

"What Neil Gaiman Teaches Us About Survival: Making Good Art and Diving into the Ocean."
Neil Gaiman in the Twenty-first Century. Ed. Tara Prescott. McFarland Press (2015).

As in much of Neil Gaiman's work, the vision of childhood in his 2013 novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is not a rosy time of innocence. Rather, Gaiman's vision of childhood reflects the novel's epigraph by children's author and illustrator Maurice Sendak: "I remember my own childhood vividly . . . I knew terrible things. But I knew I mustn't let adults know I knew. It would scare them." For children, suffering and joy coexist in registers from the quotidian to the mythic; Gaiman illustrates that what makes survival possible for children is that they don't understand that these registers are supposed to be separate. What allows his child protagonist to survive is the fact that he does not question the thresholds between the mythic and the everyday through which he crosses and re-crosses.

The novel demonstrates one of the primary strategies for survival that Gaiman explains in his widely celebrated "Make Good Art" speech: "If you don't know it's impossible it's easier to do."¹ In this speech, which he gave to the 2012 graduating class at Philadelphia's University of the Arts, Gaiman acknowledges both the pain and the pleasure of the artist's life—and by extension, life in general. According to Gaiman, the goal of being an artist is, "The moment that you feel that, just possibly, you're walking down the street naked, exposing too much of your heart and your mind and what exists on the inside, showing too much of yourself. That's the moment you may be starting to get it right." We reach such moments through the unrelenting pursuit of art. When we fail, we should make art. When we succeed, we should make art.

Though the unnamed narrator of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is an artist, he does not explicitly describe his art. Rather, it is his story which illustrates what it means to "expose too much of your heart and your mind and what exists on the inside." Within the frame story of a middle-aged man returning to his childhood home for his father's funeral lies a tale of childhood

terror, guilt, and survival involving not only infidelity and suicide but also mythic encounters with other-worldly beings, both nurturing and destructive. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is a beautifully-crafted illustration of the possibilities of adult healing through a willingness to remember, reconstruct, and temporarily return to the worlds of our childhoods.

Opening with the narrator's drive to his childhood home after attending his father's funeral, the story swiftly moves to his memories of childhood and the neighboring Hempstead Farm. He remembers meeting the neighbor girl Lettie Hempstock² at the age of seven, the same day that his family's tenant is found dead in the stolen family car, a victim of suicide after losing all of his money gambling. His death is on the first in a series of unfortunate events, including a new nanny (a human manifestation of an evil force unleashed into this realm by the narrator's feelings of loneliness after the tenant's suicide) who seduces his father. Even more shocking than stumbling upon the somewhat primal scene of his father engaged in sexual activity with the nanny is the narrator's vision of the dead man's face, which he inadvertently glimpses while sneaking looks into the car, trying to find a lost comic book. He is saved by Lettie Hempstead, who offers to bring him back to her house while his father deals with the police.

From his first encounter with the women of the Hempstead Farm, the narrator's experiences with them are those of maternal nurturing, nurturing with both material as well as magical dimensions. We see this in one of his first exchanges with Lettie, which highlights how firmly connected material sustenance is to the emotional, spiritual, and other, more abstract, aspects of the human psyche. When the narrator asks Lettie, "Do you think he killed himself?" Lettie replies, "Yes. Do you like milk? Gran's milking Bessie now" (19). This exchange highlights a central theme of the novel, that survival requires sustenance on many levels

simultaneously. When the adult narrator returns, the Hempstead women provide him not only solitude at the magical “ocean,” but also tea and a cheese and tomato sandwich (172).

More than simply a Proustian agent of memory, food in this novel is an essential element for being able to inhabit the multiple dimensions within the novel. To be fair, the Proustian element of memory is a strong undercurrent within the novel: upon taking a bit of the cheese and tomato sandwich, the narrator reports, “It was good, really good. Freshly baked bread, sharp, salty cheese, the kind of tomatoes that actually taste like something. I was awash in memory . . .” (172). However, such sensory details are equally capable of bringing one back from abstractions. After engaging in the battles with the demonic Ursula Monkton as well as the fantastic “hunger birds” which for a while threaten to destroy all of the earth’s reality, the Hempstock women feed the narrator spotted dick, a comfort food which feeds his soul as much as his body. Reflecting on that meal, he narrator muses,

I do not miss childhood, but I miss the way I took pleasure in small things, even as greater things crumbled. I could not control the world I was in, could not walk away from things or people or moments that hurt, but I found joy in the things that made me happy. The custard was sweet and creamy in my mouth, the dark swollen currants in the spotted dick were tangy in the cake-thick chewy blandness of the pudding, and perhaps I was going to die that night and perhaps I would never go home again, but it was a good dinner and I had faith in Lettie Hempstock. (149)

The sensory immediacy of the comfort food allows him to ground himself in the present and fully inhabit a sense of safety; the material sustenance bulwarks the sense of emotional security.

Earlier in the novel, we learn that the dead man owed money to many people, including many friends. As his last thoughts were, according to Lettie’s vision, that

he took all the money that his friends had given him to smuggle out of South Africa and bank for them in England, along with all the money he'd made over the years mining for opals, and he went to the casino in Brighton, to gamble, but he only meant to gamble with his own money. And then he only meant to dip into the money his friends had given him until he had made back the money he had lost. (21)

—and his last moments on earth were full of such a desire for money that his hunger awakened Ursula, a being in another dimension. Although by the nearly eternal Hempstead scale, creatures such as Ursula register as no more powerful than a flea (70), in the narrator's recognizably human sense of scale, Ursula is quite capable of destruction. Once Ursula gains access to a recognizably human form (because of the narrator's momentary doubt of Lettie, when he flinches in the face of Ursula's fantastic threatening display in her more otherworldly form), she moves in with his family, ingratiating herself with his father and sister and menacing the narrator with threats of destroying his parents' love for him as well as locking him away to a life in the dark.

Though Lettie is capable of doing battle with the flea-like Ursula, her solution, which is to invite the hunger birds—uncontrollable, powerful, otherworldly scavenger creatures to make her disappear from the narrator's realm of our universe—unwittingly endangers it, and she must ultimately rely upon the power of her older female relatives to finally banish the dangerous creatures and restore our realm. However, the cost of restoring the realm is Lettie's immediate life. Although Old Mrs. Hempstead claims that, "She's not dead She's been given to her ocean. One day, in its own time, the ocean will give her back" (164), at the time of the narrator's present-day visit, she has yet to return—according to Old Mrs. Hempstead, Lettie is "sleeping . .

. . [and] healing. She's not talking yet" (174). However, she is present in her ocean, and is satisfied with the results of her sacrifice.

After facing down the demons unleashed by Ursula, Lettie shows maternal concern by observing that the narrator must be hungry, and he realizes that, "I was so hungry, and the hunger took my head and swallowed my lingering dreams I was scared of eating food outside my home, scared that I might want to leave food I did not like and be told off, or be forced to sit and swallow it in minuscule portions until it was gone, as I was at school, but the food at the Hempstocks was always perfect. It did not scare me" (147). The Hempstead women's facility with providing nurturing food exemplifies what Gaiman insists upon in *Make Good Art*, that creation is necessary for survival. The creation of food, sewing, other domestic arts are *arts*, which are necessary for survival of any tragedies. In his speech, Gaiman says,

Husband runs off with a politician? Make good art. Leg crushed and then eaten by mutated boa constrictor? Make good art. IRS on your trail? Make good art. Cat exploded? Make good art. Somebody on the internet thinks what you do is stupid or evil or it's all been done before? Make good art. Probably things will work out somehow, and eventually time will take the sting away, but that doesn't matter. Do what only you do best. Make good art.

The narrator's meal of shepherd's pie baked by Ginnie Hempstead reflects this understanding of the world. As the hunger birds are bearing down on her chosen world, threatening to obliterate it, she makes stunning food by hand—"shepherd's pie, the mashed potato a crusty brown on top, minced meat and vegetables and gravy beneath it"—and though she speaks in "low, urgent tones" to Lettie, her long-range perspective allows her to express a sense of optimism because she is capable of creation: "'Stuff and nonsense,' she said. 'They're all mouth, they are'" (147).

While Gaiman explains the necessity for creation in *Make Good Art*, he illustrates the relationship between creation and hunger in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. In the novel, the source of evil is unassuaged hunger. The most dangerous creatures in the novel are, in fact, “hunger birds.” Gaiman recognizes that we have a number of hungers which must be fed: for food, certainly, but also for honesty and love. All of these are absent in his home, from his father’s burnt toast to his father’s affair with Ursula the nanny. Under the spell of Ursula, his father’s temper (which he already feared) blossoms into sheer terror. Before Ursula, “He never hit me. He did not believe in hitting” (67) though the narrator was still “terrified of him when he was angry. His face (angular and usually affable) would grow red, and he would shout, shout so loudly and furiously that it would, literally, paralyze me. I would not be able to think” (66-67). However, after the narrator tells his father that Ursula isn’t human, but rather a monster and a flea (70), his father goes beyond shouting, beyond even hitting, to attempted drowning, as he fills the bathtub with cold water and holds his son under the water: “The bathwater was cold, so cold and so wrong. That was what I thought, initially as he pushed me into the water, and then he pushed further, pushing my head and shoulders beneath the chilly water, and the horror changed its nature. I thought, *I’m going to die*” (72, emphasis in original). Ursula not only deprives him of food but also his father, his father’s love, and the certainty of a secure home, as she not only engages in a sexual affair with his father but also feeds his father’s temper in ways which lead him to physically abuse his son.

Ursula herself is created through hunger, and she herself is hungry, deprived of her own home. She enters novel’s reality in response to the suicidal man’s hunger—however, she misreads his hunger, which he expresses in his suicide note and his last thoughts as a hunger for money, which he imagines is at the root of his problems. Upon his death, Ursula provides money

for many in the vicinity—but as money alone is the product of neither creation nor imagination, it brings about problems, rather than solves them. The narrator awakens with an antique silver shilling in his throat choking him, his sister accuses him of throwing coins at her, and a neighbor woman “goes mad” after discovering that her mattress is full of money, refusing to get out of bed, afraid of theft. I imagine that had the suicidal man instead managed to contact the Hempstocks, they would have fed him in their warm, comforting kitchen and helped him face down his demons, rather than find an escape hatch.

Although food is a central agent in this regard, it is certainly not the only domestic article which plays a role in the magical realm. What makes art powerful is the combination of creation and imagination, which is manifest in much of the domestic arts in the novel. Some of the most striking magic in the novel uses sewing, as Lettie and her grandmother are able to actually alter time using scissors, needle, and thread. Taking the robe that the narrator was wearing when his dad tried to drown him, Old Mrs. Hempstock cuts out pieces of fabric in which these events evidently reside—“*Snip! Snip! Snip!* went the black scissor, and the irregular section of fabric that Old Mrs. Hempstock had been cutting fell to the table.” Ginnie Hempstock picks up the bits of fabric, observing, “*That’s* your dad and you in the hallway, and *that’s* the bathtub. She’s snipped that out. So without any of that, there’s no reason for your daddy to be angry with you” (97, emphasis in original). To our amazement, the narrator’s parents freeze at the moment of cutting, and once Old Mrs. Hempstock sews the edges back together, indeed, their memories of the evening are gone, replaced by Old Mrs. Hempstock’s suggested memories which she stitches into their memory with her needle and thread and the narrator’s robe.

The Hempstock women are a feminist reimagining of the divine feminine, which Kristine Larsen in her article “Doors, Vortices and the In-Between: Quantum Cosmological Goddesses in

the Gaiman Multiverse” characterizes as a progressive manifestation of a “passive, oppressed feminine principle in nature to more modern, and far more powerful, ‘liberated’ quantum cosmological goddesses, agents of change who have the ability to traverse, create, and even destroy entire universes” (265). According to Larsen, these new deities

rather than merely representing the moon or stars, travel between dimensions and create and/or destroy entire universes Gaiman puts a fresh and empowering face on the Great Mother and her reproductive powers. Gone is the Newtonian concept of a singular, linear, mechanistic universe; the universe is now replaced by the chaotic, roll-the-dice multiverse of Einstein, Guth, and Everett. (261)

Although the Hempstock women remember the time of Cromwell and claim a heritage which is recorded in the Domesday book, they are able to live in the present world—even using milking machines for their cows rather than milking by hand. And while the trio of Lettie, her mother Ginnie, and Old Mrs. Hempstock is an obvious manifestation of the maiden/mother/crone archetype, by the end of the novel, the confused narrator ultimately sees only one Hempstock woman, admitting, “It’s funny. For a moment, I thought there were two of you. Isn’t that odd?” to which the woman replies, ““It’s just me,” said the old woman. ‘It’s only ever just me” (177), a comment which emphasizes the quantum nature of Gaiman’s otherworldly women.

Certainly, Gaiman’s latest novel is a wonderful ocean itself into which its readers can immerse themselves. However, that it not only takes place within a recognizable realm but also seems to suggest that the unnamed narrator may be Gaiman himself, what are we to do with the fantastic nature of the story? One way of reading the story is, in the narrator’s grief over the death of his father with whom he struggled (reference their attempts to get along) and his memory in particular of discovering that his father had cheated on his mother, his memory of

these events has taken on elements of the fantastic over the course of time in order to transform his bad memories into unbelievable stories, as a way of protecting himself from the truth.

However, though he believes that this is the first time he has visited the Hempstock Farm since his childhood, we learn that he has, in fact, returned several times since and experienced similar reveries of reminiscence at crisis points in his life similar to the grief he is currently facing. The novel's reconstruction of the story of his childhood functions as a multivalent act of recovery. On the most basic level, the novel illustrates the recovery of narrative, creation as an act of memory. However, recovery is functioning in another way here, as the narrator's recovery of this forgotten memory of his childhood also functions in his process of grief, in his working through and recovering from the trauma of his father's death.

Memory can be a strategy for gaining control over history and time, and key to recovery, especially as the slippage between "recovery" as a healing from trauma and "recovery" as a discovery of repressed or forgotten memories highlights. Frederick Jameson has explained, we only understand our history through storytelling; when the story becomes inaccessible, the past cannot be worked through or understood. Echoing Jameson, trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth have similarly pointed to the importance of narrative to processing trauma—as the very nature of trauma itself is "its very unassimilated nature—the way it is precisely *not known*" (4). The key to processing trauma, then, is the ability to incorporate it into the narrative, into the story one tells one's self about the past.

Certainly, it is this construction of narrative which makes it tempting to read Gaiman as the unnamed narrator. The novel is dedicated "To Amanda, who wanted to know," and Gaiman has explained that his inspiration for the novel was, "Missing Amanda. I wanted to write something for her, because she was making *THEATRE IS EVIL* in Australia, and I was in

Florida. I took my childhood and the places I lived as a boy, and put them into a story for her” (“neil & i answer ‘evening with’ questions on reddit (warning: contains all sorts of things”). Palmer, an artist herself in addition to being Gaiman’s wife, acknowledges the tremendous courage which Gaiman’s artistic accomplishment required of him in her discussion of what *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is by far her favorite piece of writing of Gaiman’s: “i’m going to plant my hungry art-mouth right on neil gaiman’s face and suck the divine force out of him, too: i’m going to gulp magic air from the brave plummet he took in writing and publishing ‘ocean’ – i saw him, he was shit scared. and he did it anyway” (“sharing the cosmic cold sore: a meditation on life, death, and art (and anthony’s new book)”). As this novel emerged during a period of Gaiman’s mourning the death of his own father, it is certainly tempting to read the narrator as Gaiman himself.

However, it’s important to keep in mind that Gaiman’s speech exhorts us to make *good art*, not memoir. It is true that in Leah Schnelbach’s article on the novel on the science fiction website *Tor.com*, she reports that much of the novel’s setting, at least, is based on Gaiman’s childhood:

It is set, more or less, on the lane where Gaiman spent his childhood, and deals with a fictional family, the Hempstocks, who first took up residence in Gaiman’s imagination when he was nine years old. They showed up soon after he found out that the farm at the end of his lane was mentioned in the *Domesday Book*. The farm had to have people living in it, the boy reasoned, so he thought up many generations of Hempstocks. Years later, various members made appearances in his work—Daisy Hempstock turned up in *Stardust*, and Liza Hempstock in *The Graveyard Book*. In *Ocean*, it is Lettie Hempstock

who befriends the narrator and tries to protect him when a dark form of magic is unleashed in his village. (“Neil Gaiman Talks about *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*”) However, it is important to note that the Hempstocks are primarily residents of Gaiman’s *imagination*, not the neighboring farm. And it is here where art as the intersection of creation and imagination becomes key to the importance of art: its strength lies not in the fact that Gaiman recorded the story of his grief for his father as a memoir, but that the effects and affects of his grief were folded into the landscapes of his childhood along with the creatures of his imagination.

Gaiman’s comments about his father’s death provide a useful companion piece for his *Make Good Art* speech, as they fill in the details which his speech provides a scaffolding for:

I don’t think immediate tragedy is a very good source of art. It can be, but too often it’s raw and painful and un-dealt-with. Sometimes art can be a really good escape from the intolerable, and a good place to go when things are bad, but that doesn’t mean you have to write directly about the bad thing; sometimes you need to let time pass, and allow the thing that hurts to get covered with layers, and then you take it out, like a pearl, and you make art out of it So my suggestion is, stop trying to use it and do something else. (“The Father’s Day and Invisible Plane Post”)

It’s possible that the surrender which this process requires is a significant part of the healing process, in that one stops trying to force any pattern or design on one’s experience.

As Gaiman is famously a Doctor Who fan, it’s easy to find traces of the TARDIS phenomenology—that of being “bigger on the inside”—in his philosophy of fiction (and art) specifically and humanity more generally. In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the pond which is really an ocean is an analogue of this phenomenon, reflecting the artist’s capacity to “contain

multitudes,” in Whitman’s famous words. The capaciousness of art, of creation, functions as an analogue of the human psyche in its ability to not only contain contradictions and unresolved trauma but also allow the space necessary to recreate, relive, restore, and ultimately recover from such trauma. In his attempt to explain his art, the narrator of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* explains early on that, “If I could talk about it, I would not have to do it” (4). As Gaiman explains in his speech, “Life is sometimes hard. Things go wrong, in life and in love and in business and in friendship and in health and in all the other ways that life can go wrong. And when things get tough, this is what you should do. Make good art.” The combination of creation and imagination which art requires is ultimately a combination of the material and the sublime; by fusing these two realms in *The Ocean at the Lane*, Gaiman beautifully illuminates the fact that in the best of worlds, these two realms are inseparable.

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¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from the “Make Good Art” speech are from the published edition of the speech, illustrated by Chip Kidd; this edition is not paginated.

² *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* are not the first appearance of the Hempstocks in Gaiman’s work. While at work on the novel, Gaiman reported in his online journal that he was “writing a story about Lettie Hempstock. Who may be distantly related to Daisy Hempstock in *Stardust* and Liza Hempstock in *The Graveyard Book*” (“I Took My Love to Hobart in the Rain”).