — you'd have to go out into the desert and find the flower. And now, it's like finding the flower in the jungle — or worse, finding the flower in the flower gardens.

[...]

The task becomes finding the good stuff, for whatever your definition of “good stuff” is — and your definition of “good stuff” might be some horribly specialized form of *Harry Potter* slash.

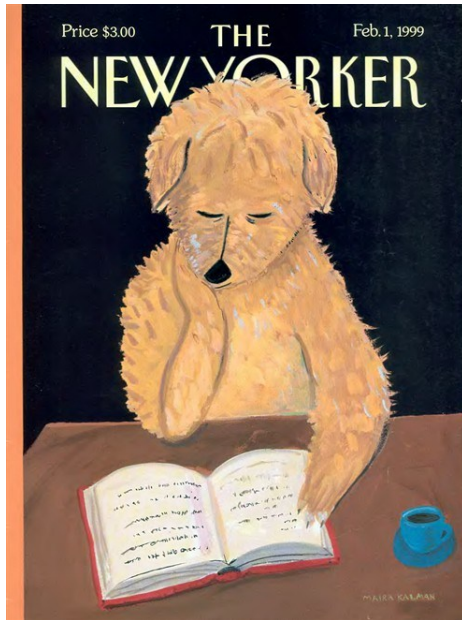
On humanity's long history of thinking with animals and why so many lasting stories feature animal characters:

Animals in fiction ... are your first attempt to put your head into the “other” and to experience the other, the idea of another...

The most important thing that I think fiction does [is that] it lets us look out through other eyes ... but it also gives us empathy. The act of looking out through other eyes tells us something huge and important, which is that other people exist.

[...]

One of the things that fiction can give us is just the realization that behind every pair of eyes, there's somebody like us. And, perhaps, looking out through animal eyes, there's somebody like us; looking out through alien eyes, there's somebody like us.



Art by Maira Kalman from 'The Big New Yorker Book of Dogs.'  
Click image for more.

On his ultimate point about the symbiotic relationship between human beings and stories, both compliant with the same evolutionary laws of life:

You can just view people as this peculiar byproduct that stories use to breed. Really, it's the stories that are the life-form — they are older than us, they are smarter than us, they keep going. But they need human beings to reproduce, much as we need food... we need things to keep ourselves alive. Maybe stories really are like viruses... Functionally, they are symbiotic — they give and give back...

The reason why story is so important to us is because it's actually this thing that we have been using since the dawn of humanity to become more than just one person... Stories are ways that we communicate *important* things, but ... stories maybe really *are* genuinely symbiotic organisms that we live with, that allow human beings to advance.

Complement with Gaiman on why scary stories appeal to us, his reimagining of Hansel and Gretel, his superb commencement address on the creative life, his advice to aspiring writers, and his eight rules of writing, then join me in supporting the Long Now Foundation's vital and vitalizing work.

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