

American Gods



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NEIL GAIMAN

Neil Gaiman grew up in West Sussex, England, reading fantasy works by authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Ursula Le Guin. In his late teens, Gaiman decided he wanted to become a writer. He began a career in journalism writing book and music reviews as he learned how to get published. After forming a friendship with the comic book writer Alan Moore, Gaiman started to work in comics. He was hired by DC comics in 1987 and worked on his most famous comic book series, *The Sandman*, from 1989 to 1996. From there, Gaiman moved into novels, screenplays, and radio. His most popular works include *American Gods*, *Good Omens* (in collaboration with British author Terry Pratchett), *Stardust*, [Coraline](#), the book and television series *Neverwhere*, and the movie *Mirrormask*. He has been honored with several awards for science fiction, including four Hugos and two Nebulas as well as the Newberry and Carnegie medals. Gaiman also keeps an active online presence, with a website, twitter, and tumblr page updated frequently with fan questions, supplemental material to his works, and general publishing news. Gaiman now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after spending a decade in Wisconsin with his first wife, Mary McGrath. Now married to the musician Amanda Palmer, Gaiman is a current professor of the arts at Bard College in New York.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

America has long been understood to be a nation of immigrants, beginning with the colonization of the American continent after Columbus's so-called "discovery" of the continent in 1492. However, the first arrival of people in North America was likely between 40,000 and 17,000 years ago (most estimates cite the Clovis people who traveled around 14,000 years ago) when ancient tribes crossed the land bridge over the Bering Sea. From that point, many different groups are said to have been the "first" people in America, including the Norse around 1000 A.D., a possible Chinese voyage in 1421, and the likelihood that Polynesian peoples made contact with American land between 500 and 700 A.D. Gaiman includes references to almost all of these groups in his accounts of "Coming to America." Regardless of who really "discovered" America, it is widely accepted that the unique American character comes from the many influxes of immigrants that have marked American history, and the unfortunate backlash against these new arrivals. In the 1500s and 1600s, thousands of French, Dutch, Spanish, and English settlers arrived in various parts of America, focusing mostly on the Eastern

seaboard and what is now Florida, California, and New England. By the early 1700s, the English had won major control over the American land. The Puritan English settlers came seeking religious freedom, while others looked for economic opportunity, as Mr. Ibis explains with his account of Essie, the indentured servant. During this time period, African peoples were also forced to come to America as slaves, concentrated mostly in the southeastern United States and adding their traditional religions to the culture of this area. In the 1800s, another major wave of immigration hit the now established country of the United States of America. People from Northern and Western Europe came fleeing famine or poverty, as well as Germans who came and settled the large majority of the Midwest United States. Anti-immigrant sentiment grew, especially with regard to those immigrants (such as Irish or Italian newcomers) who practiced Catholicism rather than the largely Protestant groups of the first English colonists. Chinese and other Asian immigrants also came to America's western coast during the mid-1800s gold rush, eventually culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that fought to keep the new Chinese population and its influence on western American culture to a minimum. By the late 1880s and 1890s, rapid industrialization and the chance for jobs brought millions of immigrants from southern, central, and Eastern Europe, and the cultural/religious practices of these groups were also added to the new mix of the American spirit. Cities such as New York and Chicago were especially affected by these new groups, retaining specific features like the Polish influence in Chicago, or the Ashkenazi Jews in New York. The immigration quotas of the 1920s fought to keep any one of these "newer" immigrant populations from becoming too strong. There was a lull in immigration during the two world wars and subsequent economic depression of the 1930s, but immigration picked up again in the 1960s with explosions of newcomers from Latin America, Asia, and countries in the Middle East, and around 14% of America's population reported as born in a country outside the United States. The majority of immigrants to America today come from Mexico and China as debates about refugees and the details of legal and illegal immigrants continue to rage on. Immigrants today still change the face of America, adding new languages, foods, cultural practices, and, most importantly to Gaiman, religions into what counts as "American."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As an "American Road Trip" novel that unearths the forgotten sides of America, *American Gods* has some aspects in common with Jack Kerouac's [On the Road](#), though *American Gods* has a far more optimistic (and fantastical) outlook. It also takes

inspiration from the detective novels of Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler in Shadow's noir-like character and the mystery of the town of Lakeside. Finally, as a work of modern mythology, *American Gods* is related to Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths, Buddha, Vol. 1* by Osamu Tezuka, Richard Wilkinson's *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, and *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell. Within the genre of urban fantasy, *American Gods* is also similar to Diane Wynne Jones' *Eight Days of Luke*, Douglas Adams' *Dirk Gently* novels and Gaiman's own collaboration with Terry Pratchett, *Good Omens*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *American Gods*
- **When Written:** June 1998 to February 2001
- **Where Written:** Neil conceived of the idea for *American Gods* on a trip to Iceland, then wrote the bulk of the novel while traveling around the United States (specifically Chicago, Florida, Las Vegas, and other locations). He finished editing and revising in Ireland.
- **When Published:** June 19, 2001
- **Literary Period:** Post-modernism, Contemporary
- **Genre:** Americana, Fantasy, Mythology
- **Setting:** America
- **Climax:** Shadow figures out the truth behind the prosperity of the town of Lakeside, after hanging to die on a tree as a sacrifice for Odin and learning his true identity as Odin's son.
- **Antagonist:** The New Gods, Mr. World (Loki), and Mr. Wednesday (Odin)
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Popularity and Relevance. *American Gods* has been adapted into a television series by Starz, which premiered in April 2017. The series has been accepted well by critics, especially for the unplanned political overtones of its pro-immigration stance in the tense environment surrounding immigrants during Trump's presidency.

Industry Secrets. Gaiman has kept a blog of the entire writing and copy-editing process for *American Gods* preserved on his website. Gaiman offers insight into the novel itself, as well as a peek into the world of publishing and all the things that have to happen after a book is written and before it can be read by the public.

for his release from prison, after three years inside. Shadow has spent his time practicing coin tricks and reading a copy of Herodotus's *Histories* borrowed from his cellmate Low Key Lyesmith. Two days before he is supposed to be allowed to go back to his beloved wife Laura, Shadow finds out that his wife has died in a car accident. He is released early and catches a plane back to his home in Eagle Point, Indiana so that he can attend the memorial. On the plane, Shadow falls asleep and has a strange dream about a man with a buffalo head who tells him to believe "everything." When he wakes, he meets a strange man who calls himself Mr. Wednesday and offers Shadow a job. Shadow refuses, then gets off the plane early to avoid talking to Mr. Wednesday any more. Meanwhile, the narrator describes a goddess in Los Angeles named Bilquis practicing her particular brand of sexual magic, swallowing a client whole when he agrees to worship her with his body.

Shadow rents a car and starts to drive home, stopping at a bar for dinner. Mr. Wednesday is at the bar, and he offers Shadow the job again. This time, Shadow accepts, drinking three glasses of mead with Wednesday to make the deal official – promising to be Wednesday's assistant and to hold Wednesday's vigil if Wednesday ever dies. Mad Sweeney, a friend of Mr. Wednesday's who calls himself a leprechaun, arrives at the bar and shows Shadow how to make a gold coin appear, seemingly out of thin air. Shadow thinks this is just a normal coin trick, and Mad Sweeney shows him how to do it too. Shadow gets so drunk from the mead that the next day he forgets what happened, and just wakes up with a **gold coin** in his pocket.

Before starting his job as Wednesday's assistant, Shadow asks to go to Laura's funeral. At the funeral service, Shadow finds out from Laura's best friend Audrey Burton that Laura died while in the process of having an affair with Audrey's husband. Shadow is hurt, but tries to forgive Laura. He throws the gold coin he found in his pocket into Laura's grave, then goes to meet Wednesday at a hotel. On his way, Shadow is kidnapped by a "New God" named Technical Boy, who tells Shadow to give Wednesday the message that the Old Gods are obsolete.

Shadow finally makes it to the hotel, and tries to go to sleep despite disturbing dreams of forgotten gods. In the middle of the night, his wife Laura appears, now a walking corpse, and promises to protect Shadow now even though she betrayed him in life. The novel then switches to tell of the first Northmen who came to America and brought the Norse gods Odin, Tyr, and Thor with them, planting these gods of death and deception on American soil. Back with Shadow, Wednesday tells Shadow to drive him to Chicago, where Shadow meets the Zorya sisters and Czernobog. Wednesday tries to convince Czernobog to join his fight against the New Gods, but Czernobog doesn't agree until Shadow wagers his life on a game of checkers. Shadow loses the first game, giving Czernobog the right to kill Shadow with a hammer, but wins the second, meaning that Czernobog has to help Wednesday first.



PLOT SUMMARY

The novel starts as a man named Shadow Moon is getting ready

That night, Zorya Polunochnaya, the moon sister, gives Shadow a **silver Liberty coin** and blesses him with protection.

Shadow and Wednesday spend the next day robbing a bank, showing Wednesday's affinity for cons, deception, and tricks. Shadow himself is fairly adept at taking on a new identity for the sake of the grift. Wednesday then tells Shadow to drive them to the House on the Rock, a strange tourist attraction that Wednesday calls one of the most important places in America. Wednesday meets up again with Czernobog and another god called Mr. Nancy. They all ride a carousel that transports them to a huge Norse hall, where a few gods are assembled. Shadow finds out that Wednesday is really the Norse god Odin, and that all the gods came to America with the immigrants who believed in them. Mr. Nancy, with his talent for stories, and Mr. Wednesday, with his ability to make rousing speeches, try to convince the gathered gods to fight against the New Gods who have stolen their power, but the other gods are not interested in taking that risk.

Everyone goes back to the House on the Rock, and Shadow is captured by Mr. Wood and Mr. Stone, two hitmen for the New Gods. They take him to an abandoned train in the Wisconsin woods, where they beat him and interrogate him about Mr. Wednesday's plans. Wednesday holds on to his Liberty coin and gives away nothing. Early the next morning, Laura appears and kills Mr. Stone and Mr. Wood so that Shadow can escape. Shadow walks south through the woods, following a raven who tells him to go to Cairo and find "Jackal." Shadow reaches a gas station, where the attendant tells him Cairo is in Illinois and sells him a used car. Shadow drives down to Cairo, picking up a hitchhiker named Sam Black Crow along the way. Sam, a half-Cherokee girl, tells Shadow a story about Odin where a sacrifice that was supposed to be symbolic turns into a real death. Shadow gets Sam to her destination, then spends the night in a motel where the TV comes to life and offers him fame and fortune if he joins the New Gods.

Shadow keeps driving, finally reaching Cairo where he finds the Ibis and Jacquel Funeral Parlor. Mr. Ibis welcomes Shadow to live with them and help out with their work as funeral directors and autopsy prosecutors. Shadow feels at peace in Cairo, listening to Mr. Ibis's stories of how different gods came to America and meeting Bast – a cat goddess who helps heal the many injuries Shadow has accumulated on his journey so far. After spending the beginning of December in Cairo, Shadow runs into Mad Sweeney, who begs Shadow to give the gold coin back. After hearing that Shadow gave the gold coin away, Mad Sweeney drinks himself to death. On Christmas Eve, Mr. Wednesday reappears and takes Shadow back north, giving him the identity "Mike Ainsel" and sending him to live in a small Wisconsin town called Lakeside. That night, Shadow has a dream that he is reborn out of the earth and meets the star people, after the Buffalo Man tells him to look for a thunderbird in order to bring Laura back to life.

On Christmas Day, Shadow makes it to Lakeside, where an old man named Hinzelmann helps show him around the town. Everyone he meets in Lakeside repeats what a *good* town it is. Shadow meets the local policeman, Chad Mulligan, and settles into his apartment for the freezing Wisconsin winter. He joins in the town tradition of buying a raffle ticket to guess when a car parked on the frozen lake will crack through the ice, marking the arrival of spring. Shadow tries to find out more about thunderbirds so he can help Laura, even dreaming about a thunderbird one night. Every once in a while, Wednesday comes to get Shadow so that Shadow can accompany him on visits to different gods, including the goddess Easter in San Francisco. Easter seems to hate Wednesday, but takes a liking to Shadow and reluctantly agrees to help Wednesday.

When Shadow returns from San Francisco, Chad gives him the bad news that one of the teenagers in the town, a young girl named Alison, has disappeared. Shadow learns that this is only the latest in odd disappearances that seem to happen every winter. Wednesday takes Shadow again to South Dakota where they have to sneak "Backstage" behind Mount Rushmore on foot to avoid a trap set by the New Gods. While Backstage, Shadow touches a bone that transports him into the body of a man named Mr. Town, who works for Mr. World, the leader of the New Gods. Shadow thinks that Mr. World's voice sounds familiar, but can't place it. Shadow and Wednesday emerge from Backstage at the house of Whiskey Jack (Wisakedjak), a Native American hero. Whiskey Jack refuses to join Wednesday's lost cause and tells Shadow that the dead must stay dead even if he finds a thunderbird.

In February, Shadow makes more journeys with Wednesday, and takes long walks through the Wisconsin forest when he is in Lakeside. One walk takes him to a graveyard where Laura is waiting. Laura asks Shadow if he is really alive, and Shadow is hurt by the question. Meanwhile, the war between the gods starts to take lives, with Bilquis ending up as one of the first casualties. Wednesday calls Shadow to say that he is going to attend a peace talks meeting with the New Gods.

One day Shadow goes to dinner with his neighbor, who turns out to be Sam Black Crow's sister. Sam is there visiting, and demands to know the truth about Shadow. Shadow tells her, after Sam assures him that she can believe impossible things, but their conversation is interrupted when Audrey Burton, ostensibly visiting her cousin Chad, shows up and demands that Shadow be arrested for skipping parole. Chad reluctantly takes Shadow down to the police station, where he finds out that Shadow is in fact an ex-convict. While in the Lakeside holding cell, Shadow sees a live feed of the Peace Talks between the Old and New Gods where Wednesday is murdered, shot through the head on camera. Mr. Nancy and Czernobog arrive to get Shadow out of jail, both shaken by Wednesday's death.

The novel flashes back to the first people to arrive in America, following the orders of their mammoth god despite the

misgivings of their shaman woman. The shaman woman sacrifices herself so that the tribe can reach America safely, but her distrust means that these first people will eventually be overthrown in America. The tribe soon forgets about their mammoth god as they create new gods on American land.

After Wednesday's death, the Old Gods band together to avenge him, finally agreeing to fight the New Gods. Shadow insists on sitting Wednesday's vigil (as he had promised to), which means being tied to a tree for nine days. The New Gods hand over Wednesday's body in the center of America, a small park outside of Lebanon, Missouri, where no god has any power. There, Shadow finds out that his old cellmate Low Key is actually the Old God Loki, who has defected to the New Gods' side. Mr. Nancy and Czernobog take Shadow and Wednesday's body to an ash tree in Virginia, called the "world tree." Three women (The Norns) tie Shadow to the tree to sit Odin's vigil.

Shadow's nine days are a wash of pain and hallucinations, including a vision of an elephant-headed god who tells Shadow, "it's in the trunk." Laura visits Shadow again and offers to cut Shadow down, but Shadow tells her to go get a drink of water from the fates to revive herself as her body continues to decay. Shadow dies while on the tree and finds himself in the underworld. There, Zorya Pulunochnaya takes back her Liberty coin and turns it into a moon to light Shadow's way. He chooses to walk the path of hard truths, finding out that his father was actually Mr. Wednesday. He then goes through the Egyptian Hall of the Dead, where Bast, Mr. Ibis, and Mr. Jacquell weigh his heart and give him the choice of where he wants to go next. Shadow asks for nothing, just rest.

Meanwhile, the gods all gather at a tourist attraction called Rock City on Lookout Mountain in Tennessee. Laura goes to the farmhouse and gets water that restores her body to a freshly dead corpse, then meets Mr. Town, who has been sent to cut a stick for the ash tree where Shadow hangs. At the same time, Easter goes to the ash tree to revive Shadow. At Rock City, Mr. World kills Technical Boy, one of the New Gods, and dedicates the death to Odin, starting Mr. Wednesday's revival.

Shadow stays in darkness for a while, then finds Whiskey Jack, who tells him that America is not a place for gods. The land is the most important thing in America, he says, and anything the gods do is only to serve themselves. Shadow realizes that Wednesday's plan all along has been to use a war between the gods to give himself power, as Loki is going to dedicate all the deaths to Odin before the fighting starts. Back at Rock City, Laura has killed Mr. Town and stolen **the ash stick**. She finds Mr. World and sacrifices herself to use the ash stick to kill Mr. World before he can throw the stick as a spear and dedicate the war to Odin. Meanwhile Easter resurrects Shadow and Shadow rides a thunderbird back to Rock City. Shadow finds Mr. World and figures out that it is really Loki in disguise, part of the two-man con that Loki and Mr. Wednesday have been pulling. Shadow then goes Backstage at Rock City and tells all

the gods the truth, about both Mr. Wednesday's trickery and the tentative place of all gods dependent on human belief in America. The gods all leave, refusing to fight each other now. The Buffalo Man congratulates Shadow for taking his own godly power and using it for good to honor the land of America.

With the battle diffused, Shadow finds Laura and takes the gold coin back so that she can move on and die for good. Shadow leaves Rock City with Mr. Nancy, but soon figures out that he has to get back to Lakeside before the car falls through the ice. Shadow gets back to Lakeside on March 23rd, the exact day he bought for the raffle. He opens the car's trunk, finding Alison's body inside. Shadow figures out that Hinzelmann is actually a dark god who sacrifices a child each year so that Lakeside can prosper. Hinzelmann admits this, and Chad Mulligan overhears and kills Hinzelmann. With the Lakeside mystery solved, Shadow goes to Chicago to fulfill his promise and let Czernobog hit him with his hammer. Czernobog lets Shadow live, now that spring is here and Czernobog is turning into his kinder identity, Bielebog. Shadow, finally free, goes to Reykjavik, Iceland, where he meets an older incarnation of Odin, his father.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Shadow Moon (Baldur) – The protagonist of the novel, Shadow is a large, tall man whose defining feature is his inability to be defined. As his name suggests, Shadow is hard to read, often hiding his true feelings and reflecting back to people what they see in him. Though people expect him to be dumb because he is large and strong, Shadow is actually well-read, well-spoken, and incredibly thoughtful. He is still devoted to his late wife, Laura, who calls him "puppy" – a nickname that showcases how loyal Shadow is to those he loves. Shadow also feels obligated to his employer Mr. Wednesday and the Old Gods, fulfilling his promises even when they cost him his life. Over the course of the novel, Shadow is forced to learn more about his identity, including the fact that Mr. Wednesday (Odin) is his father, in order to become truly alive rather than passively floating through his life. As the reincarnation of the Norse god Baldur and a manifestation of the mysterious King of America, Shadow acts as a bridge in the novel – between the Old Gods and the New Gods, between gods and men, and even between life and death. **Shadow's coins**, both the gold and the silver, give him protection from death as well as showcasing his powers as Baldur, a sun god. Shadow embraces honesty where the other gods choose lies, making him ultimately more successful and able to unravel the many mysteries of the novel.

Mr. Wednesday (Odin) – The King of the Norse Gods, worshipped for his status as the Allfather, his wisdom, his prowess in battle, and his healing ability. In Norse mythology,

Odin attained his power by hanging on a tree for nine days and sacrificing his body, a vigil that Shadow later recreates as Odin's son, Baldur. In wider Germanic mythology, Odin is known as Woden, the namesake for "Wednesday" and Mr. Wednesday's tongue-in-cheek name. As an American god, Mr. Wednesday makes his living as a grifter, using disguise, charm, and sleight of hand to trick mortals and gods alike. He runs a two-man con with his partner Loki to try to force the Old Gods and the New Gods to fight in a battle that will replenish Odin's waning power in America. Mr. Wednesday clearly feels some affection for Shadow, but is unable to truly care for anyone but himself—as Gaiman shows that those who live by deceit are unable to truly connect with other people. Both an important mentor for Shadow and Shadow's enemy, Mr. Wednesday shows the duality of gods who need mortal worship to live but do not actually care about mortal happiness or well-being.

Mr. World (Low Key Lyesmith / Loki) – Loki, the trickster and sometimes evil god of Norse Mythology, acts as one of the main antagonists in *American Gods*. As Low Key Lyesmith, Loki is nothing more than Shadow's cell mate in jail, seemingly separate from the war between the gods. As Mr. World, Loki is the leader of the New Gods, spurring them on to fight the Old Gods instead of waiting for the Old Gods to die out on their own. As Loki, Loki is a shapeshifter and a double agent, at times helping the other gods of the Norse pantheon (such as Odin (Mr. Wednesday) and Thor) and other times wreaking havoc simply because he can. He is Mr. Wednesday's partner in their two-man con to trick all the other gods for their own benefit. Loki thrives on deceit and chaos, helping instigate the fight between the Old and New Gods so that the turmoil of battle will feed his own power. Loki is killed with the **ash stick**, as Laura uses his own talent for lies against him.

Mr. Nancy (Anansi) – One of the most important figures in West African and Caribbean folklore, Anansi is a spider god who embodies the spirit of stories, boasts, and trickery. His worship comes mostly through the oral tradition, as the Astante people of Ghana tell many stories of how Anansi's bravado, cunning, and sly wit help him triumph over stronger animals and people. In the novel, Mr. Nancy is an old friend of Mr. Wednesday's and brings all the Old Gods together through his stories. He acts as a sort of uncle figure for Shadow, teasing the young man but giving him good advice about how to find his own identity and hold his own among the other gods.

Laura Moon – Shadow's late wife, who begins an affair with Shadow's best friend Robbie while Shadow is in jail for a heist that Laura engineered and put into action. Laura seems to regret her actions in life and becomes Shadow's protector when she is brought back from the dead by Shadow's **gold coin**. Unable to cope with the living world, Laura eventually asks Shadow to let her go so that she can stop living a lie.

Richie Hinzelmänn – An overly nice old man in Lakeside who acts as the unofficial town leader. Hinzelmänn's affable exterior

hides a Germanic kobold (cursed spirit) who is forced to sacrifice one child each year to protect Lakeside, ensure Lakeside's prosperity, and keep himself alive. Hinzelmänn begs Shadow to kill him after Shadow uncovers Hinzelmänn's plot, depicting the dark side of sacrifice and the toll it takes on everyone when the cost of the sacrifice is not worth the promised reward.

Sam Black Crow – A half-Native American young woman who hitchhikes across the Midwest and meets Shadow during one of his drives away from Whiskey Jack's house to Cairo. Sam later encounters Shadow in Lakeside while visiting her half-sister, Marguerite, and supports Shadow when his past as a convict is exposed. Sam does not believe in any official pantheon or specific gods, but she does revere the place of belief in human minds and sees the divinity in American life. Her statement of belief is seemingly closest to Gaiman's own beliefs. She encompasses Buffalo Man's advice to "believe everything," and is incredibly tolerant of other people and their beliefs though she has no sympathy for the New Gods and current popular American culture. Sam is also portrayed as either lesbian or bisexual, with a girlfriend named Natalie, increasing her status as someone who embraces diversity and the changing face of America.

Audrey Burton – Laura's best friend and Robbie's wife. She is angry after Laura and Robbie's affair is exposed, in contrast to Shadow's numb acceptance of the betrayal. Audrey also comes to Lakeside to visit her cousin Chad Mulligan, there revealing Shadow's identity as an escaped convict. She is manipulated by gods throughout the novel, showing the power that gods have over mortals.

Atsula – A shaman woman for the tribe that first came to American land around 14,000 BC. Atsula does not believe in the gods, but in the power of the human heart. She rebels against the woolly mammoth god Nunyunnini, then dies as a sacrifice so that her people can reach America safely. Gaiman hints that Sam Black Crow is a reincarnation of Atsula.

Mama-ji (Kali) – An Indian Goddess who supports Mr. Wednesday's complaints against the New Gods but does not want to start a violent war. Mama-ji specifically notes the differences between her form in America and her form in India, explaining that the Indian version of this goddess is far more powerful because she is worshipped more. Mama-ji offers a voice of reason and peace, though she recognizes that gods in America have a tougher life than gods in other parts of the world.

Technical Boy – The New God of technology in America, portrayed as a whiny teenage boy. Technical Boy may claim to have all the answers, but he is ultimately insecure about his place in the minds of the American people, scared that he is already becoming obsolete as newer technologies become popular every day.

Chad Mulligan – The police officer in Lakeside, a kind man who appreciates the low crime rate of Lakeside and tries to help people whenever possible. Chad welcomes Shadow to Lakeside and becomes a true friend to him. Chad is shattered when he finds out the dark secret that keeps Lakeside prosperous, unable to live with killing Hinzelmann though Chad knows that Hinzelmann had to be stopped for the safety of Lakeside’s children. Shadow is able to convince Chad to keep living and start dating Marguerite Olsen, a sign of how much Shadow cares for mortal happiness in contrast to the indifference of most gods.

Czernobog (Bielebog) – The Russian God of darkness, thought to be the cursed twin of Bielebog, the god of light. Little is known about Czernobog other than his black appearance and his hammer weapon. Gaiman interprets Czernobog and Bielebog as two halves of the same man, with different aspects coming out in different seasons. The gruff, blood-obsessed Czernobog rules over the winter and agrees to help Shadow and Mr. Wednesday only because Shadow promises to give Czernobog the chance to smash Shadow’s skull with a hammer. After Czernobog turns into Beilebog in spring, though, he has mercy on Shadow.

Mad Sweeney – An Irish leprechaun who breaks stereotypes through his height (over six feet tall) and his preference for Southern Comfort whiskey over Guinness beer. Mad Sweeney helps Shadow get **the gold coin** meant for the King of America that brings Laura back to life, but pays for this coin trick with his life when the New Gods come after him.

Zorya Utrennyaya – Zorya Utrennyaya, or the Dawn Star (as her name means in Russian), is a Slavic goddess with control over the dawn and the responsibility of opening the gate for her father, the sun god, each morning. She is the oldest of the Zorya sisters and the closest to their brother Czernobog.

Zorya Verchernyaya – Zorya Verchernyaya, or the Evening Star (as her name means in Russian), is a Slavic goddess who has control over twilight and is able to tell pretty lies and fortunes for people. Zorya Verchernyaya and her sisters guard the sky, making sure the monsters of the constellations do not escape and eat the world. Zorya Verchernyaya is the only Zorya sister who is able to make money for their family, making sure that the Zorya Sisters and Czernobog can survive in America now that they can no longer live on belief.

Zorya Polnochnaya – Zorya Polnochnaya, or the Midnight Star (as her name means in Russian), is the Slavic goddess with control over the night and an affinity for the moon. Zorya Polnochnaya sleeps all day, then guards the sky all night so that the monsters of the constellation cannot escape and eat the world. Zorya Polnochnaya extends these protective powers by giving Shadow the **silver Liberty coin** that keeps him safe from the New Gods and lights his way in the Underworld.

John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed) – An American “culture hero” famous for planting apple trees throughout the American west and living peacefully with Native Americans. In the novel, John Chapman is friends with Whiskey Jack and also describes his grief after the loss of his Shoshone wife, offering a comparison as Shadow sorts through his own feelings after Laura’s death. While not a god, John has the status of a god because of the way his story is remembered in the American public, showing the difference between gods brought to America and gods conceived on American soil.

Horus – An Egyptian god associated with the sky and the figure of a hawk. In the novel Horus has gone crazy and stays permanently in his hawk form, because he is no longer remembered by the American people and does not have enough power to stay sane. Shadow meets Horus in the underworld, where Horus shows him how to return to the world of the living if Shadow so chooses.

The Unknown God – A god that Mr. Wednesday meets in Las Vegas, who is associated with money, wealth, and chance, but somehow slips out of people’s minds. Shadow can never remember who he is and no mortal can see or remember interacting with him. Gaiman has famously refused to say who the Unknown God is supposed to represent.

Mr. Jacquel (Anubis) – The Egyptian god of mummification and the afterlife, who judges mortals’ souls against a feather and decides who is allowed to go on to paradise and who gets eaten. Mr. Jacquel can take the form of a jackal. In America, Mr. Jacquel works as a funeral director and coroner for the town of Cairo, Illinois with his partner Mr. Ibis.

Essie Tregowan – Essie is a woman from Cornwall, England, who comes to America as an indentured servant and brings her belief in the “piskies” with her. The piskies bring Essie luck and prosperity, but Essie is unable to transmit that belief to her children (Anthony, John, and Phyllida) or her grandchildren, as Gaiman explores the ways that later generations of Americans abandon the beliefs of the old country.

The Norns – Three sisters from Norse mythology who loosely control the past, present, and future (roughly corresponding to the “Fates” of other European mythology). Urd, the oldest sister, rules the past, Verdandi, the middle sister, oversees the present, and Skuld, the youngest sister, foresees the future. The sisters are in charge of the world tree where Shadow undergoes Mr. Wednesday’s vigil, and they protect Urd’s Well, a magical well that has the power to restore Laura’s decomposing corpse.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Easter (Eostre) – The Germanic goddess of the dawn, who now draws power from the American celebration of Easter—though few mortals actually know that they are honoring her in this spring festival. Easter has power over rebirth, helping to bring

Shadow back from the underworld after he sacrifices himself for Odin.

Whiskey Jack (Wisakedjak) – An Algonquin trickster figure who is a “culture hero” rather than a full god. He lives near a Lakota reservation and is mistaken for the Lakota god Iktomi, another trickster. Whiskey Jack offers Shadow wisdom about the magical nature of the American land itself.

Mr. Ibis (Thoth) – The Egyptian god of wisdom, writing, and judgment of the dead. Mr. Ibis, associated with cranes, works as a funeral director in Cairo, Illinois along with Mr. Jacquel, and writes histories of how the many different gods came to America.

Bast – An Egyptian goddess who takes the form of a cat and acts as a lioness protector during times of war. Bast likes Shadow, sleeping with him, healing his wounds, and leading him through the underworld.

Bilquis – The deity form of the Queen of Sheba, who uses sex as a form of worship. She tries to adapt to the new technology and modern gods of America, but is killed by Technical Boy.

The Buffalo Man – Half buffalo, half man, he is the incarnation of the land of America. Shadow often dreams of him, and he acts as a spiritual advisor for Shadow.

Media – The New Goddess of television, radio, news, and media. Media is sugary sweet, but ultimately threatening. She tries to convince Shadow to join the New Gods, but is unsuccessful.

Robbie Burton – Shadow’s best friend and the husband of Audrey Burton. Laura begins an affair with Robbie while Shadow is in jail, ending when they both die in a car crash.

Sam Fetishier – A fellow convict while Shadow is in prison, who sees that there is something odd about Shadow. Fetishier refers to the Voodoo priests of Africa.

Nunyunni – An ancient woolly mammoth god who leads the first tribe into America around 14,000 B.C. Atsula refuses to listen to Nunyunni, and the tribe eventually forgets this god once they are in the new land.

Mr. Wood – A thug for the New Gods, and a symbol of people’s worship of tools. Mr. Wood captures Shadow but is killed by Laura.

Mr. Stone – A thug for the New Gods, and a symbol of people’s worship of tools. Mr. Stone captures Shadow but is killed by Laura.

Mr. Town – One of the New Gods, who gains power from people’s worship of civilization. In trying to deliver **the ash stick** to Mr. World, Mr. Town meets Laura and dies by her hand.

Salim – A young man from Oman who lives in New York City but is seduced and captured by the jinn Ibrahim.

Marguerite Olsen – A woman in Lakeside who distrusts Shadow. Marguerite is also Sam Black Crow’s sister and Leon

and Sandy’s mother. Though sad after the disappearance of Sandy, Marguerite seems ready to come back to life with Chad Mulligan’s help.

Sandy Olsen – Marguerite Olsen’s oldest son, rumored to have run away with his father though he was really one of Hinzelmann’s sacrifices.

Leon Olsen – Marguerite’s youngest son, who loves Shadow’s coin tricks.

Alison McGovern – A pre-teen girl in Lakeside who goes missing, then is discovered as the sacrifice for Hinzelmann this year.

Sophie – Alison’s friend in Lakeside.

Ibrahim bin Irem (The Taxi Driver) – An Arabian jinn who drives a taxi in New York City and steals Salim’s life in order to free himself.

Harry Bluejay – A Lakota man and Whiskey Jack’s “nephew,” though Harry himself denies any familial connection. Harry helps Shadow get a new car for his road trip, and generally follows what Whiskey Jack tells him he should do.

Johnnie Larch – A fellow inmate while Shadow is in prison, who gets released but is arrested again when the airport does not accept his credit cards.

John Richardson – A tobacco farmer in 18th century Norfolk, Virginia. John buys Essie Tregowan from indentured servitude and eventually marries her.

Anthony – Essie Tregowan’s first son.

John Richardson Jr. – Essie Tregowan’s second son by John Richardson.

Phyllida Richardson – John Richardson’s daughter by his first wife, raised by Essie Tregowan.

Wututu – A girl sold into slavery with her twin, Agasu, who channels the god Elegba and teaches voodoo in Louisiana.

Agasu – A boy sold into slavery with his twin, Wututu, who channels the god Elegba and participates in the slave revolt to form the Republic of Haiti.

Macha – One of the Morrigan, an Irish war goddesses and one of the fiercest of the Old Gods.

Alviss – One of the Old Gods, the King of the Dwarves in Norse mythology.

Natalie – Samatha Black Crow’s girlfriend.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MYTHOLOGY, BELIEF, AND COMMUNITY

American Gods aims to show that mythology is not a primitive belief system relegated to unsophisticated cultures. For Gaiman, the same

questions, desires, and superstitions that led humans to create Odin and the other Old Gods are still embedded in the human psyche, causing contemporary people to worship material things and cultural phenomena in the same way the ancients worshipped their gods. By reframing contemporary cultural phenomena as semi-religious myths created to fulfill the human need to worship things bigger than themselves, Gaiman shows the centrality of mythology and belief in shaping the identity and purpose of contemporary individuals and communities.

Just as ancient peoples gave life and form to natural elements such as the sun or the ocean, modern people in *American Gods* give mythic significance to things such as technology (in the form of Technical Boy), television (in the form of Media), or money (in the form of intangible stock market gods).

Personifying these mundane aspects of American culture gives a mythic dimension to the texture of American life. As such, Shadow's road trip through America becomes like an epic journey, and banal objects take on a supernatural aura, as with Shadow's **coins** that have the power to restore life or the drink that Mr. Wednesday gives Shadow to cement their deal to work together.

The mythic stories that Gaiman tells about these experiences show how mankind uses stories to make sense of the things that have power over them and to give order to human life. In fact, Gaiman shows that stories do more than simply help people come to terms with the things that have power over them; to Gaiman, myths—and beliefs in general—actually give people power over their lives by enabling them to take confident action in the face of fear or confusion. One example is when Essie Tregowan depends on her belief in the Pixies to keep herself safe throughout the tumultuous experience of her arrival in America. Even more significantly, Shadow realizes after his time in the underworld that human belief is the only reason that anything happens in the world at all, and he uses this knowledge to persuade the New and Old Gods to stop fighting each other.

The human need to believe in something is shown to be double edged, however. Since it's people and culture that create gods (not vice versa), the gods are only powerful as long as people believe in them. This incentivizes gods to make humans believe in them at all costs. Gaiman uses the story of the gods running amok and abusing their power as an allegory for the destructive power that human beliefs can have over their own lives and the lives of others.

Yet despite the dangers inherent to myth and belief, Gaiman shows that the stories people tell are essential to their ability to come together. By telling stories that propose a common past

and common interests for diverse groups of people, societies are better able to envision a common future. Shadow demonstrates this by bringing the Old and New Gods together by telling a story about the new place that both kinds of gods can have in the minds of American people. In a way, *American Gods* is self-consciously doing exactly what it's talking about in the book; it's bringing together many different stories from different people and places in order to propose a single story, knit from all of them, that explains who Americans are, what they have in common, and why—moving forward—they're on the same side.



CHANGE AND GROWTH

Americans, who come from a country that is relatively new (globally speaking), are known for constantly looking to the future rather than

reflecting on the past. This focus on the future creates a culture of fast-paced change that the gods, since they derive power from peoples' belief in them, must navigate in order to remain relevant to Americans. The novel shows many possible fates that the gods can suffer at the hands of time. Some become obsolete very quickly, like the god of trains, while others remain successful at the cost of their true nature, as with the goddess Easter, who still receives worship but is no longer remembered as the goddess Eostre. Other gods try to adapt, but cannot change quickly enough to keep up, as when Bilquis tries to use new technology, but ends up a casualty of the war between the Old Gods and the New.

Though all gods must adapt to survive, there is a generational and cultural divide among the "Old" gods who were brought by immigrants from other countries and the "New" gods that were conceived on American soil. The New Gods favor constant change in the name of progress, while the Old Gods try to relive the glory of their old lives in this new location. The New Gods love change above all, showing contempt for the past and erasing old traditions in favor of winning a constant stream of new worshippers in modern areas of influence. Technical Boy kills Bilquis while taunting her that she is a relic of the past, yet the very fact that he feels the need to kill her shows that the New Gods still feel as if the Old Gods represent some form of competition in the quickly shifting American culture. In contrast, the Old Gods are stuck in their attempts to cling to past glory and are thus unable to move forward in a changing America. They depend on reincarnation in America, hoping to repeat their previous success using the same tactics that worked in the old countries, as when Czernobog holds on to his old life instead of improving conditions for himself and his sisters in modern Chicago.

Since each of these perspectives is inadequate to ensuring the gods' survival in modern America, Shadow must learn to blend these two approaches, which he does when he performs the death ritual at the end of the book. He reinvents this old

tradition, keeping its spirit and parts of its form, but updating its content to include elements from modern life. Because Shadow blends aspects of the past with the breakneck change of the future, he is able to grow and change as a person without cutting himself off from the rich foundation of the past. Gaiman positions this blend of preservation and modernization as a new model for the gods, and the best way for them to honor tradition while still adapting to change. In fact, this tactic could be said to be the foundation of Gaiman's book itself: Gaiman breathes new life into old legends and puts them alongside contemporary American culture in order to contextualize secular aspects of culture and belief within a long religious and mythological tradition.



LIFE, DEATH, DESIRE, AND SACRIFICE

In *American Gods*, life and death are two sides of the same coin; each is meaningless without the other.

Gaiman explores this interdependence through the relationship of life and death with fear and desire. Those who accept that death is an inevitable part of life are better able to enjoy their lives, and those who fear death tend to be unable to live fully—in particular, they are shown have a difficult relationship to their own sexual desire and a tendency towards demanding unfair sacrifices from others.

Of all the characters in the book, the gods—who can be killed, but only with difficulty—seem to be the most afraid of death, since they have seen less death in their lives than humans have and they are thus uncomfortable with it. The gods' inability to accept death leads them to extreme measures to keep themselves alive, and their fear leaves them unable to appreciate or be present in their day-to-day lives. Furthermore, the gods often use sex as a way of staving off their fears of death, rather than for pleasure and connection. They get no enjoyment out of sexual desire, and sex is instead a ravenous and destructive act for them, as when Bilquis literally consumes the men who sleep with her, or the ifrit jinn (Ibrahim) “steals the life” of Salim after a sexual encounter. Mr. Wednesday's attempts to get women to sleep with him also come off as a desperate attempt to make himself feel alive during a cold night.

Just as the gods use sex as a means of staying or feeling alive, they also, in order to protect themselves and feed their life forces, demand sacrifices of others—including taking other peoples' lives. For the gods, a sacrifice is not a freely-chosen act of giving up something for the benefit of others, but rather a ritual that they desperately impose on others for their own selfish reasons. Throughout the book, the American gods' fear of death strips the notion of sacrifice of its true significance by removing the elements of generosity and selflessness that can make sacrifice restorative and meaningful. Mr. Hinzelmann is the clearest embodiment of this, as he sacrifices one child each winter in order to keep himself alive and ensure the protection

and prosperity of the town of Lakeside. This is especially perverse because Hinzelmann was himself a child sacrifice, murdered in order to make a kobold (a German sprite) that protected German settlers in America. Thus, Hinzelmann should know better than anyone the cost of sacrifice. Sacrifice is also implicated in the lives of Mr. Wednesday (a god who is nourished by death on the battlefield) and Mr. World—particularly in their willingness to kill all the other gods in order to keep themselves alive.

Shadow—who, for most of the book is portrayed as alive, “but not truly living”—doesn't mind the idea of death because he doesn't care much for life. While not living in constant fear of death makes him more generous than other gods (as when he goes to prison to shield his wife from the consequences of her behavior), and more able to enjoy sex (as in his encounter with Bast), Gaiman shows that it's not enough to simply not fear death—Shadow must also learn to embrace his life and live with intention. Shadow's path to becoming truly alive hinges on his willingness to perform the ceremony at the end of the book, which entails sacrificing himself to memorialize Odin's life by hanging on a tree for nine days. Shadow's sacrifice is selfless and freely-given, and, significantly, it occurs after he decides that he truly does want to live, so he is giving up something of value to him (his life). Because of this, Shadow's ritual rescues the act of sacrifice from its debasement at the hands of the other gods, restoring it to its place as a gift that has the potential to heal and transform others. Not only does Shadow's sacrifice help others, but it ultimately proves beneficial to Shadow himself; once Shadow is resurrected, it is clear that he has finally learned to live intentionally. It is through risking his life for others that Shadow learns to embrace the new chance at life that he has been given.



DECEPTION

Deception and lies follow all the characters throughout their journeys in *American Gods*. This trickery may be profitable in the short term, but Gaiman shows that deception will never help a person achieve long lasting success. This suggests that, though Gaiman sees deception as an inescapable part of human life, he nonetheless sees an unimpeachable value in fighting for truth. Most people (and gods) live their entire lives in a state of deception; the prevalence of deceit makes the truth even more powerful because it is so rare.

Gaiman opens the novel with a reference to Herodotus, who is known simultaneously as the father of history and the father of lies. Intertwining history (which is assumed to be truthful) with lies creates an atmosphere in which very little can be trusted at face value. Herodotus follows Shadow throughout the novel, becoming somewhat of an intellectual mentor as Shadow learns how to navigate the layers of deception involved in the world of the gods. All the gods lie in some way to the people

who worship them, hoping to hide their flaws to ensure that those who love them will never abandon them. The Old Gods conceal their identities behind mundane facades, trying to hide how much of their power they have lost, while the New Gods promise the American people happiness or prosperity despite their inability to give satisfaction to their worshippers. Even Mr. Wednesday (Odin), the master grifter with divine control over lies, is undone by his deception at the end of the novel as Gaiman shows that the best possible lying still cannot grant anyone long-term success.

As lies and deception are the normal state for most of the characters, the truth becomes a very powerful force in the novel. The truth about what really goes on in American mythology, seen in the “Backstage” experience, is too potent for mortals to handle for long; even Shadow becomes physically ill when faced with the gods stripped of all the disguises that these figures usually wear. However, after his death and sacrifice, Shadow follows the path of Hard Truths, and once he can fully confront the truth, he learns to harness its power. Shadow becomes powerful, then, precisely because he is able to cut through all of Mr. Wednesday’s and Hinzemann’s lies at the end of the novel, revealing their cons to the other gods and the citizens of Lakeside. Shadow, thought to be a mortal throughout the book, reaches god-like status when he tells the truth and settles the lies that the other gods have told. Through Shadow, the novel shows that finding the truth is one way that humans can take control over their own lives, cutting through the duplicitous meddling of the gods. Deception has its place in everyday life, but the truth is what makes human life truly transcendent.



PLURALITY AND THE POWER OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN AMERICA

America—a relatively young nation composed largely of immigrants—is, in some sense, defined by its lack of definition: Gaiman writes that America is “the only country that does not know what it is.” As a country, the United States does not have a long history from which to draw its identity, and it does not have a single religion, language, culture, or heritage that can encompass or define it. In addition, the country is constantly changing due to immigrants bringing new cultures and ideas, and due to the American fixations on innovation and adaptation to change. For this reason, *American Gods* aims to reject sweeping and superficial definitions of American identity in favor of a more nuanced, flexible, and pluralistic idea of American life.

The American gods are Gaiman’s most comprehensive example of the plurality and fluidity of American culture. Immigrants bring the gods of their homelands to America, where those gods—just like the people who brought them—change and adapt to their new culture. One example is when Czernobog, the god of darkness in Slavic mythology, who demanded

sacrifices with a hammer in return for protection, channels his godly penchant for violence into a job at the American industrial meat factories. In addition, modern gods, created in contemporary America, reflect the passions and quirks of contemporary Americans, such as the goddess Media who arose from the American worship of television. This means that, just as the American population is diverse and constantly changing, the pantheon of American gods is a shifting blend of Old Gods and New Gods, which suggests that American religion, like all of American culture, is so broad and fluid that it is impossible to define.

Just as Gaiman thoroughly rejects static and homogeneous definitions of American people and culture, he also pushes back against the stereotypical iconography of the American landscape. Gaiman suggests that to focus only on America’s most iconic landmarks—New York or Las Vegas, for example—is to obscure the diversity of American places and to miss the strangeness that makes America interesting and unique. Gaiman thus infuses the book with details about offbeat American sites (including House on the Rock and Rock City on Lookout Mountain) that really exist, yet are not well-known. Gaiman’s highlighting of eccentric, lesser-known pieces of Americana further complicates simplistic ideas of what America, or the American landscape, is. The sites that Gaiman chooses are also significant in that they have been created by the idiosyncratic visions of individual Americans—House on the Rock, for instance, was the passion project of an eccentric aspiring architect who wanted to leave his mark on his small Wisconsin hometown. Through this, and through the exploration of the ways in which individuals influence the characteristics of the gods they worship, Gaiman invokes another unique attribute of Americans: their belief in their own power to shape their lives and the world around them.

It is the combination of plurality and individual empowerment that explains the Buffalo Man’s observation that America allows for a creator but refuses to honor individual gods as they were in the old country. Indeed, Gods that arose in America are less like the traditional religious gods from the Norse, Germanic, African, or other pantheons and more similar to cultural heroes, such as Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan. These heroes are fallible and humanlike—blurring the distinction between god and man. That Americans consider themselves to be godlike and their gods to be humanlike raises the question of whether American religion is characterized by the lack of divinity altogether, or whether everything in America is imbued with the divine. While Gaiman leaves most of his questions about America open-ended (he never defines what America is, or who Americans are), he does answer that one: when Shadow asks the Buffalo Man what to believe, the Buffalo Man answers “everything.” America is not one sacred thing, but all that is sacred.



THE SACREDNESS OF AMERICAN LAND

While Gaiman sees plurality and change as the central characteristics of America, he does suggest that one part of America is constant and

unimpeachably sacred: the land itself. The land, for Gaiman, is the literal and spiritual foundation of all that America is, as its resources anchor the country and make all of its advancement and achievement possible. While the gods are flamboyant presences in American life and human individuals are also worshipped like gods, the land often goes unnoticed. Shadow sees the spirit of the land—the force that makes all else possible—only in dreams or “Backstage” (the magical place where gods gather away from mortal eyes). The true power of America, Gaiman seems to suggest, is not easily seen amid all the flash and production of modern American life, and the land is perhaps even more powerful because of its invisibility; the land can work secretly while the gods distract the fickle attention of the American people.

Despite most characters’ lack of recognition of the land’s power, *American Gods* gives several forceful hints about the sanctity and importance of the land. Whiskey Jack tells Shadow that the land is older than people and wiser than people, and he further points out that Native American peoples felt no need to build churches because the land is their church. In addition, the Native American peoples knew, as Whiskey Jack tells Shadow, that America “is no land for gods.” Instead, Native Americans chose to give thanks to a creator without creating new gods for themselves. The refusal to create new gods seems wise, considering that the land actually provides tangible resources for people, while the gods tend to take power from people without giving anything in return. This underscores the divine legitimacy of the land, and undercuts the gods’ claims to sacredness.

Furthermore, the huge array of gods present in America does not take power away from the land, as the land is what allows the gods to stay in America in the first place. The Buffalo Man, the manifestation of the land itself that speaks through Shadow’s dreams, says “[The Gods] never understood that they were here—and the people who worshiped them were here—because it suits us [the land] that they are here. But we can change our minds.” The Buffalo Man claims responsibility, along with the other spirits of the land included in the deliberately mysterious “us,” for the many divine pantheons welcomed onto American soil. Gaiman thus puts the power of America squarely in the hands of the land itself, underscoring that both the physical requirements for human life and the spiritual needs of mankind (the gods themselves) are granted to the American people by the land. In return, the land asks for nothing; it hides behind the showy machinations of the gods and continues to quietly assert its power to keep America moving forward.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



SHADOW'S COINS

Shadow often does small coin tricks throughout the novel, but there are two coins in particular that take on greater significance. His gold coin symbolizes the sun, while his silver coin symbolizes the moon. Taking literally the idea that these heavenly bodies “watch over” the earth, both these coins offer protection in different ways. Together, they represent the importance of balance and duality, gold and silver, life and death, the sun and the moon.

The gold coin that Shadow takes from the “treasure of the sun” is supposed to belong only to the King of America, marking Shadow as American royalty because he is able to take it from the sun’s hoard. As well as connecting Shadow to his true nature as the sun god Baldur of Norse mythology, the coin literally represents new life. It has the power to grant Laura a chance at life even after she dies, reanimating her corpse so that she can help protect Shadow. Thus the gold coin protects Shadow indirectly, channeling his own power as a sun god through Laura as Laura fights to keep Shadow safe. The silver coin, itself bearing the American symbol of liberty in the face of the Statue of Liberty, in some sense offers Shadow freedom from death. As long as Shadow has the silver coin, he is protected from death by the New Gods. When Shadow chooses to die as a sacrifice for Odin, the silver coin becomes the moon and lights Shadow’s way through the underworld. Thus the silver coin gives Shadow freedom again once he dies and is reborn knowing his full identity as Odin’s son. Shadow is then able to use his power as the sun god completely, plucking another gold coin from the sun’s hoard at the end of the novel, once Shadow is free from all the manipulations of the other gods.

More than the life-giving and protective powers of the coins themselves, the coins also represent Shadow’s affinity for both the Old Gods and the New Gods. The gold coin ties Shadow to the traditional sun god mythos, but it also shows his essential American nature by naming him the “King of America.” The silver coin is given to Shadow by Zorya Polunochaya, an old Slavic goddess of the moon and the night, showing that Shadow is blessed by the Old Gods even as it guides him through the underworld where he becomes a New God born of American belief. The coins thus show Shadow’s identity both as a reincarnation of an established god and a completely new god in his own right. As Shadow taps into the magic power of these coins, he blends both of these roles and reinvents what gods can do in America and in the American psyche.



THE ASH STICK

At the end of the novel, Mr. World (Loki's alter ego) orders Mr. Town to cut a stick from the ash tree on which Shadow was sacrificed, planning to throw the stick over the battlefield of the gods and dedicate all the carnage to Odin. The characters themselves see the stick as a symbol, self-consciously referencing that, as Loki says, the symbol is the thing it is supposed to represent. In a world where belief itself is a powerful force that can shape the physical world, symbols, like the ash stick, have the ability to change the world around them as if they were the very thing they represent. Though an ash stick is obviously not as dangerous or strong as a spear, the power of belief is so strong in this novel that a weak stick can become a spear when it is specifically chosen to stand in for that object. That means that, for Loki, the small stick of an ash tree really is a spear, and can do the damage that a spear can do. Any so-called symbolic action taken in the novel, as when Mr. Town pantomimes stabbing Shadow with the ash stick, has real consequences, such that Mr. Town's fake poke creates a real wound in Shadow's side. Laura, stealing the stick from Mr. Town, puts this idea to the ultimate test, using the stick to stab Loki in the chest and kill him as the stick literally turns into a spear capable of piercing Loki's flesh.

On another level, the ash stick also represents Loki and Mr. Wednesday's plan to double-cross all of the gods and use this battle for their own gain. No one except Loki actually knows what the stick is for, thinking that it is just an ordinary branch. Loki and Wednesday tend to use mundane objects for nefarious purposes, depending on the art of misdirection and false assumptions to keep their true agenda hidden. Their deception comes back to harm them, though, as Laura also uses the stick to further her plan for Shadow and disrupt Loki and Wednesday's plot. The stick thus symbolizes how Wednesday and Loki hope to trick others to further their own power, but end up themselves the victims of this malicious plan.




QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the William Morrow edition of *American Gods* published in 2013.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ And the moral of this story, according to Johnnie Larch, was this: don't piss off people who work in airports. "Are you sure it's not something like 'kinds of behavior that work in a specialized environment, such as a prison, can fail to work and in fact become harmful when used outside such an environment'?" said Shadow, when Johnnie Larch told him the story. "No, listen to me, I'm telling you, man," said Johnnie Larch, "don't piss off those bitches in airports."

Related Characters: Shadow Moon (Baldur) (speaker), Johnnie Larch

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

As Shadow gets out of prison, he goes to the airport with his ticket home, paranoid after Johnnie Larch's experience that the airport employees will only see an ex-convict instead of a man who wants to get home. Shadow's appearance is also deceiving in other ways. Though he is large, and projects the somewhat dumb demeanor that most people assume that a man of his size and strength will have, Shadow is actually quite well read and thoughtful. His explanation for why Johnnie Larch was banned from the airport and eventually got himself arrested again reflects an educated, scientific mindset that thoughtfully looks at situations and assesses what is going on underneath them. However, those around Shadow refuse to accept his deep mind, even when they see direct evidence of it, as Johnnie does when he fails to recognize the truth of Shadow's hypothesis.

Shadow's hypothesis about Johnnie's behavior could also apply to the Old Gods, who are unable to adapt to their new environment in the modern United States, after years of being worshipped with one kind of behavior. The Old Gods are set in their ways, and bitter that the world has changed around them. Shadow himself later offers a way to move forward into the future, learning to depend on new types of behaviors through a connection to the American land, while continuing to honor the old traditions of the gods.

☛ "Believe," said the rumbling voice. "If you are to survive, you must believe."

"Believe what?" asked Shadow. "What should I believe?"

He stared at Shadow, the buffalo man, and he drew himself up huge, and his eyes filled with fire. He opened his spit-flecked buffalo mouth and it was red inside with the flames that burned inside him, under the earth.

"Everything," roared the buffalo man.

Related Characters: Shadow Moon (Baldur) (speaker), The Buffalo Man

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Shadow starts to dream about a mysterious Buffalo Man who gives him advice for how to deal with the world of gods, supernatural belief, and myths that he is suddenly plunged into through his association with Mr. Wednesday.



Specifically, the Buffalo Man marks out belief as the central task necessary for Shadow's survival. Gaiman points to the significance of belief in human lives, arguing that humans have a basic need to believe in things in order to give meaning and purpose to their world. But Gaiman does not elevate one belief system over any other. The Buffalo Man, perhaps the wisest character in the novel, as the representation of American land itself, commands Shadow to believe "everything," matching the huge size and scale of American land with the ability to embrace many worldviews and belief systems. All sacred things are important in America, so Shadow, as an American demigod, will have to believe in everything in order to reconcile the many things at work on American land.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ "I brought you mead to drink because it's traditional. And right now we need all the tradition we can get. It seals our bargain." ...

"You work for me. You protect me... In the unlikely event of my death, you will hold my vigil. And in return I shall make sure that your needs are adequately taken care of."

Related Characters: Mr. Wednesday (Odin) (speaker), Shadow Moon (Baldur)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33-34

Explanation and Analysis

When Shadow finally agrees to work for Mr. Wednesday, Mr. Wednesday asks Shadow to drink three glasses of mead, a honey wine, to seal their deal. Though Shadow understands this deal as a standard employment arrangement, Mr. Wednesday clearly sees it as a far weightier decision. Gaiman finds the mythic resonances in their agreement to work together, pointing out that Shadow is essentially signing his life away to Mr. Wednesday by agreeing to "sit his vigil"—an ordeal that involves hanging on a tree and usually results in death. Shadow wants to continue to act as though his life is mundane and ordinary, writing off Mr. Wednesday as eccentric, though Mr. Wednesday makes no attempt to hide that he is not talking about the normal circumstances of human life and jobs.

Framing Shadow's journey with Mr. Wednesday as a mythic quest, Gaiman emphasizes the importance of tradition and mythic resonance in their agreement. The number three is very important in many legends of mythology, including the Norse creation stories that influence Mr. Wednesday as Odin, the all-father in Norse mythology. These three drinks also foreshadow the three days that Shadow will spend in the underworld when he does sit Mr. Wednesday's vigil. The mead, traditionally drunk by heroes and gods, shows that Shadow will become both of those things by the end of his journey, even if he seems to be nothing special right now.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ "These are the gods who have passed out of memory. Even their names are lost. The people who worshiped them are as forgotten as their gods. Their totems are long since broken and cast down. Their last priests died without passing on their secrets.

"Gods die. And when they truly die they are unmourned and unremembered. Ideas are more difficult to kill than people, but they can be killed, in the end."

Related Characters: Mr. Ibis (Thoth) (speaker), Shadow Moon (Baldur)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 54



Explanation and Analysis


Shadow has a strange dream of the Museum of Forgotten Gods, a collection that he later sees again in the Underworld and finds out is curated by Mr. Ibis. Mr. Ibis

explains in Shadow's dream that the surest way to kill a god is to forget them, as most gods can be resurrected through belief from most other types of death. Because it is belief that first brings the gods to life, their place in the collective conscious of human memory is essential to their survival. Those gods that are no longer worshiped fade away with no hope for recovery. Precisely because there is just this one method for killing a god, the gods are absolutely terrified of death and are willing to do anything to make sure that humans continue to remember them. This usually means that the gods will stop at nothing to get what they need to live, no matter how much it costs the humans who sustain them.

☞ She did not look at him. "You've gotten yourself mixed up in some bad things, Shadow. You're going to screw it up, if someone isn't there to watch out for you. I'm watching out for you. And thank you for my present."

Related Characters: Laura Moon (speaker), Shadow Moon (Baldur)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

After Shadow goes to Laura's funeral service, Laura visits him that night, as a walking corpse, promising to watch out for Shadow and protect him. Laura has been brought back to life by Shadow's "present," a large gold coin that Shadow threw into Laura's grave. Shadow stole this coin from the hoard of the sun, using a trick he learned from the leprechaun Mad Sweeney, meaning that the coin has magical properties to both give and save life. Furthermore, this particular coin is only supposed to be given to the King of America. Shadow wins this coin fairly, claiming his birthright as both a sun god and an American god, but he gives the protection away freely. As Shadow gives this gift with no expectation of receiving anything in return, Laura's protection is actually more meaningful. Shadow did not "buy" Laura's service with this coin, as another god might have done, but gave the coin willingly. Laura chooses to give the coin's protection back to Shadow, dedicating her second chance at life to keeping Shadow safe.

Chapter 4 Quotes


☞ "You were given protection once, but you lost it already. You gave it away. You had the sun in your hand. And that is life itself. All I can give you is much weaker protection. The daughter, not the father. But all helps. Yes?" Her white hair blew about her face in the chilly wind, and Shadow knew that it was time to go back inside.

"Do I have to fight you? Or play checkers?" he asked.

"You do not even have to kiss me," she told him. "Just take the moon."

Related Characters: Shadow Moon (Baldur) (speaker), Zorya Polunochnaya

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

In Chicago, Shadow meets Zorya Polunochnaya, a Russian goddess of the night and the moon. Zorya Polunochnaya gives Shadow a silver Liberty dollar coin, likening this coin to the "moon" and "the daughter." In Slavic mythology, the sun was ruled by a King who had three daughters, the Zorya sisters. Zorya Polunochnaya, as the midnight sister, has dominion over the night. She chooses to give the protection of the moon to Shadow, as symbolized by the silver Liberty coin. She references the protection that Shadow already had in the coin he stole from the hoard of the sun, but Shadow gave that coin to his late wife Laura. Though Zorya Polunochnaya seems to dismiss this choice as somewhat stupid, it also seems clear that Shadow's selflessness is repaid when Zorya Polunochnaya herself gives her protection freely. Other gods ask for huge sacrifices from Shadow, but Zorya Polunochnaya gives her help without conditions. Zorya Polunochnaya's reference to a "kiss" also calls back to the way that gods demand sexual favors or worship from humans. Unlike the other "favors" bestowed by gods, Shadow does not have to do anything for Zorya Polunochnaya's kindness. Her loyalty is thus much more meaningful than the complicated and conditional allegiances of the other gods.

Coming to America. 1721. Quotes

☞ The important thing to understand about American history, *wrote Mr. Ibis, in his leather-bound journal*, is that it is fictional, a charcoal-sketched simplicity for the children, or the easily bored. For the most part it is uninspected, unimagined, unthought, a representation of the thing, and not the thing itself.

Related Characters: Mr. Ibis (Thoth) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

America, as both a place and a country, encompasses too much to ever be summed up in one linear history, no matter how hard historians might try. Mr. Ibis recognizes this plurality of America by telling his many histories through the life accounts of all who come to America (and the gods these people bring with them.) Though only a few of these accounts are shown in the novel, Mr. Ibis hints that he has thousands more, telling each individual arrival to this varied and variable country. Mr. Ibis also recognizes that American history changes with the addition of each new perspective that is added to it. The real tale of America is far larger than anything that would fit in a history book, or anything that would lend itself to being told at all. American history as it exists now is far closer to a fairy tale or mythic legend, a fictional representation of the logical and coherent past that Americans *wish* they had.

☞ "...although it was you that brought me here, you and a few like you, into this land with no time for magic and no place for piskies and such folk."

"You've done me many a good turn," she said.

"Good and ill," said the squinting stranger. "We're like the wind. We blows both ways."

Related Characters: Essie Tregowan (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 92-93

Explanation and Analysis


Essie Tregowan, originally from Cornwall, England, comes to America as a young woman and brings her belief in the piskies, Cornish fairy folk, with her. As the time comes for Essie's death as an old woman living in Virginia, one of the

piskies (or a "Cousin Jack," as he is called) comes to usher Essie into this next phase. While Essie lived in America, she dedicatedly set out a bowl of milk for the piskies each night, and told her own children about these old tales. In gratitude for this belief, the piskies ensure that Essie's farm is prosperous and that she has good luck, the good turns that the pisky speaks of. However, the pisky also has cause to be angry with Essie for bringing him to this harsh land that dampens belief in all the old customs. Essie's grandchildren, born on American soil while America itself is heading towards independence, have no time for Essie's tales, and no time for the piskies. Essie comments that they only want tales about "Jack" such as Jack and the Beanstalk, completely ignoring the Cousin Jack moniker given to Cornish miners in America. As such, the Cornish roots are somewhat lost in Essie's family and the piskies no longer feel swayed to do them good turns. The pisky's reminder that they can also blow ill winds suggests that Essie's family will no longer be so blessed once Essie dies and her belief in these gods fades. Further, the "ill winds" could refer to all the troubles Essie has faced throughout her life—she's hasn't had an easy time, and the piskies could be just as responsible for her misfortunes as for her successes.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ "In other countries, over the years, people recognized the places of power... And so they would build temples, or cathedrals, or erect stone circles, or... well, you get the idea." "There are churches all across the States, though," said Shadow. "In every town... And about as significant, in this context, as dentists' offices. No, in the USA, people still get the call, or some of them, and they feel themselves being called to from the transcendent void, and they respond to it by building a model out of beer bottles of somewhere they've never visited... Roadside attractions: people feel themselves being pulled to places where, in other parts of the world, they would recognize that part of themselves that is truly transcendent, and buy a hot dog and walk around, feeling satisfied on a level they cannot truly describe, and profoundly dissatisfied on a level beneath that."

Related Characters: Shadow Moon (Baldur), Mr. Wednesday (Odin) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Wednesday explains to Shadow that the truly sacred

sites in America are not marked with religious buildings such as churches or temples, but with roadside attractions (or tourist traps). This is a crucial aspect of the novel, which is in some ways a “road novel” about various road trips across America, as Shadow and Wednesday visit quintessentially American landmarks that might otherwise be overlooked.

As Wednesday says here, the fact that Americans recognize these places of power at all points to the human need for spirituality that, Gaiman argues, leads men to worship something wherever they are. Yet while people of other countries respond to the feeling of the divine by creating areas of specifically religious significance, Americans seem unable to properly come to terms with the feeling of sacredness on their land. Mr. Wednesday suggests that they are superficially satisfied by constructing odd memorials or strange buildings (and always places of consumption and capitalism), but they are “profoundly dissatisfied” on a deeper level. Organized religion in America also does not manage to answer the deep yearning in the human soul, as Mr. Wednesday explains that American churches are not built to correspond with the places of power on American land. Gaiman doesn’t really address Christianity and its prevalence in America in the novel, but brief mentions of it, like Wednesday’s here, offer some of his perspective on the commercialization of American organized religion.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☪☪ "The land is vast. Soon enough, our people abandoned us, remembered us only as creatures of the old land, as things that had not come with them to the new. Our true believers passed on, or stopped believing, and we were left, lost and scared and dispossessed, to get by on what little smidgens of worship or belief we could find...

"We have, let us face it and admit it, little influence. We prey on them, and we take from them, and we get by; we strip and we whore and we drink too much; we pump gas and we steal and we cheat and we exist in the cracks at the edges of society. Old gods, here in this new land without gods."

Related Characters: Mr. Wednesday (Odin) (speaker)

Related Themes:      

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Wednesday calls a meeting of the “Old Gods,” the gods from other countries who were brought over to America long ago as immigrants transplanted their beliefs to their

new home. These gods, rather than being revered, now exist on the “edges of society” – Mr. Wednesday, for example, lives as a con man, stealing from others in order to survive at all. Mr. Wednesday even admits that the gods’ existence is fundamentally parasitic, as they “prey” on the humans in order to survive. Whereas in the old country, the gods received plenty of sacrifices and worship that fed their souls, Mr. Wednesday speaks of the loss of power that these gods have faced in America. Human belief is diluted by the huge number of gods in America and the anti-god nature of the American land itself. America is too “vast” to nurture the gods that thrived in smaller countries, as the people spread out and begin to find new gods that are better suited to them. Not only does America replace the gods, it also stifles all godly activity. New generations of Americans choose not to continue the old rituals and traditions of their ancestors, meaning that the gods no longer receive the worship that they need to live. Wednesday hopes to correct this, but seemingly does not see that the Old Gods are hurting themselves by refusing to change their ways. The gods must learn to adapt to America as well as honoring their old traditions.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☪☪ "Okay. As soon as they say Odin's name, the reed transforms into a spear and stabs the guy in the side, the calf intestines become a thick rope, the branch becomes a bough of a tree, and the tree pulls up, and the ground drops away, and the king is left hanging there to die with a wound in his side and his face going black. End of story. White people have some fucked-up gods, Mister Shadow."

Related Characters: Sam Black Crow (speaker), Mr. Wednesday (Odin), Shadow Moon (Baldrur)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

While Shadow is driving down to Cairo, Illinois, he picks up Sam Black Crow, a half-Cherokee woman who hitchhikes around the Midwest while attending school at UW Madison. Sam tells her favorite story from her class on Comparative Religions, describing how a ritual sacrifice dedicated to Odin—which was meant to be merely symbolic—became real as soon as the necessary motions were made and Odin’s name was spoken. This foreshadows the symbolic gestures that become important later in the novel, as when Mr. World wants to dedicate a battle to Odin

by throwing a stick that will transform into a spear when it is thrown—as well as Shadow’s sacrifice, when he agrees to symbolically sit Odin’s vigil and ends up really dying on a tree. Through these and other instances, Gaiman points out the mythic overtones in otherwise mundane situations of Shadow’s experiences in America.


Sam labels these practices as specifically the gods of “white people” rather than the gods of Native Americans. The Old Gods, brought over from Europe with immigrants, seem barbaric to Sam Black Crow, who is not used to gods demanding so much from the humans who believe in them. The “gods” of Native American tribes, according to Sam in this novel, are more like culture heroes teaching people lessons, rather than gods who demand sacrifice and offerings from those who believe in them. The foreign gods may have incredible power, influencing the world in their favor, but they have no real compassion or care for the humans who give them life.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☪☪ "I did it like he said. I did it all like he said, but I gave you the wrong coin. It wasn't meant to be that coin. That's for royalty. You see? I shouldn't even have been able to take it. That's the coin you'd give to the King of America himself..."
 "You did it like who said, Sweeney?"
 "Grimnir. The dude you call Wednesday. You know who he is? Who he really is?"

Related Characters: Mad Sweeney (speaker), Mr. Wednesday (Odin), Shadow Moon (Baldur)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

Mad Sweeney finds Shadow in Cairo and asks for the gold coin from the hoard of the sun. Unbeknownst to Shadow, Mad Sweeney showed Shadow how to steal these coins at Mr. Wednesday’s request. Mr. Wednesday, or Grimnir (Odin), as he is known in other countries, is secretly manipulating many situations in Shadow’s life, though Shadow has no knowledge of the extent of Mr. Wednesday’s plans. Mad Sweeney thus tries to warn Shadow about Wednesday’s deceitful nature here.


Yet Mr. Wednesday does not have complete control over how his manipulations play out, specifically because Shadow

has a special relationship to America. As Mad Sweeney explains, Shadow is able to take the coin meant for the “king of America,” suggesting that Shadow actually is American royalty. Gaiman never explicitly outlines how Shadow earned the position of American King, but it seems likely that he has some Native American heritage, based on the assumptions that others make about his skin color, his spiritual connection to the Buffalo Man, and Whiskey Jack’s inquiries about Shadow’s “tribe.” This gold coin ties Shadow back to the magic at the very heart of America, making him a part of the essential power of the land. Shadow’s ability to hold this coin represents his place as a bridge between the American land and the Old Gods, like Mad Sweeney, who are still trying to survive here.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☪☪ Shall we go out onto the street, Easter my dear, and repeat the exercise? Find out how many passers-by know that their Easter festival takes its name from Eostre of the Dawn?

Related Characters: Mr. Wednesday (Odin) (speaker), Easter (Eostre)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 275

Explanation and Analysis

As the gods deal with the new circumstances of modern American culture, they have few choices when it comes to adapting and surviving in those conditions. Easter, the modern incarnation of Eostre, the goddess of Dawn in Germanic belief, has to make do with the worship that she receives as the manifestation of the Christian Easter celebration, ignoring the original aspects of her deity. Compared to many of the other gods, Easter is doing well, because her festival day is still celebrated. But it is celebrated for the wrong reasons, prioritizing the Christian or commercial aspects of the holiday rather than Eostre’s life-giving and rejuvenating power. As the attention span and capacity for belief among Americans continues to shrink, Easter is forced to accept this lesser worship to stay alive at all. As American culture continues to change quickly and often, the gods must change with it in order to keep themselves from becoming obsolete and gradually fading from memory.

☞ "You shouldn't think badly of the town because of this," said Brogan. "It is a good town." ...

"So what I'm saying is that Lakeside's lucky. We've got a little of everything here—farm, light industry, tourism, crafts. Good schools."

Shadow looked at her in puzzlement. There was something empty at the bottom of all her words. It was as if he were listening to a salesman, a good salesman, who believed in his product, but still wanted to make sure you went home with all the brushes or the full set of encyclopedias.

Related Characters: Richie Hinzemann, Shadow Moon (Baldur)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

Over and over again, the residents of Lakeside tell Shadow what a good town it is, and how Lakeside is doing better than any other town in the region. However, the citizens of Lakeside do not fully know the price they are paying to gain that prosperity. Hinzemann, the self-proclaimed protector of Lakeside, may seem like a kind, jovial old man, but he is actually an ancient kobold (Germanic forest spirit) that sacrifices one child from the town each winter in order to keep the town going. Hinzemann, himself sacrificed for the good of a tribe thousands of years ago, ensures that the citizens of Lakeside feel nothing but loyalty towards their town. Even in the wake of another disappearance, as the citizens mourn the missing Alison McGovern, several residents step up to tell Shadow not to “think badly” of Lakeside. Something about this feels false to Shadow, another example of the deception that marks so much of the novel. Shadow is not yet able to see the truth of the situation: that Hinzemann’s lies about how the town really runs cover a sacrifice that asks too much.


Coming to America. 1778. Quotes

☞ We need individual stories. Without individuals we see only numbers: a thousand dead, a hundred thousand dead, "casualties may rise to a million." With individual stories, the statistics become people—but even that is a lie, for the people continue to suffer in numbers that themselves are numbing and meaningless...

Fiction allows us to slide into these other heads, these other places, and look out through other eyes. And then in the tale we stop before we die, or we die vicariously and unharmed, and in the world beyond the tale we turn the page or close the book, and we resume our lives.

A life, which is, like any other, unlike any other.

Related Characters: Mr. Ibis (Thoth) (speaker), Wututu

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 285



Explanation and Analysis

As Mr. Ibis continues to share the life stories of various people who came to America and brought their gods with them, he singles out a girl who is forced to come to America on a slave ship. Mr. Ibis recognizes that this story is hard to hear, but that it is also necessary to share the painful details of these stories to bring all the history of America together. American history cannot erase the aspects of its past that are hard to face without seriously harming the ideals of truth and freedom in America itself. By sharing a fictional story, where the details are real but the audience does not have to go through the trauma of acknowledging the intense suffering of real people, Mr. Ibis can better share the values that all Americans can identify with. These fictional stories allow the reader to build an idea of America that becomes more cohesive, despite the competing idea that America thrives precisely because it includes so many distinct stories.

Though the strength of America may come from the plurality of voices that come together to form this diverse nation, Gaiman asserts that individual stories still need to be told so that people can better understand perspectives different from their own. The circumstances of each person's life are incredibly different, but there are still common lessons that can (and must) be learned through experiencing life through other people's eyes.

☛☛ Soon, it seemed to her that they pretended that there never had been a place called St. Domingo, and as for Haiti, the word was never mentioned. It was as if the whole American nation had decided that they could, by an effort of belief, command a good-sized Caribbean island to no longer exist merely by willing it so.

Related Characters: Mr. Ibis (Thoth) (speaker), Wututu

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 294



Explanation and Analysis

The enslaved woman Wututu hears about the slave revolt in St. Domingo, but is soon surprised to find that the white people of her North Carolina town no longer speak of the entire island after the slaves successfully fight for their freedom. Gaiman frames this as a matter of the power of belief, suggesting that the collective effort of these Americans is enough to make it as if the island really doesn't exist. In *American Gods*, belief is a powerful force that can affect the physical world just as much as it shapes people's metaphysical perception of it. Belief literally sustains the gods, controlling whether they can exist at all. Similarly, what Americans choose to believe about the very state of another country has the capacity to shape the world as if that nation really isn't there. Human belief makes things happen in the world, and can erase things or create them, as the beliefs of the enslaved people in St. Domingo brought the Republic of Haiti into reality in the first place. Yet Gaiman still seems to suggest that there is something especially potent about belief in America, which overrides what everyone else chooses to believe about Haiti.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☛☛ "Take a sip of this," he said. "Only a sip." The liquid was pungent, and it evaporated in his mouth like a good brandy, although it did not taste like alcohol. Wednesday took the flask away, and pocketed it. "It's not good for the audience to find themselves walking about backstage. That's why you're feeling sick. We need to hurry to get you out of here."

Related Characters: Mr. Wednesday (Odin) (speaker), Shadow Moon (Baldur)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 307

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Wednesday is forced to take Shadow "Backstage," into the magical foundation of America, in order to avoid a trap set by the New Gods. Once there, Shadow feels ill, because it is too overwhelming for humans to see the true nature of America (and reality itself) in such a potent form. Gaiman again asserts the forceful influence of the truth, when so much of everyday American life is draped in lies. Mr. Wednesday probably has Shadow drink ambrosia, a drink originally meant for gods alone, pointing towards the truth of Shadow's own identity. He is a demi-god, the son of both a god and a mortal, who is able to handle the truth about America and eventually use it to his advantage. Mr. Wednesday is wrong when he calls Shadow the "audience," as this would suggest that Shadow is just a mortal who has no part to play in the war that Mr. Wednesday wants to incite between the Old Gods and the New Gods. Shadow actually has an integral role in this modern day myth. He is simply not yet used to confronting the truth, and so has a negative reaction to it until he has grown enough and walked the true "path of hard truths."

Chapter 13 Quotes

☛☛ "I can believe things that are true and I can believe things that aren't true and I can believe things where nobody knows if they're true or not. I can believe in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny and Marilyn Monroe... I believe that the future sucks and I believe that the future rocks and I believe that one day White Buffalo Woman is going to come back and kick everyone's ass..."

...
"Would you believe that all the gods that people have ever imagined are still with us today?"

"...maybe."

"And that there are new gods out there, gods of computers and telephones and whatever, and that they all seem to think there isn't room for them both in the world. And that some kind of war is kind of likely."

Related Characters: Shadow Moon (Baldur), Sam Black Crow (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 348

Explanation and Analysis

When Sam encounters Shadow in Lakeside, she demands to



know the truth about who he is, assuring Shadow that she can believe all kinds of crazy things so that he will tell her his strange tale of gods in America. Sam's two-page long monologue (excerpted above) lists all kinds of things that she believes in, both serious and irreverent. She lumps together Santa Claus and Marilyn Monroe, exemplifying Gaiman's argument that Americans find new celebrities and culture heroes to be just as sacred as the old myths and legends. Sam also shows the updated perception of these old tales by invoking Santa Claus rather than Saint Nicolas, and the Easter Bunny instead of Eostre of the Dawn (or even Jesus). Shadow sketches out the conflict between the Old and the New Gods that depends on just this dichotomy, as both camps of gods feel that they have to eliminate the other so that they can dominate the spiritual imaginations of all Americans.

However, Sam is special in that she seems to have the ability to maintain belief in many things, even contradictory things, such as her belief in both the good and the bad in the future. She also mentions a White Buffalo Woman, which is most likely a reference to the sacred White Buffalo Woman of the Lakota belief system, and is possibly analogous to Shadow's Buffalo Man, who represents the spirit of American land itself. Thus Sam's faith is explicitly tied to a foundation of spirituality in America, and has the ability to encompass all the gods, both old and new, as well as respecting the American land. Gaiman has said in interviews and on his blog that Sam's speech is the closest representation of his own belief system shown in the novel.

☞ And as for keeping my word, well, these preliminary talks are being filmed and broadcast live," and he gestured back toward the camera. "Some of your people are watching as we speak. Others will see video-tapes. Others will be told, by those they trust. The camera does not lie."

"Everybody lies," said Wednesday.

Related Characters: Mr. Wednesday (Odin), Mr. World (Low Key Lyesmith / Loki) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 361

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. World assures Mr. Wednesday during their peace talks that the New Gods will be completely faithful to a truce, though they have not shown themselves to be trustworthy so far. Mr. World points out the fact that this talk is filmed, stating it as evidence that he could not be lying. In response,


Mr. Wednesday re-emphasizes the fact that "everybody lies," supporting the high volume of lies in the novel and Gaiman's argument that lying is an inevitable part of human life. Mr. Wednesday himself is a grifter who makes his living by lying to other people in various ways so that they will give him money. Mr. World seems awfully naïve, or at the very least assumes that Mr. Wednesday is naïve, to say that the camera does not lie, given that video cameras (as relatively new technology) would ostensibly be under the jurisdiction of the New Gods and therefore not a reliable source of objective evidence for the Old Gods. Even in the real world, where there is not a "god" of cameras possibly controlling the image, camera footage can be doctored or faked to look like anything.

Yet it turns out that Mr. World is not being ignorant—he is simply playing his part in a huge web of lies that he and Mr. Wednesday have concocted specifically to incite a war between the Old and New Gods. Neither character actually wants the peace talks to succeed, but they do want the other gods to believe what they see on the camera, as their entire plan depends on everyone trusting that Mr. Wednesday is actually dead when Mr. World murders him. Yet in the end these many layers of lies, no matter how carefully thought through, do not actually help either Mr. World or Mr. Wednesday. Everybody does in fact lie, but those lies do not lead to ultimate happiness or power.

Coming to America. 14,000 B.C. Quotes

☞ "Gods are great," said Atsula, slowly, as if she were comprehending a great secret. "But the heart is greater. For it is from our hearts they come, and to our hearts they shall return..."

Related Characters: Atsula (speaker), Nunyunnini

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 369

Explanation and Analysis

The shaman Atsula leads her tribe into American land on the orders of her tribe's god, but she also has second thoughts about the absolute authority of gods who would ask such great sacrifices of their people. Atsula begins to understand that it is people who create gods, not the other way around. In this dialogue, Gaiman echoes the Bible verse traditionally read at Christian funeral services, substituting the words "our heart" for "ashes" in the phrases: "Until you return to the ground, For from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return." While humans may



be made from dust, a mundane substance, the gods are made from the strength of human belief. Atsula claims that gods come “from our hearts,” suggesting that gods are created because of the human desire to have some higher power to give significance and purpose to life. Ultimately, Gaiman proposes that humans are more powerful than gods because they have the power to create gods in the first place, and stamp gods out of existence if they choose to stop worshipping and forget them. In this way, the gods could return to human’s hearts.

It’s also noteworthy that Gaiman presents this realization as coming to a woman 16,000 years ago—it’s not exactly new, and yet it seemingly dies with Atsula (when she later becomes a sacrifice to Nunyunnini), such that each generation, or even each individual person, must learn to discover this “great secret” on their own.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ Shadow was stretched out full length on the seat in the back. He felt like two people, or more than two. There was part of him that felt gently exhilarated: he had done something. He had moved. It wouldn't have mattered if he hadn't wanted to live, but he did want to live, and that made all the difference. He hoped he would live through this, but he was willing to die, if that was what it took to be alive.

Related Characters: Mr. Wednesday (Odin), Mr. Nancy (Anansi), Shadow Moon (Baldur) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 403

Explanation and Analysis

As Mr. Nancy, Czernobog, and Shadow drive Mr. Wednesday’s body to Virginia for the traditional vigil for Odin, Shadow insists that he will be the one to undergo Odin’s vigil and be tied to a tree for nine days. By the end of the novel, Shadow begins to make choices for himself rather than letting everyone around him dictate what he should do. Mr. Nancy even tries to persuade Shadow not to sit the vigil, but Shadow remains adamant about his desire to follow through with this promise of his own accord. Shadow recognizes that this choice may cost him his life, but he now thinks that losing his life might be worth it if it means that he lives out his life to the fullest in the time he has remaining. Significantly, Shadow is no longer indifferent about death. He specifically wants to live so that he can embrace his newfound confidence in making decisions for himself. Shadow has finally begun to live with intention, thinking


through what he actually wants to do in life instead of passively obeying Laura or Wednesday’s plans for him. The sacrifice of his life, at the moment when it tastes the sweetest, is the most meaningful thing that Shadow can give, and therefore it generates enormous power in this world built on beliefs and intentions.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ When he was opposite Shadow, he paused. "God, I hate you," he said. He wished he could just have taken out a gun and shot him, and he knew that he could not. And then he jabbed the stick in the air toward the hanging man, in a stabbing motion. It was an instinctive gesture, containing all the frustration and rage inside Town. He imagined that he was holding a spear and twisting it into Shadow's guts.

Related Characters: Mr. Town (speaker), Shadow Moon (Baldur)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 443

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Town, a New God who does not believe that the old legends have any power, nonetheless finds himself acting out part of an old story when he goes to get a stick from the ash tree on which Shadow has been hung. Mr. Town symbolically stabs Shadow with the stick, not actually touching Shadow’s skin, but still performing the traditional duty of stabbing the side of a man sacrificed to Odin. Though all of these actions are symbolic, they become real when people assign meaning to them. Mr. Town’s stabbing motion follows the old pattern that people used to believe meant a sacrifice was dedicated to Odin, so Mr. Town’s action now carries that meaning—and when he leaves, Shadow’s side begins to bleed as if he had been stabbed by an actual spear. Mr. Town’s “instinctive gesture” shows that these old legends have significance in people’s lives whether people believe in them or not. These stories still shape (or reflect, on an instinctual level) how people experience their world.

Chapter 18 Quotes


☞☞ "It's never a matter of old and new. It's only about patterns. Now. My stick, please."

"Why do you want it?"

"It's a souvenir of this whole sorry mess," said Mr. World. "Don't worry, it's not mistletoe." He flashed a grin. "It symbolizes a spear, and in this sorry world, the symbol is the thing."

Related Characters: Laura Moon, Mr. World (Low Key Lyesmith / Loki) (speaker), Shadow Moon (Baldur), Mr. Wednesday (Odin)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 468

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. World, later revealed as the alias of the Norse god Loki, waits to send his New Gods in to fight the Old Gods until he can get a specific stick from the ash tree on which Shadow was sacrificed. Laura, delivering the stick, asks why Mr. World needs it, and Mr. World shows that he is far more aligned with the old ways and myths than anyone expects. As an Old God himself, Loki depends on retelling his myths in order to gain new life. As the patterns are repeated, he can gain strength the same way he did in the old legends about Loki, as all of the gods and myths are reincarnated in a new time. As long as things happen the same way, Loki will remain as powerful as he used to be in the golden age of the Norse gods.

In order to replay the old myths, Loki needs to use the objects that have gained power as symbols for these actions. The ash stick symbolizes the spear that Odin used to sacrifice himself and gain knowledge, and its presence on the battlefield will let Loki dedicate all these new deaths to Odin and thus feed on the new belief that the symbols will reignite. In order to resurrect Odin, after Wednesday died to become a martyr for the Old Gods, Loki must utilize all the symbols associated with the old legends of Odin so that these patterns can begin again. His reference to mistletoe (while perhaps also a joke about kissing Laura under mistletoe) further brings in Shadow's role in this plot, as Shadow is the reincarnation of Baldur, the Norse god of the sun who was traditionally killed (by Loki) with a stick of mistletoe. Having these specific touchstones for their myths allows humans to attribute meaning to mundane circumstances, creating more belief in the world and giving their gods more power.

☞☞ People believe, thought Shadow, It's what people do. They believe. And then they will not take responsibility for their beliefs; they conjure things, and do not trust the conjurations. People populate the darkness; with ghosts, with gods, with electrons, with tales. People imagine, and people believe: and it is that belief, that rock-solid belief, that makes things happen.

Related Characters: Shadow Moon (Baldur)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 477




Explanation and Analysis

Shadow, on the brink of ending the war between the Old Gods and the New Gods, finally understands why humans created all these gods in the first place. As Gaiman describes it, it is human nature to believe in something, out of a desire to create a meaningful and understandable experience out of chaotic or terrifying events. Gaiman equates gods and science (through his mention of electrons) as two equally valid ways that humans try to understand the world, because they both provide something for humans to grasp as they make sense of an otherwise overwhelming world. Using faith, ideas, or stories of any kind, humans can then form communities of people who believe the same thing and are willing to act on those beliefs. Gaiman argues that people who believe in something, be it a god, a theory, or simply a basic idea, are more likely to fight for what they think is right. Their efforts in the name of their beliefs can change the world, for better or for worse. Thus belief is one of the most powerful forces on earth, convincing humankind to do things that don't make sense from the outside, but have deep convictions behind them.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☞☞ "Call no man happy until he is dead. Herodotus." Mr. Nancy raised a white eyebrow, and he said, "I'm not dead yet, and, mostly because I'm not dead yet, I'm happy as a clamboy." "The Herodotus thing. It doesn't mean that the dead are happy," said Shadow. "It means that you can't judge the shape of someone's life until it's over and done."

Related Characters: Shadow Moon (Baldur), Mr. Nancy (Anansi) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 485

Explanation and Analysis



After Shadow defuses the war between the Old Gods and the New Gods, he goes home with Mr. Nancy, who asks him if he's now happy. Yet Shadow simply repeats the phrase that has followed him since he was in jail: Call no man happy until he is dead. At first, this advice seemed to be advocating the depressing perspective that no human life could be happy, and that death is the only way to find relief. Yet as Shadow learns to appreciate his life over the course of the novel, the phrase takes on the much more hopeful view that it is simply foolish to judge whether a person is happy or not until all the facts of that person's life are known. Shadow's life is not over yet, and so it is impossible to say whether he is happy. Shadow now has much more to live for than he did before, and the end of his life is nowhere near close enough to begin judging how he has lived.

Similarly, the history of America is still in process and resists categorization. It is impossible to sum up America in a few words like "happy," or to say that the soul of America is one specific thing, because the spirit of "America" is still developing and changing as more people come to America and other old traditions pass away. Gaiman cautions against speaking too soon and putting down a linear version of American history before all the facts are known and all the stories are told. *American Gods* itself incorporates many visions of America, and leaves its ending open for America to become something completely new.

☛ "You made peace," said the buffalo man. "You took our words and made them your own. They never understood that they were here – and the people who worshiped them were here – because it suits us that they are here. But we can change our minds. And perhaps we will."
"Are you a god?" asked Shadow.

The buffalo-headed man shook his head. Shadow thought, for a moment, that the creature was amused. "I am the land," he said.

Related Characters: The Buffalo Man (speaker), Shadow Moon (Baldur)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 488

Explanation and Analysis

Once Shadow has defused the battle between the Old and New Gods, he has one last dream where he learns that he has really been a kind of spokesperson for the land of America itself. While the gods have been fighting for

dominance, with Wednesday and Loki especially fighting to become the most powerful gods in America, the true supreme power – the land – has been quietly watching and shaping events the way it wants them to go. By sending Shadow dreams of the Buffalo Man, the land carefully taught Shadow to respect it and avoid making the mistakes the other arrogant gods made. The land of America does not explain why it allows the gods to stay, but it does assert its authority over everything by watching behind the scenes, while the gods take human attention through their flashy antics. To borrow the tactics of Wednesday and his fellow con men, the land seems to be running one long "grift" that depends on people looking at the gods instead of at the land. Using the gods as misdirection, the land is then able to make sure that the real magic of America survives, though that magic is shrouded in mystery.

Postscript Quotes

☛ "You and I, we have walked the same path. I also hung on the tree for nine days, a sacrifice of myself to myself. I am the lord of the Aes. I am the god of the gallows."
"You are Odin," said Shadow.
The man nodded thoughtfully, as if weighing up the name.
"They call me many things, but, yes, I am Odin, Bor's son," he said.
"I saw you die," said Shadow. "I stood vigil for your body. You tried to destroy so much, for power. You would have sacrificed so much for yourself. You did that."
"I did not do that."
"Wednesday did. He was you."
"He was me, yes. But I am not him."

Related Characters: Shadow Moon (Baldur) (speaker), Mr. Wednesday (Odin)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 521

Explanation and Analysis

When Shadow meets the version of Odin that lives in Iceland, this incarnation of the Norse god explains that all of the gods in various countries are different depending on the people who believe in them. Odin will always be the god of the gallows, and always have specific traits such as his dependence on sacrifice, but Wednesday was a specific version of the god who took the principles of Odin too far. As everything in America is on a larger scale, including the land and the people who live there, it makes sense that the version of Odin brought to life in America would go farther

than the versions of this god in other countries. Shadow is rightfully disgusted with Odin for thinking that he deserved to cause so much pain for his own benefit, but he has to realize that this feature is only true of the gods in America. The incarnations of these gods in other places have been able to become more balanced, not driven mad by constantly fighting for their existence. The extreme

conditions of life and death in America create gods that are willing to do anything to maintain their own power, unlike the healthier relationship between gods and men that Shadow now sees is possible in other places. Shadow's mission is then to bring that balance back to America, recognizing the unique principles of his land and the attributes of the gods who live there.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Gaiman begins the novel with an excerpt from *American Folklore and the Historian* (a book by Richard Dorson that distinguishes genuine American folklore from “fakelore” created by corporations or marketing campaigns). In the excerpt, Dorson explains how immigrants describe their old gods as “scared to cross the ocean.” Gaiman then opens the chapter with a quote from an essay titled “The American” from *Joe Miller’s Jest Book*, an Americanized version of a British joke and witticism book. The essay portrays America’s boundaries as the sun, the aurora borealis, the equinoxes, and judgement day.

A man named Shadow Moon, the protagonist, has now spent three years in prison, but he finds jail to be a relief: he knows he has gone as low as he can go. He tells this theory to his cellmate, Low Key Lyesmith, who laughs at Shadow’s “gallows humor.” Shadow marks off the days to his release on a *Songbirds of North America* calendar and dreams of the three things he will do once he gets out. First, Shadow will take a proper bubble bath. Second, he will make love with his beautiful wife, Laura. Third, he will stay out of trouble for the rest of his life.

Low Key Lyesmith asks Shadow if he will be happy once he gets out of prison, but Shadow responds, “Call no man happy until he is dead.” Low Key chuckles at the Herodotus quote, having given Shadow *Herodotus’ Histories* to read. The other inmates have no idea who this “dead Greek” guy is. One inmate starts talking about a Greek girlfriend he used to have, who landed him in prison when he fought a man for checking the girl out. Shadow listens to the inmate’s complaint but doesn’t say much, having learned to let people serve their own time.

A few weeks later, Low Key gets suddenly transferred to another prison, leaving Shadow his copy of *Histories* with several contraband coins hidden in the pages so that Shadow can practice coin tricks. A month before Shadow’s release date, a warden calls Shadow into his office. The warden asks about Shadow’s wife, Laura, who is a travel agent, and about Shadow’s plans after he gets out. Shadow’s best friend Robbie has saved a personal trainer job for Shadow at the gym where Shadow used to work. Laura has already sent Shadow an e-ticket so that he can fly home as soon as he is released.

Gaiman begins by placing his novel within a very specific set of works about American folklore. His first quote both introduces the concept of “Old Gods” brought over from other countries and distinguishes that Gaiman will be dealing with actual legends, not just making up his own “fakelore.” The opener to the chapter meanwhile presents the irreverent and often sarcastic bent of Gaiman’s novel. He is not literally doing a survey of the gods in America—he is rather poking fun at the ways that American culture interprets itself and its gods.



Right away, Shadow is presented as a type of anti-hero. After all, prison is not something that most people see as a relief, and Shadow’s feeling about it shows that there is more to him than meets the eye. Even his name is mysterious, as “shadow” has cryptic connotations of something that can’t be entirely pinned down. Low Key’s reference to gallows humor later becomes a winking aside to Low Key’s (Loki’s) relationship to Odin, the god of the gallows in Norse mythology.



*Shadow sets himself apart from the stereotypical “prisoner” through his interest in a highly academic book like *Herodotus’ Histories*. This ancient work blends factual history with fantasy, much like *American Gods* will do with its history of America. As both the father of history and lies, Herodotus will become somewhat of a spiritual mentor for Shadow as he learns when to lie and when to tell the truth over the course of the novel.*



*Low Key seems to have a hand in Shadow’s development, giving him *Histories* in the first place and sparking his interest in coin tricks. However, Low Key’s sudden disappearance marks him more as someone to watch out for than someone to trust. At this point, it looks like everything is in order for Shadow to return to a perfectly normal life, but the noir-like, mysterious, and suspenseful tone of the meeting with the warden hints that everything is not as it appears.*



The last week before Shadow's release date, he is jittery and on-edge. He calls Laura, who tries to reassure him that everything's fine and calls him her pet name, "Puppy." Laura started calling Shadow Puppy when they were not allowed to get a dog in their apartment. After Shadow hangs up, he talks to a fellow convict named Sam Fetishier—a seemingly ageless African American man. Sam tells Shadow that a big storm is coming, and then asks where Shadow is from. Shadow answers Chicago, and Sam winks and tells Shadow to be careful.

Two days before Shadow's release, a guard pulls Shadow aside. After commenting on Shadow's strangely calm demeanor and insulting Shadow's dark skin, the guard takes Shadow to the prison warden's office. Shadow is worried that he has done something to delay his release, though he can think of nothing he has done wrong since his arrest. The warden, a harsh man with a bookshelf full of books about prison, tells Shadow that he will be released this afternoon instead of on Friday. Then, in a cruel "good news, bad news" joke, the warden tells Shadow that Laura has died in a car crash early this morning.

Shadow numbly packs his few possessions, leaving behind Low Key's copy of Herodotus and the coins. He walks out of the prison into a freezing rain and boards the repurposed school bus that will take him and the other released inmates into the city. On the bus, Shadow has a sudden vision of himself as a prisoner in an ancient oubliette (a prison cell formed by a deep hole that can only be entered by a trapdoor in the ceiling), but is shaken out of his daydream by the inmate next to him, who hisses about all the women they can sleep with now that they are out of prison. Shadow thinks of Laura, but can't cry.

As the bus gets closer to the city, Shadow thinks of an old cellmate named Johnnie Larch who was unable to board a flight because his driver's license was expired and he had no other identification. Johnnie reacted to the situation as if his reputation had been challenged, threatening to fight all the airport security guards. Banned from the airport, Johnnie spent all his money on bars in town, and then got arrested again for holding up a gas station with a toy gun. Back inside prison, Johnnie tells everyone who will listen not to mess with airport employees, refusing to believe that the moral of this experience is: "kinds of behavior that work in a specialized environment, such as a prison, can fail to work and in fact become harmful when used outside such an environment" – as Shadow suggests.

Like the traditional hero of a mystery novel, Shadow is jaded, terse, and on edge. Yet Laura sees Shadow completely differently, calling him "puppy" – a name that's at odds with Shadow's huge physique, but fits with his loyal and kindly personality. Sam Fetishier is the first hint of the supernatural in the novel, as a "fetisher" is a word for a priest who practices voodoo. Sam sees that Shadow is not entirely normal, not trusting that Shadow truly comes from Chicago, as Shadow himself believes.



The guard at the prison sees that Shadow is strangely passive, willing to wait to be told what his life is rather than choosing it for himself. The guard also reads Shadow's skin as African American, but isn't entirely sure, introducing the idea that Shadow is racially ambiguous and appears differently to different people. Laura's death is the first sign that nothing is going to go as planned for Shadow.



Shadow hardly seems to react to the death of his wife. There is a certain amount of shock involved, but Shadow also seems extraordinarily able to just accept what life hands him with little complaint. His flash into an oubliette, a prison system that has never been used widely in America and passed out of fashion hundreds of years ago, introduces the idea that Shadow to some extent relives patterns from long ago times with influences from outside of America. His fellow inmate points to the idea that sex can be used as a tool and a distraction, rather than a real emotional connection.



Shadow's explanation for Johnnie's troubles, phrased in semi-scientific language and showing deep insight into human behavior, again shows that Shadow is far more intelligent and thoughtful than most people would expect from a man of his size, strength, and history with crime. Shadow's looks deceive people, as they see in him whatever they want or expect to see. Shadow's moral also suggests one of the main themes of the novel: the idea that people must adapt to change in order to survive – especially in America. Just as Johnnie had to change his behavior out of prison to better fit with his new surroundings, gods who come over from other countries must also retrain themselves to act in specific ways in the new (and constantly changing) American environment.



Shadow makes it to the airport, worrying that his e-ticket will not work today and further thinking that anything electronic seems fundamentally magical and hard to trust. All he has is a reservation number and a license that luckily has a few years left before expiration. The storm continues with thunder and lightning outside the airport as Shadow makes it to the airport counter and explains that he is traveling early because of a death in his family. The woman behind the counter expresses her sympathy and gives Shadow a boarding pass for a flight that afternoon.

While Shadow waits for his flight, he calls Robbie and leaves a message, then calls Laura just to hear her voice on the answering machine. He has a crazy feeling that everything will actually be fine once he gets home, and imagines that Laura will meet him at the airport. He remembers the first time he saw Laura, out at a bar with Robbie where Laura had walked in with her friend Audrey Burton. Laura made Shadow order a strawberry daiquiri, and Shadow had been smitten from the first look at Laura's blue eyes.

Shadow boards his plane and quickly falls asleep. He dreams that he is in a cave "in the earth and under the earth" where a creature with a buffalo's head and a man's body tells Shadow that change is coming, decisions must be made, and Shadow must believe in order to survive. Shadow asks what to believe. The Buffalo Man roars, "Everything." Shadow wakes to find that the plane is tipping and spinning in the storm. He wonders idly if he will die, then falls back asleep.

The plane lands at an airport, where Shadow stumbles around before finding out that he is in St. Louis instead of Eagle Point, Indiana. After a lot of shuffling between help desks and gates, Shadow gets a flight connection to his proper destination and runs to the next gate where the plane is already prepping for take-off. Shadow is the last one on the plane and the only open seat is in first class. A well dressed, bearded man with a tie pin that looks like a silver tree (later revealed as Mr. Wednesday) tuts at Shadow that he is late. Shadow apologizes if he made the other man late, but the man replies that he was only concerned that Shadow would not make the flight.

Shadow shows an immediate distrust for anything electronic, distancing him from the current popularity of technology and tying him to more "traditional" or "outdated" methods of doing things. However, Shadow is able to modulate his behavior enough to fit in, pretending to be comfortable with the e-ticket and telling the woman at the counter a version of his situation that he knows will garner sympathy. Shadow does not lie, but he does create a more acceptable story by omitting details about his recent incarceration.



Laura looms large in Shadow's mind, continuing to exert some control over his actions though she is dead. It seems as if Shadow doesn't know what to do for himself now that he no longer has Laura to make plans for him. From their first meeting, Laura was the one who took initiative in their relationship, deciding even details like what drink Shadow should order. Without her, Shadow is somewhat lost.



The location of Shadow's dream is intimately tied to the earth, making the Buffalo Man clearly related to the land in some way. The Buffalo man reiterates the idea that American life means change, and introduces the importance of belief in the novel—his command to "believe everything" indeed becomes a sort of thesis statement for the book. Belief literally has the power to save Shadow (and the other godly characters) if he is able to open his mind enough to all the strange things that he will soon need to accept. For now, Shadow doesn't seem to care whether he lives or dies, seeming remarkably indifferent to the storm.



Shadow's experience at the airport is full of misdirection, as he's told to go here and there with seemingly no logic. Yet in light of what we learn later, Mr. Wednesday is probably just manipulating the situation so that Shadow must end up on the plane with him. Wednesday's concern about Shadow's late arrival at first seems like kind-hearted care for another passenger, but it quickly becomes clear that Wednesday has plans for Shadow in particular. His tree tie pin also foreshadows the "world tree" later in the book, referencing Yggdrasil from Norse mythology.



The bearded man, sipping a glass of Jack Daniel's despite the protests of the flight attendants, tells Shadow that he has a job for him. Shadow, confused as to how this man knows his name, refuses, and asks the man to stop speaking to him. After a few minutes, the man tells Shadow that he is sorry that his wife died, lamenting, "If it could have been but any other way." Shadow struggles to keep his temper in check while the man tries again to get Shadow to agree to a job that could make him rich enough to be the next "king of America."

Shadow again refuses the job, but asks the bearded man's name. The man chuckles about the currencies of information and knowledge, then says Shadow can call him Mr. Wednesday because "today certainly is my day." Mr. Wednesday then promises to tell Shadow his real name if Shadow works for him long enough. Mr. Wednesday goes to sleep as the plane lands at the first airport on their flight path. Though it is not Eagle Point, Shadow gets off and rents a car to drive the last 250 miles home.

Shadow drives for a couple of hours, and then stops at a place called Jack's Crocodile Bar for some food. The bar is thick with smoke and "Walkin' after Midnight" plays on the jukebox. Shadow orders a burger and chili then goes to the restroom. In the bathroom, Mr. Wednesday suddenly appears at the urinal next to him. Shadow realizes that Mr. Wednesday is almost as tall as he is, an impressive height. Mr. Wednesday asks Shadow again about taking the job, grinning a foxlike smile with no warmth behind it.

SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA. LOS ANGELES. 11:26 P.M.

In a room decorated entirely in red, a tall woman dressed in "cartoonishly" revealing clothing tells a short man to light a candle. The man groans that he should have settled for a blow job in his car, but the woman persists. The man lights the candle and puts \$50 on the dresser, then joins the woman on the ox-blood red bed. The woman, Bilquis, shamelessly praises the man, then asks him to worship her as they make love. The man begins to whisper sweet nothings as Bilquis writhes on top of him, then finds that he is reciting a litany of praises that sound almost like a poem.

Mr. Wednesday is a man who does what he wants, regardless of the rules or desires of other people. He also knows things about Shadow that he has no logical way of knowing, showing a predisposition for knowledge and wisdom that highlights his identity as the Norse God Odin. Mr. Wednesday also nods at an identity for Shadow that will become clearer as the novel progresses, joking about a "king of America."



As the Norse God Odin, who is associated with granting wisdom, Mr. Wednesday sees knowledge as a form of power. His joke about today being "his" day refers to the origin of the word Wednesday, which comes from the phrase "Woden's Day," as Woden is the Germanic pronunciation of Odin. Though Wednesday has promised riches, knowledge and power, Shadow would rather have a normal life.



The song "Walkin' After Midnight" and its lyrics about searching for a lost love set the scene for Shadow to be upset about Laura's death, no matter how little he shows it. Yet it also foreshadows that Shadow may be found by people late at night who are searching for him when he least expects it. Mr. Wednesday's oddly cold smile, at a "crocodile bar" no less, shows that Mr. Wednesday is a false person who hides an agenda behind a "crocodile smile"—a smile that covers his malicious intentions.



Gaiman describes Bilquis as "cartoonishly" dressed, referencing how the goddess of sexual love and desire has been reduced to a two-dimensional version of herself, as media and modern culture cheapen and commodify ideas of sexuality. Bilquis' rituals go back to biblical times, as the poem-like song that the man finds he is saying is actually an excerpt from the biblical book Song of Solomon, who some historians believe is a love letter partially addressed to the Queen of Sheba. Gaiman takes the beautiful and desirable aspects of the Queen of Sheba and raises her into a deity as Bilquis. Yet Bilquis is hanging on too tightly to the old ways, unable to properly survive as a modern goddess or use modern phrasing about love.



The man stops talking, too consumed by lust and desire, but Bilquis forces him to keep going. As the man orgasms, gasping with pleasure, he realizes that he is hanging upside down. He looks up and sees that his body is inside Bilquis up to his chest. Bilquis pushes the man completely inside her as the man whispers one more prayer to the goddess Bilquis. The man's cell phone rings, playing a cheap version of "Ode to Joy." Bilquis answers, tells whoever is on the other line that the man has gone away, and then goes to sleep on her blood-red bed.

Bilquis depends on the worship of men to survive, literally turning their praise and sexual attention into energy, which she uses to consume their life force when they dedicate it to her. This unequal taking of power is a hallmark of how the gods treat humans in the novel: as sources of worship and life with no feelings or needs of their own. The man's ringtone, the classical masterpiece, "Ode to Joy," is another sign of how modern practices take traditional items and change them into almost unrecognizable versions of themselves. Bilquis is both sympathetic, as a woman of a by-gone time trying to make it in a harsher present, and unsympathetic, as a parasite that drains others to live.



CHAPTER 2

The chapter opens with a quote from an "old song" in which a woman is taken to a cemetery in a Cadillac. Back in Jack's Crocodile Bar, Mr. Wednesday continues to persuade Shadow to take a job with him. When Shadow protests that he already has a job, Mr. Wednesday flippantly says that Robbie Burton is dead. Shadow accuses Mr. Wednesday of lying, but Mr. Wednesday produces a newspaper to support his story. Shadow decides to eat his chili and burger first, fondly remembering the chili that Laura used to make, then reads the article that details the early morning car crash that killed both Laura and Robbie. Shadow can't help but picture a possible reason for the crash, imagining Robbie driving drunk as Laura shouts at him to pull over.

Mr. Wednesday seems very unconcerned with giving Shadow the news that his entire world has crumbled, another example of how gods seem to have little compassion for humans. Shadow remains entirely loyal to Laura, both nostalgically thinking of her cooking and casting her in the best light he can, given the facts of the car crash with Robbie. Shadow assumes that it was Robbie's fault, blaming him for the accident though he actually has no idea what happened aside from the fact that it was very late at night. Shadow is so trusting of Laura that he doesn't even stop to think that this would be an odd time for Laura to be alone with another man.



Shadow sighs, realizing he really doesn't have a job, and then pulls out a coin. He asks Mr. Wednesday to call the coin toss to decide if Shadow will take the job or not. Mr. Wednesday calls heads, and Shadow reveals without looking at the coin that he rigged the toss to make the coin come up tails. Mr. Wednesday laughs and tells Shadow to check. The coin is heads. Shadow thinks he must have fumbled when he tried to rig the toss.

Shadow is very adept at coin tricks, having little to do but practice for hours while in jail. Mr. Wednesday has actually magically changed the coin, but Shadow would rather believe that he messed up than admit that there is anything supernatural going on. Again Shadow expresses a desire for normalcy.



Mr. Wednesday then welcomes Mad Sweeney, a tall man with ginger hair, to their table, and then goes to the bar to get the newcomer a Southern Comfort and Coke. Mad Sweeney opens a pack of Lucky Strikes and asks if Shadow works for Mr. Wednesday, to which Shadow sighs that he does. Mad Sweeney then claims that he is a leprechaun, making Shadow question why Mad Sweeney doesn't have an Irish accent and isn't drinking Guinness. As Mad Sweeney tells Shadow not to trust stereotypes, Mr. Wednesday returns with their drinks.

Mad Sweeney's description as the complete opposite of the stereotypical leprechaun is another example of Gaiman dispelling "fakelore" in American Gods. The popular image of leprechauns is actually based on derogatory assumptions about the Irish spread when the Irish came to America in the 19th century. Gaiman does nod to some of the roots of the leprechaun myths, though, associating Mad Sweeney with luck through his choice of cigarette.



Mr. Wednesday brings Shadow a golden drink that tastes oddly sour and sweet, reminding Shadow of the beer inmates tried to brew for themselves in prison. Mr. Wednesday explains that it is mead, the drink of heroes and gods. Wednesday agrees that it tastes awful, then stares at Shadow straight in the eyes and tells Shadow that they have to seal their bargain in the most traditional way possible. Noticing that Wednesday seems to have one glass eye, Shadow listens as Wednesday lays out what Shadow is promising to do by working for him – mostly doing whatever Wednesday says. The last task includes holding Wednesday's vigil in the unlikely event of his death.

Mr. Wednesday brings Shadow mead, pointing to the fact that Shadow will eventually be revealed as both a hero and a demi-god. Mr. Wednesday's insistence on the traditional highlights the ways that the Old Gods (including Wednesday, as Odin) cling tightly to their previous ways despite the fact that these practices no longer make sense in modern America. Yet Shadow passively goes along with Wednesday's plans because it is easier than choosing for himself what to do. Shadow doesn't even question the strange condition about the "vigil," instead simply accepting all of Wednesday's terms.



Mad Sweeney warns Shadow that Wednesday is a hustler, and then the bar falls silent. Shadow comments that these strange lulls in conversation only happen at 20 past or 20 to the hour. Checking the clock, Shadow sees that it is indeed 11:20. Shadow drinks the rest of his mead in one gulp and Wednesday orders him another one. Shadow explains the conditions of his employment: he wants time to go to Laura's funeral, he won't hurt people for fun or for profit, he wants \$500 a week, and he won't go back to prison. Wednesday smiles his strange, threatening smile, and agrees that they have a deal. Wednesday spits in his hand and holds it out to shake. Shadow does the same, then agrees to have one last glass of mead to seal the deal.

The urban legend that groups of people fall silent at 20 past or to the hour comes from a bit of folklore surrounding the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. This organically American superstition suggests that because Lincoln died at 7:20, people now fall silent in reverence due to some supernatural influence. Shadow wants surprisingly little in return for giving Wednesday almost complete control over his life, again trying just to stay out of trouble rather than negotiating for money or power. This last glass of mead brings the total up to three, an important number in Norse mythology and signifying the creation of an unbreakable contract between Shadow and Wednesday.



Mad Sweeney puts "Who Loves the Sun" on the jukebox, and then notices that Shadow is doing coin tricks. Mad Sweeney does his own coin trick, reaching into the air and producing a large gold coin, then filling his glass with gold coins plucked from all over the table, tipping all the coins into his pocket, and making them disappear. Shadow tries to figure out how Mad Sweeney did it, but Mad Sweeney says only that he picks them out of the air. Shadow backs down and drinks his final glass of mead as Mad Sweeney toasts to their health instead of paying for his drink.

Mad Sweeney's song choice again clarifies Shadow's emotional state, as it talks about a man who is unable to appreciate even the sun when his love is gone. Yet the song also points to the origin of Sweeney's gold coins, which are later revealed to come from the treasure of the sun itself. For now, the coins simply seem like another aspect of Mad Sweeney's identity as a leprechaun, which are usually said to have a hidden pot of gold.



Mad Sweeney brings his coin trick back up, offering to fight Shadow for the secret. Shadow refuses, seeing that Mad Sweeney is clearly drunk, but Mad Sweeney continues to goad both Shadow and Wednesday, saying that Wednesday has hired a coward. Wednesday tells Shadow to deal with the problem and Shadow asks Mad Sweeney to leave. Mad Sweeney punches Shadow in the face, and Shadow knows that he can't back down now. Having learned in prison that some fights were for show and that some fights were actually meant to hurt, Shadow asks Sweeney why they are fighting. Sweeney answers that they are fighting for the joy of it. Shadow knocks Sweeney down twice before Sweeney agrees that they are done and falls asleep on the bar floor.

Mad Sweeney comes across as the worst stereotypes of Irishmen here, both getting drunk and picking a fight for no reason, somewhat undercutting his earlier desire not to be stuck with people's assumptions. The distinction Shadow makes between showy fights and real fights is important later as Wednesday unfurls his plan to misdirect attention through a big showy fight so that he can hide his true intention of gaining power for himself. Shadow's fight with Sweeney is clearly only for show, as Sweeney can't even stay mad enough to keep from falling asleep.



Shadow wakes up in the back of Wednesday's car with a spectacular hangover. He wonders aloud what happened to his own rental car, but Wednesday assures Shadow that he made a deal with Mad Sweeney that Mad Sweeney would take the car back. Shadow has no memory of making a deal, and the entire night in the bar feels fuzzy and blurred in a mead-induced haze. Shadow finds a large **gold coin** in his pocket and plays with it while Wednesday drives, slowly remembering that Mad Sweeney showed him how to make the coin appear, but unable to remember exactly how.

Wednesday stops at a gas station to let Shadow clean up his injuries from fighting Mad Sweeney. Shadow wonders what Laura will say when she sees his black eye, then remembers that Laura is gone. Wednesday shuffles through a transaction at the gas station register, forcing the girl behind the counter to try and then cancel three different cards and give him back his cash twice, appearing like an old man confused by the vagaries of credit cards versus cash. It is only once they are back on the road that Shadow realizes that Wednesday managed not to pay for his gas at all.

Wednesday drives towards Eagle Point, heading for the funeral parlor where Laura's memorial will be held. Shadow looks at the town that used to be his home, as they pull up to the House of Rest. Shadow goes in alone while Wednesday goes to get them rooms at the Motel America. Shadow manipulates his heavy **gold coin** as he walks into the dim funeral hall and to the room where Laura's casket is being displayed. All of Laura's friends and family are congregated in the room, but none greet Shadow.

Shadow writes his name in the remembrance book, following his signature with the date and "Puppy" in parentheses. He musters the courage to approach Laura's body as a small woman dressed in black comes in. Shadow recognizes Audrey Burton, Robbie's widow and Laura's best friend. Audrey walks to Laura's casket and Shadow follows her. Laura looks strange in death, still in a way that she never was in life. Audrey places a sprig of violets on Laura's chest, then spits in Laura's face.

Mad Sweeney was true to his word, as he had originally promised to give Shadow the secret to his coin trick if Shadow fought him (though Shadow now doesn't remember stealing the coin himself). Shadow does not yet know that this coin is far more special than the coins that Mad Sweeney was producing, but his faulty memory covers up the details of the night. That Wednesday's mead caused Shadow such trouble is further proof that Wednesday might not have Shadow's best interests at heart.



Shadow seems to care more about Laura's reaction to his injuries than the injuries themselves. Wednesday reveals his first con of the novel, showcasing his "profession" as a grifter who lies to others in order to live off of their money. Shadow does not necessarily object, but he does seem uncomfortable with Wednesday's lifestyle.



Laura may have been the most important thing in Shadow's life, but the reaction of Laura's friends and family suggests that Shadow was not exactly a welcome addition to Laura's. They treat him as an ex-con, unable or unwilling to see the depths underneath. Shadow masks his discomfort at the funeral by playing with his coin, unwittingly using a symbol of life to counteract his sorrow at Laura's death.



Shadow identifies himself as Laura's "puppy," clearly more comfortable being her "pet" than making life decisions for himself. In contrast, Audrey has a much more complicated relationship with her recently deceased friend. While Shadow memorializes and idolizes Laura, numbing his feelings rather than going to the effort of processing them, Audrey is more willing to fully give in to both her sorrow and her rage at Laura.



Audrey starts walking out the door and Shadow follows her again. Shadow asks why Audrey spit on Laura, which Audrey deliberately misunderstands as a question about the violets, a flower that Audrey and Laura picked together as girls. Shadow asks again, and Audrey calmly explains that Laura and Robbie were having an affair and that Laura died while giving Robbie a blow job in the car. Audrey walks away and Shadow returns to the funeral parlor.

Audrey does obviously love her friend, giving homage to their long history with the violets. Yet Audrey is also better able to separate her sadness at Laura's death from her anger at how Laura died. Unlike the drunk driving scenario that Shadow had imagined, it seems that it was Laura's fault that they both died—adding to the news that Laura was cheating on Shadow with Robbie and lying to him for years.



Shadow rides with Laura's mother, Mrs. McCabe, in the hearse to the graveyard. Mrs. McCabe dislikes Shadow and sniffs at his black eye. Shadow simply answers "Yes" when Mrs. McCabe asks if he has been fighting. At the graveyard, there is a short service and Laura is lowered into the ground. Shadow throws his **gold coin** in with the dirt, says, "I'm sorry," and then starts to walk back into town.

Though Shadow could have made excuses to Mrs. McCabe, he chooses to tell the truth even when it makes him look bad. He shows an early preference for honesty, as well as a desire to forgive Laura rather than hold a grudge—in general he just seems to not really care what happens to him anymore. He gives up his gold coin freely, making this present highly significant, though he is unaware of the coin's meaning right now.



As Shadow walks to the Motel America, Audrey pulls up and offers him a ride. Shadow refuses, even though it's snowing. Audrey follows him, creeping along in her car and grumbling about Laura's betrayal. Shadow refuses to take her bait, saying that he will always love Laura more than he hates her. Audrey angrily stomps on the gas pedal and drives away. Shadow keeps walking, thinking about Low Key calling a graveyard a "Bone Orchard," and a dream Shadow once had about an orchard made out of skeletal trees. Shadow trips in the dark, falling in the mud. As he gets up, he is grabbed from behind and a wet rag smelling of chemicals is forced over his mouth.

Audrey seems to desperately want someone to validate her anger at Laura, though there is a taboo against speaking ill of the dead. Shadow stays loyal to his late wife, though he is not blindly saying that he still loves her but intelligently choosing to look past his hurt to focus on the bond that he and Laura once shared. The imagery of the "bone orchard" presents graveyards as places where things can actually grow, blurring the lines between death and life in the novel and foreshadowing the fact that death is not an end.



Shadow wakes up with his hands tied behind his back and a raging headache in the back of a limousine. A fat young man (later revealed as Technical Boy) sits across the aisle and two men sit beside Shadow. Shadow asks to be dropped off at the Motel America, and the young man orders one of the other men to hit Shadow, warning him, "Don't fuck with me." The young man then asks about Wednesday's game plan, but Shadow has no answer. The young man takes out a hand-rolled cigarette and lights it, filling the car with the smell of burning electrical parts. Shadow watches the young man smoke as the limo's lights glint off his neon green eyes.

Though Shadow's first meeting with Wednesday was also unpleasant, Shadow is already loyal to his new employer in the face of another disturbing individual who seems to know far too much about Shadow. While Wednesday can easily pass for human, Technical Boy is more obviously something else, given his strange green eyes and stilted way of talking. Technical Boy acts as if he is always quoting someone else, showing that New Gods like him are more derivative and have little originality when compared to the Old Gods.



The young man (Technical Boy) tells Shadow to tell Mr. Wednesday that Mr. Wednesday is in the “Dumpster of History” while people like him “have reprogrammed reality.” Shadow agrees to do this, and then asks to be let out. The young man stops the limo, giving Shadow one last threat that they will “delete” him, then comments that his cigarette is made of synthetic toad skins with synthesized bufotenin (a hallucinogen). The people next to Shadow cut the ties on his hands as Shadow clambers out of the car. The young man calls out an apology about Shadow’s wife, and then Shadow walks back to the Motel America without further problem.

Technical Boy is the first sign that there is a conflict currently going on between the Old Gods and the New Gods based on who can adapt best to the future of America. Bufotenin is a chemical found in poisonous frogs, traditionally used by some tribal shamans in Amazonian cultures to trigger godly visions and prophecies. Thus, Technical Boy is again borrowing old traditions and wrapping them in new packaging, even as he claims to represent the new face of America that is rejecting all the old ways. Technical Boy may think he has “reprogrammed reality,” (another nod to his affinity for computers) but he actually has no control over the future or whether humans continue to believe in him.



CHAPTER 3

At the start of the chapter appears the so-called “old saying”: “Every hour wounds. The last one kills.” The receptionist at the Motel America gives Shadow his key and reluctantly agrees to call up to Mr. Wednesday’s room, though she regards Shadow with suspicion. Wednesday comes to Shadow in the lobby and leads him to the room where Wednesday is staying, which is covered with maps of America with sites highlighted in bright colors. Mr. Wednesday asks about the funeral, then nods in approval when Shadow doesn’t want to talk about it. Shadow explains that he was hijacked by a kid in a limo, and Mr. Wednesday says he knows the boy. Shadow goes back to his room to get some sleep, thinking that he can go tomorrow to take care of Laura’s things and their old apartment.

Gaiman seems to have borrowed this saying from a list of sayings on old sundials. In this context, it suggests that the gods get weaker over time rather than more powerful—and in general, time is a brutal and relentless force for everyone. Shadow’s appearance again makes him seem like a villain, though he’s not actually doing anything wrong, and indeed was just the victim of a crime. Wednesday pays no attention to Shadow’s physical or emotional distress after his capture by Technical Boy, simply accepting that Shadow will make these sacrifices for him. Shadow is still holding on to his old life, hoping to pick up the pieces where he left off rather than looking to new things.



Back in his own room, Shadow draws himself a bath, even though he is too big for the tub, trying to keep his promises to himself about his plan after prison. Shadow lies in bed, thinking that this is his first bed as a free man, but he finds no joy in the thought. To distract himself from thinking about the bed he used to share with Laura, Shadow runs through coin tricks in his head. He likes the physical process of manipulating the coins, though he does not have the personality or storytelling skills to be a truly great magician. Yet thoughts of Audrey telling him how Laura died keep intruding. The saying, “Every hour wounds. The last one kills,” runs through his head. Shadow smiles, thinking that if he bottles up his feelings long enough, soon he won’t feel anything.

Shadow follows through on his promises, even about something as small as a bath, because it is the only thing left connecting him to his old life. Shadow has no flair for misdirection: the small lies necessary to make people look in the wrong place during a trick. His honesty seems especially notable in contrast to Laura’s lies. Yet instead of taking the philosophy that time heals all wounds, Shadow seems to identify with the hope that all these hurts will build up and eventually kill him. Shadow doesn’t want to take control over his own life—he just wants nothing.



Finally, Shadow falls asleep. He dreams of walking through a room filled with statues, carvings, and images. Many have names in front of them: Leucotios, Hubur, Hershef, and others. As he backs away from a particularly disturbing image of a woman-like figure with two snakes coming out of her neck instead of a head, he hears a disembodied voice explain that these statues are the gods who have been forgotten except in historical accounts. As Shadow continues to walk through the room, the voice returns to explain that some of the gods are completely forgotten, without even a name. Though gods are harder to kill than humans, they can die unmourned and unremembered. Shadow begins to panic, then bolts awake.

Shadow wakes up fully, then goes into the bathroom without turning on any lights. When he comes out he sees Laura's silhouette, sitting on the side of his bed and wearing the suit she was buried in. Laura asks Shadow to sit beside her, but Shadow refuses until Laura explains about her and Robbie. Laura, smelling faintly of flowers and rot, asks sweetly for a cigarette. Shadow pulls on clothing and goes to the lobby to buy a pack.

Shadow gets back to his room and finds Laura still on the bed. He passes her the cigarettes and a book of matches. She lights one and takes a drag, but says that she can't feel anything. Laura apologizes for getting her Puppy mixed up in "it" and letting him go to prison, but Shadow reminds her that he could have said no. Shadow idly realizes he is not afraid of Laura, though she is effectively a walking corpse, and Laura begins to explain about her and Robbie.

Laura tells Shadow that she was lonely while Shadow was in jail, and that the sex with Robbie was good. Shadow winces, and Laura apologizes, saying that it's hard to remember which things matter when you're dead. She assures Shadow that she was never going to leave him, though she had been having an affair with Robbie for two years. She recounts the night that she died, explaining that she was very drunk as they drove home and wanted to give Robbie a "goodbye" blowjob now that Shadow was coming home. She knocked the gearshift with her shoulder and Robbie couldn't get it back in gear as they swerved and eventually crashed.

Leucotios (most often spelled Loucetios) was a god identified with lightning in the Gallo Roman religion; Hubur was a creation goddess who gave birth to the cosmos in Babylonian belief; and Hershef was a ram god from the Nile region who was folded into the sun god Ra in the Egyptian pantheon. All of these represent gods who were once worshipped but are now considered relics of history. The snake-headed goddess may be Wadjet, a prophetess who became the goddess of Upper Egypt after Upper and Lower Egypt were united. Though the voice (which Shadow will later realize is Mr. Ibis) does not make it explicit, he hints at the fact that gods live on belief. Thus when humans no longer remember them, gods die.



Laura appears like the femme fatale in a noir mystery, ready to trip up the hero and push him into bad choices. Shadow clearly still loves her, rather than being afraid of a walking corpse, though the details that Gaiman shares about her clothing and her scent make it obvious that Laura is actually dead. Laura's pull over Shadow is still strong, as he goes to get her cigarettes with no questions – but he is starting to assert his own needs by asking Laura to explain about Robbie.



Aside from controlling the small details of Shadow's life, it seems as though Laura was the one who actually came up with the so-far unexplained crime that put Shadow in jail. Shadow knows that he doesn't assert his own agency, refusing to blame Laura for something that was ultimately due to his own passivity. He is so indifferent about his life that he even seems comfortable talking to a dead person.



Shadow is capable of being hurt, though he usually doesn't show it. With Laura, he can afford to be more transparent about his feelings, since Laura is the person he used to trust most. Laura, in her own way, believes that she is as loyal to Shadow as he is to her, as she wasn't planning on leaving Shadow for good. Yet Laura's lies still get her in incredible trouble—she wouldn't have gotten in the car crash if she weren't having an illicit affair with her husband's best friend.



Shadow smells burning plastic and realizes that Laura's cigarette has burned down to the filter. He takes the cigarette butt from Laura's hand and throws it out the window. Shadow reminds Laura that she is dead and shouldn't be visiting him. Laura tells Shadow that she is going to protect him now. Then she thanks him for her "present." When Shadow questions what present, Laura pulls the large **gold coin** out of her pocket. She then gets up to kiss Shadow goodbye. Laura rises on tiptoes, and Shadow tries to kiss her on the cheek, but Laura turns her head so that their lips meet. She tastes of cigarettes and bile. As Laura walks out, she tells Shadow that dead or not, he will eventually ask her to stay the night.

Shadow taking the cigarette filter subtly shifts him into a more assertive mode. The present that he gave Laura actually had the power to grant life—though no one knows yet how the gold coin works—and Laura is going to use that second chance at life to keep Shadow safe (so in a way, the coin is keeping Shadow safe via Laura). Her parting promise that Shadow will one day ask her to stay the night seems like a threat that Shadow will soon be so desperate for her love that he will even accept her like this.



Laura leaves, with graveyard mud clinging to her shoes and the carpet. Shadow rushes over to Wednesday's room and knocks on the door. Wednesday answers the door wearing a towel, and Shadow notices that the receptionist who checked him in is hiding in Wednesday's bed. Shadow quickly explains that his dead wife just visited him, and Wednesday follows Shadow back to Shadow's room. Shadow notices a white scar down Wednesday's torso as Wednesday inspects the room and sniffs the air.

The graveyard mud is another sign that Laura is not some figment of Shadow's imagination. Wednesday takes the news that a dead person visited in stride, as resurrection is simply par for the course in many tales of Norse mythology – Odin himself has died before, keeping the scar down his torso as a souvenir of being stabbed in the side. Wednesday uses sex as a way of making himself feel alive—another god using humans for his purpose.



Shadow tells Wednesday that he's ready to leave Eagle Point tomorrow. Wednesday happily agrees and goes back to the girl in his room. Shadow sits on his bed, wishing that he could mourn Laura without being troubled by her visit. He lies down, thinking of the early years of their marriage, and then cries the hardest he has in years.

With this disturbing visit from Laura, Shadow seems ready to let go of the past and move forward with Wednesday. Gaiman asserts that truly experiencing one's emotions is better than bottling them up, as Shadow has a cathartic experience reliving the good memories with Laura, finally showing his emotions so that he can process them.



COMING TO AMERICA. 813 A.D.

A ship of sailors from the "Northlands" ask the "all-father" for protection as they make their way across the ocean. They finally reach the land to the west, claiming this land for the all-father, and begin to build a hall out of the trees they find in this land. The day the hall is finished, a great storm rises and the men give thanks that "The Thunderer" is with them.

The Northlands refers to the regions of Scandinavia where the Norse pantheon held sway, including parts of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland. Expeditions from these regions really did reach America around this time period, hundreds of years before Columbus "discovered" America. The all-father is Odin, and the Northmen bring him to America with their belief. The Thunderer is Thor, one of Odin's sons.



In the hall, a bard sings the old songs, including those about how Odin, the all-father, was sacrificed to hang for nine days on the world-tree and learned nine names, nine runes, and twice-nine charms. The next day, the men find a scraeling (the Norse word for foreigner) dressed in feather and furs. They take the scraeling to camp and give him a feast, then carry him to an ash tree and hang him in tribute to the all-father. The next day, two ravens peck at the dead scraeling's eyes and the men know their sacrifice was accepted.

Through the long winter, the men dream of spring and the time when they can send the boat back to the old country for their wives and refreshed supplies. On midwinter's day, it begins to snow. The men huddle in their encampment, but a scraeling war party invades and kills each of the men. The scraelings burn the men's camp and their boat, hoping that no other Northmen will arrive. A hundred years later, Leif the Fortunate lands in this place, which he calls Vineland. He finds the gods Tyr, Odin, and Thor already waiting for him there.

The number nine is of great significance to Odin, representing most of the aspects of the ritual that will later be known as Odin's vigil. As the gallows god, Odin accepts sacrifices that are hung, exacting a great price in return for protecting his people in this new land. Ironically, the Norse men call the original inhabitants of the land "foreigner," though they themselves more accurately fit that role. Odin's ravens, Hugin and Munin (Thought and Memory) are said to be his messengers. Here, they seem to signal that Odin is pleased.



Winter is a time to be endured, not a time to celebrate. These seasons roughly correspond to death and life, with winter being the time for death and spring the time for rebirth. It is thus fitting that the scraelings achieve their revenge against the Norsemen during winter, though it is obviously a hollow victory, as more invaders will follow in a few generations. This is the first explicit sign that gods literally accompany their believers when they move to a new place. Tyr is the Norse god of law and glory.



CHAPTER 4

The chapter begins by quoting the song "The Midnight Special." Shadow and Wednesday eat breakfast at a Country Kitchen across the street from the motel. As they eat breakfast, Wednesday heaping his plate with meat, Wednesday comments on Shadow's strange "dream." Shadow agrees, thinking to himself that he still saw Laura's muddy footprints on the hotel carpet when they left that morning. Wednesday asks Shadow how he got his name, but Shadow just shrugs and asks Wednesday how he lost his eye. Wednesday grumbles that it isn't lost—he knows exactly where it is.

Wednesday fills Shadow in on the plan: they will meet some of his associates in one of the most important places in the country so that Wednesday can persuade them to join his "current enterprise." But first, they need to stop in Chicago to make some money. They pay at the restaurant and leave, with Shadow driving and Wednesday looking at a folder of maps.

"The Midnight Special" is a traditional Southern folksong, possibly originating amongst prisoners in the American South hoping to catch the midnight train out of town—appropriate for this chapter where Shadow is violating his parole by leaving the state with Wednesday. Shadow thinks that Wednesday is referring to Laura as the dream, but Wednesday actually knows that Shadow had an odd dream about the gods. In the myth, Odin actually lost his eye in exchange for specific pieces of wisdom. As such, Gaiman jokes that of course Odin would "know" where his eye is.



Wednesday does not yet say what his current enterprise is, though it seems reasonable to assume that it has something to do with fighting against people like Technical Boy. Wednesday and Shadow's places in the car reflect their places in this plan: Shadow does the physical work while Wednesday points the directions.



Wednesday asks if Shadow will miss the town, but Shadow responds that he has too many memories of Laura here. Wednesday says he hopes that Laura stays there, and then asks if Shadow and Laura had sex last night. Shadow tells Wednesday to mind his own business. Wednesday laughs and says that the best part about the Midwestern states is that they have the kind of girls he loves, with blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin. Shadow asks if Wednesday had anything to do with what happened to Laura, and Wednesday denies any involvement. Shadow wonders if Wednesday is lying.

Shadow and Wednesday arrive in Chicago and park in front of a black brownstone building. They go into the lobby and meet a gaunt old woman coming down the stairs. Wednesday greets her and then introduces Shadow to her, calling her Zorya Verchernyaya. Zorya Verchernyaya is initially suspicious of Shadow's appearance, but perks up when she hears his name. She leaves to buy groceries, muttering that her two sisters cannot bring in any money for food because they cannot lie like she can when people come to hear their fortunes. Zorya Verchernyaya asks Wednesday for money for dinner if they are staying, and Wednesday gives her \$40.

Shadow and Wednesday go upstairs to a door painted red. A grizzled older man opens the door a crack and gruffly asks what "Grimnir" wants. Wednesday promises information to his old friend Czernobog, and the man (Czernobog himself) opens the door, smoking an unfiltered cigarette, but does not let Wednesday and Shadow in. A woman then comes to the door as well, introduces herself as Zorya Utrennyaya, and fusses at the men to go through to the sitting room where she will bring them coffee. Finally, Czernobog allows them to come in and sit. Shadow asks if Zorya Utrennyaya is Czernobog's wife, but Czernobog says that they are all relatives who came to America together long ago.

When Czernobog first came to America, he says, he settled in New York with all his countrymen, and then came to Chicago. He got a job in the meat business, dealing death blows to cows with a sledgehammer. Czernobog revels in the "art" to this blow, and laments that meat factories now use bolt guns that anyone can operate. Zorya Utrennyaya comes in with black coffee and comments that her sister Zorya Verchernyaya is out shopping. Shadow mentions that Zorya Verchernyaya tells fortunes, and Zorya Utrennyaya nods, saying that twilight is the only good time for lies, so Zorya Verchernyaya is the only good fortune teller.

Wednesday clearly knows that Laura was really there, and not just some dream. Wednesday clearly objectifies women, describing his "type" purely on looks. As his type sounds suspiciously like Laura, at least in terms of blue eyes, Shadow is right to be wary. Gaiman continually points out places where Wednesday is less than trustworthy.



Zorya Verchernyaya (Russian for Evening Star) seemingly takes a liking to Shadow because of the association of shadows with twilight. Zorya Verchernyaya's appearance is as foreboding as Shadow's, in its own way, but like Shadow, Zorya Verchernyaya has a surprising personality. Her habit of asking for money becomes a running gag in the novel, but also represents the way that gods are forced to beg or steal in order to survive when they are no longer worshipped.



Grimnir is another old name for Odin, showing that Wednesday and Czernobog have a long history together. The Slavic gods probably came to America with Russian immigrants during the Industrial Revolution, when massive waves of people from Eastern Europe came to America looking for jobs. Czernobog says they are relatives simply because they are from the same Slavic pantheon, as most myths do not consider Czernobog and the Zorya sisters siblings.



Czernobog's arrival story parallels that of the expansion of Eastern European immigrants to America, settling in urban centers near the coast and then spreading to cities further inland. Yet Czernobog seems unable to let go of his past glory, continuing to talk about the rush of killing cattle, though that is no longer part of his life. Zorya Utrennyaya (Russian for the Morning Star) is the dawn sister, and cannot hide things in shadow as well as her twilight sister can.



Shadow goes out to the bathroom and returns to find Czernobog yelling at Wednesday that they want his brother instead. Another old woman peeks out from another door in the hallway, asking if everything is okay, and Czernobog tells her, his third sister, to go back to sleep. Wednesday asks Czernobog if he has heard anything from his brother Bielebog, but Bielebog has been missing for years. Czernobog comments that they are now so old that both Bielebog's golden hair and his own black hair have turned grey.

Czernobog, Russian for "the Black God," is assumed to have a light brother, simply because most gods associated with light and dark come in pairs. Gaiman pokes fun at this expectation by having the light god, Bielebog, be "missing," since no one knows if he actually exists or not. Little is known about Czernobog except that he was associated with darkness, winter, and a hammer for sacrificial purposes. With the passage of time, Czernobog suggests that both he and Bielebog have become so diluted that they are practically the same person.



Czernobog then challenges Shadow to a game of checkers. Shadow, having played a lot of checkers in prison, has a strategy of never planning ahead, but picking the perfect move for the moment. Czernobog adds a bet to raise the stakes: if Shadow wins, Czernobog will join Mr. Wednesday's cause. If Czernobog wins, Czernobog gets to deal one blow with his hammer to Shadow's head. Unafraid of death, Shadow agrees. They play, and after a flurry of moves, Czernobog wins the first game with the black pieces. Shadow then persuades Czernobog to play again for the same terms, offering him two blows to the head if Czernobog wins this time. Czernobog agrees. Shadow realizes that Czernobog will try to repeat the same game he just won, and uses that knowledge to beat Czernobog this time.

Shadow's checkers strategy matches his philosophy on life. He does not often make choices with a long-term goal in sight, but just does what is easiest at the moment. However, Shadow's risky offer to play Czernobog again does have far-reaching consequences through winning Czernobog's loyalty. Shadow is able to be reckless because he really does not care if he lives or dies by Czernobog's hammer. Meanwhile, Czernobog is so frightened of losing that he reuses the same moves that worked the first time. This inability to adapt and change makes Czernobog (and indeed many of the Old Gods) easy to predict and easy to beat.



Zorya Verchernyaya brings supper into the sitting room, serving five bowls of borscht, leathery pot roast, and tough stuffed cabbage rolls. Shadow inquires after the third sister, but Zorya Verchernyaya says that Zorya Polunochnaya is still asleep. As they eat, Czernobog tells his sisters that Shadow's checkers victory means that Czernobog has to accompany Wednesday on his journey, but Czernobog's victory means that Czernobog gets to kill Shadow when the journey is over. Zorya Verchernyaya clucks that she would have given Shadow a much better fortune if he were her client.

Zorya Verchernyaya makes traditional recipes, but they don't taste good, another example of how sticking to the old ways does not necessarily yield good results. Her comment about giving Shadow a better fortune also reflects the ways that the gods now have to pander to humans in order to keep their belief. Zorya Verchernyaya only tells people good fortunes, whether they are true or not, in order to keep herself and her siblings well-fed and sheltered.



Zorya Verchernyaya insists that Wednesday and Shadow spend the night at their house, though they have to pay the same as they would at a hotel. Zorya Utrennyaya goes to bed while Czernobog, Zorya Verchernyaya, Wednesday, and Shadow eat a delicious store-bought apple pie. Wednesday compliments Shadow on his quick thinking with the checkers game wager, then goes to the guest room while Shadow goes to sleep on the sofa bed in the sitting room.

Zorya Verchernyaya again demands money, showing how poorly these Slavic siblings are doing. Yet the apple pie, an American staple that is also the one thing in the meal that Shadow enjoys, shows that the Zorya siblings could succeed if they included some more modern American elements in their lives. Wednesday, ever the con man, obviously appreciates Shadow's trick, as the honest Shadow succeeds where the untrustworthy Wednesday could not.



Shadow dreams that he is a soldier, driving a truck through gunfire over a minefield. He dies in his dream, then wakes, wondering if that means he has died in real life. A woman stands at the window in the sitting room, and Shadow realizes that this is the third sister, Zorya Polunochnaya. Zorya Polunochnaya looks younger than her sisters, with an unlined face and waist-long white hair. Zorya Polunochnaya points out the constellation Ursa Major out the window, and then invites Shadow to come to the roof with her.

Zorya Polunochnaya climbs out the window onto the fire escape. Shadow reluctantly follows her into the freezing wind. Zorya Polunochnaya says that the cold does not bother her for she is always comfortable at night, just as Zorya Utrennyaya is always comfortable at dawn and Zorya Verchernyaya is always comfortable at dusk. Shadow asks if Zorya Polunochnaya's nocturnal life is a medical condition, but Zorya Polunochnaya ignores him and explains that her people used to call Ursa Major "Odin's Wain" and the "Great Bear." In the old country, she says, they believed that these stars chain up a horrible god who will eat the world if the three sisters who watch the sky ever let him out.

Shadow decides that he is dreaming, and decides to tell Zorya Polunochnaya about his dead wife's visit last night. Zorya Polunochnaya counsels Shadow to ask what his wife wants the next time she comes back. Zorya Polunochnaya then brings up the checkers game and Czernobog's prize, explaining that people in the old days would sacrifice people to Czernobog by smashing the back of their skulls with rocks. Shadow wonders about all the strange rules he's been learning about in the past few days. Zorya Polunochnaya agrees that Shadow does not know how to keep hold of protection that he needs, saying cryptically that Shadow had the sun in his hand but gave it away. Zorya Polunochnaya then gives Shadow a weaker protection by plucking a **silver Liberty-head dollar coin** from the moon. When Shadow wakes the next morning, he finds the silver coin still in his hand.

COMING TO AMERICA. 1721.

The chapter opens with an unexplained author named "Mr. Ibis" writing about the "fiction" of American history, in which all people see the freedom that they wish. Those in London during the 18th century saw it as a second chance, even if getting to America meant accepting transportation as an indentured servant. Ibis writes specifically about Essie Tregowan, a woman who was originally from Cornwall and was born to a fisherman and a cook. Essie worked as a scullery maid and believed fervently in the legend of leaving a saucer of milk outside every night for the piskies (small mischievous spirits).

Shadow's dream, like his vision of the oubliette, again takes him back to a time and place that represents his present life. Shadow is now a "soldier" in Wednesday's army, putting his very life on the line. Zorya Polunochnaya, Russian for "midnight star," is referenced in some legends about the Zorya sisters, but Gaiman admits that the character in American Gods is mostly his own invention.



Zorya Polunochnaya explains that she and her sisters dominate different times of day, following the Slavic legend of the morning star and evening star watching the sun leave and then welcoming the sun home. Shadow still seems to be seeking reasonable and non-supernatural explanations for the things he's experiencing. That Zorya Polunochnaya is especially wary of a monster behind a constellation named for Odin suggests that Shadow should also keep a careful eye on what Wednesday is doing.



Shadow expresses a desire to be rational, and continues to act as though all of these crazy experiences are dreams – though his actual dreams are even weirder. Even as he says otherwise, Shadow is slowly coming to terms with the supernatural world he has stumbled into and the odd, but consistent rules that govern these mythical people. Zorya Polunochnaya, a goddess of the night, would also have some affinity for the dead, who are said to come out more easily at night. Zorya Polunochnaya also has ties to the moon, granting Shadow the protection of a silver coin that carries both the imagery of freedom in Lady Liberty's face, and protection, in the fact that Zorya Polunochnaya gave it as a gift. The "sun" that Zorya Polunochnaya refers to is the golden coin that Shadow gave to Laura.



America, much like Shadow, has the power to encompass many points of view depending on what one wants to see. Additionally, American history expands with each new culture that comes to the country, meaning that history as we tell it could never include enough detail to tell the full story. The dream of America as a place to start over is repeated again and again, though the gods brought here with these people seem more likely to repeat their same mistakes.



As a teenager, Essie fell in love with the son of the squire she worked for and performed a charm so that the son would love her as well. Essie gets pregnant by the squire's son, and the squire's family angrily dismisses her from her position. Essie gets her job back once the baby is born stillborn, but is crushed when the squire's son wants nothing to do with her. Harboring a new hatred for the squire's family, Essie lets her latest beau in at night to steal from the squire. Essie's lover is caught and hanged, and Essie herself is sentenced to seven years of "transportation"—meaning that she must travel to America and serve as an indentured servant for seven years. Essie wins the heart of the sea captain who takes her to the Carolinas, comes back to London as the captain's wife, then runs away with the captain's valuables the next time the captain is away on a voyage.

Over the next two years, Essie lives as a shoplifter and pickpocket, always remembering to put out a bowl of milk for the piskies in order to ensure her good fortune. But when Essie is 19, she has the bad luck to try to pickpocket the very same squire's son she had originally seduced. She is taken to Newgate and sentenced to hang until she is found to be pregnant once more. The judge softens the sentence to transportation for life. Essie endures a nightmarish voyage and makes it to Norfolk, Virginia, where she is bought by the tobacco farmer John Richardson, who needs a wet nurse after his own wife died giving birth to his daughter Phyllida.

Essie has a baby boy and names him Anthony "after his father," knowing that no one in Norfolk can contradict her story. Essie acts as a mother to John's children, telling them all the stories of the piskies that she grew up hearing. Essie continues to put out a bowl of milk each night and John's farm prospers. After 8 months, John comes to Essie's bedroom hoping to gain sexual favors, and Essie pretends to be shocked that he would take advantage of a widow-woman and a servant. John is so flustered by Essie's tears that he ends up proposing marriage to her.

Essie continually reinvents herself, deceiving those around her into thinking that she is whatever she needs to be in order to get ahead. As with the gods who beg, steal, and lie in order to survive, Essie seems to care little for the feelings of those around her. She also uses magic, leveraging her belief in the piskies for a love charm that will win her the heart of the boy she wants, rather than trying to have an honest relationship. Essie is so scared of death that seven years' transportation, though a harsh sentence, is infinitely preferable to staying in England.



Essie continues to pay homage to the piskies, winning herself their favor when it counts. The piskies are changeable fairy-like creatures in Cornwall who will both help and harm humans on a whim. In this case, the piskies let Essie get caught, but also seem to have a hand in reducing her sentence from death to servitude for life. Essie again takes this in stride, preferring anything over death, and again tricks a man into giving her what she wants – in this case a home and a job in America.



Anthony may very well be named for his father, as Mr. Ibis has not yet revealed who Anthony's father is. Yet Essie takes advantage of this new start to reinvent herself once more, showing the same shapeshifting and lying abilities that the piskies are said to have. This time, Essie morphs herself into a respectable woman, though she continues to believe in the piskies and pass them down to the next generation, thereby ensuring that they have enough belief to survive in America.



Essie and John get married and Essie bears John a son, naming him John Jr. for his father, and all three children grow up following the rituals that Essie teaches them to keep the piskies happy. After Essie and John have been married for 10 years, John dies of a toothache. Essie manages the farm herself for another 10 years, when Anthony then kills John Jr. in a struggle over who will inherit the farm and win Phyllida's hand in marriage. Anthony flees Virginia to avoid trial and a heart-broken Phyllida marries a ship's carpenter so that there will be a man on the farm. Essie continues to tell the stories of the piskies to Phyllida's children, but this generation only wants modern tales like "Jack and the beanstalk."

Essie is one of few characters who truly benefits from her association with gods, gaining a prosperous farm due to her careful attention to the piskies. Yet the piskies are not able to keep her completely safe from tragedy, showing that gods are not all-powerful in America (if anywhere). The fight between Anthony, conceived in the Old Country, and John Jr., conceived in America, forms a microcosm of the fight between the Old Gods and the New Gods, as each group struggles to eliminate the other so that they can dominate the hearts and minds of the American people. Meanwhile, Americans show a natural inclination away from gods, as the third generation of children raised completely on American soil has no time for gods from the old country.



One May, an elderly Essie takes a bag of peas out to the kitchen garden to shuck them. Her mind ranges back to her childhood in Cornwall, then to her time as a pickpocket, and finally to how she had forced herself to have sex with the warden at Newgate prison so that she could escape death via a pregnancy. Her thoughts are interrupted by a red-haired man dressed all in green, and Essie realizes that this man is a Cornishman (called a "cousin Jack" in America). The red-haired man laments how much harder life is in America than in his native Cornwall, but thanks Essie for bringing him and his kind to America. The red-haired man asks for Essie's hand, and she takes it. Essie's family later finds her body, still holding the bag of peas.

At the end of her life, Essie reveals that she actually took matters of her life into her own hands, actively deciding to get pregnant so that she would not be hanged. Essie, like the gods Wednesday and Bilquis, used sex as a method of escaping death, and not as an expression of love or lust. Just as Essie regrets some of her harder life choices, the piskies to whom Essie was so diligent are also less than grateful that they have to live in America where children would rather hear about a made-up Jack than the "Cousin Jack" of their Cornish heritage. Yet the relationship between Essie and the piskies is still one of the more positive god-human relationships of the book.



CHAPTER 5

At the start of the chapter, Gaiman includes a quote from "Madame Life's a Piece in Bloom" that describes death as "the ruffian on the stair" of Madam Life's house. Only Zorya U is awake to say goodbye to Shadow and Wednesday when they leave. Shadow keeps his **silver coin** in his hand, flipping it over his palm. Wednesday nods at Shadow's skill, but Shadow says that he lacks talent for misdirection—which holds people's attention in the wrong place so that the trick looks truly magical.

The quote at the start of the chapter acts as a reminder that death is always waiting at the end of life, no matter what people do to avoid it. Wednesday's assessment of Shadow's coin trick also mirrors their attitude when it comes to cons. Shadow may be able to do the physical mechanics of a con, but he lacks the flair for it that Wednesday has.



Looking at the **silver coin** more closely, Wednesday laughs that Lady Liberty, a foreigner, is the symbol of all that America holds dear, and says theatrically that "Liberty is a bitch who must be bedded on a mattress of corpses." Shadow murmurs that he thinks Lady Liberty is beautiful, and Wednesday calls this the eternal folly of man.

Wednesday has a very cynical view of liberty, quoting Saint-Just, one of the most violent leaders of the French Revolution, when he considers liberty's place in America. Shadow takes a purer view of liberty, simply calling it beautiful. Shadow may be naïve, but this viewpoint actually allows him to find an easier freedom than is possible in Wednesday's violent and cynical worldview.



Wednesday takes Shadow to the bank that he says they will be robbing later, and asks for deposit forms from the teller. Wednesday then goes outside, inspects the night deposit slot, and writes down the phone number of the pay phone across the street. Wednesday then asks Shadow to think of snow. Shadow concentrates on the details of a snow storm while Wednesday goes to Kinko's and photocopies the deposit slips, makes business cards, then prints several large signs. Finally, as Shadow begins to get a headache, he is surprised to look outside the Kinko's window and see a snow storm approaching in the distance.

Shadow and Wednesday leave the Kinko's and Wednesday tells Shadow that his new identity is A. Haddock, Director of Security at AI Security Services, while Wednesday himself is Jimmy Gorman, Security Guard. Shadow warns Wednesday that he won't do anything illegal, and Wednesday assures Shadow that they won't be. After lunch, Wednesday dresses himself up as an old beat cop while it starts to snow. Shadow goes to the supermarket across the street with directions to shop for a while, then wait by the pay phone and say he is waiting for a call from his girlfriend, who's having car trouble.

Wednesday goes to the First Illinois bank ATM and tapes an "out of order" sign to the front. As people come up to use the ATM, Wednesday explains that it is out of order but he can still take their deposits. Wednesday does this all afternoon, charming all the people who happily give him their deposits so that they can be on their way and out of the cold snow. The cops pull up outside the bank after a few hours and Shadow sees Wednesday give them a business card. After a few minutes, the pay phone rings. Shadow answers it as "Andy Haddock" and helpfully explains to the police that the bank employs his business when they need security guards. The police warn Shadow that he really should send two men when large amounts of cash are involved, then tell him to have a nice day.

Wednesday continues his performance as Jimmy Gorman until night falls, then tells Shadow to take him to the other First Illinois Bank in town. Wednesday deposits all the checks, credit card slips, and some of the cash there, keeping a random amount from some envelopes. Wednesday then tells Shadow to drive toward Madison, chuckling at their earnings for the day. On the drive, Wednesday muses sadly that America is the only country that "worries about what it is." He then perks up and tells Shadow that they are heading to the "House on the Rock."

Shadow's belief in a snow storm is enough to make the storm appear, showing how powerful the force of belief (and, perhaps, Shadow himself) is within the world of the novel. Wednesday busies himself with setting up the materials for their con, with a practiced hand that shows he has a wealth of experience with these types of operations.



Wednesday sets up a two-man con that would not be possible without a partner, clearly relishing the chance to get more elaborate with his scheme. Shadow, again ambiguously placed with regards to the law, does not want to go to jail again but does not seem to have any moral qualms against robbing the bank itself. The scheme also makes use of the trusting nature of small towns in the Midwest, where no one will think twice about Shadow waiting by a pay phone as long as he has a ready excuse.



Wednesday's con depends on people coming to the bank to make their deposits in cash, rather than using online banking service with checks or debit cards. It shows that he is still stuck somewhat in the past, though he has tried to adapt to the future by using the banking scheme at all. While Shadow may say that he has no talent for misdirection, he warms to the role of Andy Haddock quite well, seemingly more comfortable in this fake personality than he is in his own skin. The details that "Andy" adds manage to distract the policemen enough to let them get away.



Wednesday again uses misdirection, depositing things at the other branch of the bank to split people's attention when they try to figure out what happened later on. Wednesday's musings on America reflect Gaiman's general project in the book—portraying America's constant attempt to define itself.



Shadow and Wednesday drive for hours, then reach the House on the Rock. Wednesday explains that it is a roadside attraction, the traditional thing that Americans build when they sense a place of power. While other countries might build churches, temples, or stone circles, Americans feel most transcendent wandering around tourist traps. Wednesday and Shadow buy tickets and walk into the strange house, which is full of retro items and odd animatronics. Wednesday explains that the house was built by Alex Jordan, for reasons that Alex himself didn't understand, but millions of people come every year. Wednesday takes Shadow to a "gypsy" themed fortune-teller machine. Shadow's fortune says: "Every ending is a new beginning. Your lucky number is none. Your lucky color is dead. Motto: Like father, like son."

Shadow and Wednesday wander through the large house, then find Czernobog in the Mikado room, which is decorated in a vaguely Asian manner with an off-key version of "Danse Macabre" playing in the background. Czernobog forces Shadow to watch an animatronic show of a drunkard waking up in a church yard to see spirits everywhere, then being shamed by the priest. Czernobog says that this scene is the real world. The three men then wander through what seem like hundreds of rooms full of old Americana and random ephemera. Finally, they reach a small pizzeria where an elderly black man in a bright suit and yellow gloves is waiting. Wednesday introduces him as Mr. Nancy.

Mr. Nancy is smoking a cigarillo, and Czernobog lights a cigarette, musing that "our kind" like cigarettes because they act as reminders of the burnt offerings that humans used to sacrifice. Mr. Nancy laughs and says he'd rather have a woman. Mr. Nancy then looks at Shadow and affably comments that Shadow may be big but he looks as stupid as Mr. Nancy's useless son. Shadow thanks Mr. Nancy for the compliment of being compared to Mr. Nancy's family. Mr. Nancy nods appreciatively.

The House on the Rock is a real roadside attraction located in Wisconsin. Wednesday explains it as a response to the divine call within American land itself, but twisted by the strangeness of American culture into something unrecognizable as a traditional place of worship. This fortune-teller machine actually holds accurate predictions about Shadow's future, picking up on the similarities between Wednesday and Shadow when it says, "like Father, Like son," and the chance that Shadow will have to be resurrected from some sort of "ending."



When Czernobog refers to the animatronic as the real world, he is referencing the way that humans really can see spirits, but be shamed out of believing in them by various organized religions that hold cultural power in America – especially Christianity, which leaves no room for other deities. The "random" collection of items captures a significant aspect of America – it's a type of catch-all country that does encompass seemingly random elements, and so this eclectic collection is a fitting "holy place" for the country.



By "our kind," Czernobog means gods, though Shadow is still not ready to accept that the gods are real. While Czernobog enjoys violent sacrifices, Mr. Nancy expresses a preference for sexual favors, equating sacrifice and sex in terms of the role they play in keeping the gods fed. Mr. Nancy is the American version of the West African trickster spider, Anansi, who has a flair for story-telling and insults (and who features in Gaiman's book Anansi Boys). Shadow again reflects what people want to see in him, matching Mr. Nancy's wit the same way he was accepted by Czernobog with their checkers wager.



Mr. Nancy, Shadow, Czernobog, and Wednesday make their way to the House on the Rock's famous carousel. Shadow is entranced by the magic and variety of the hundreds of animals circling the carousel. Wednesday and Mr. Nancy compare it to the world's largest prayer wheel, then climb up despite the many signs that say that the carousel should not be ridden. Shadow, wary of being caught, reluctantly climbs up as well. Wednesday chooses a golden wolf, Czernobog rides an armored centaur, and Mr. Nancy chooses a leaping lion. Seeing the three old men completely happy, Shadow relaxes and decides the ride will be worth it even if they get thrown out. He mounts a creature with an eagle's head and a tiger's body and feels truly happy for the first time in three years.

A prayer wheel is a small spinning object of paper and wood meant to focus a person's spiritual energy on their prayers. Likening the carousel to a prayer wheel explains why Wednesday would consider this one of the most important places in America – it is one of the places where he has the most power. Wednesday's wolf references Odin's traditional wolf companions, Geri and Feri, while Czernobog and Mr. Nancy's mounts likewise match aspects of their godly personas. Shadow seems to be riding a completely made up hybrid creature with no previous myths associated with it – pointing to the fact that Shadow himself is a hybrid demi-god, with his own American story to tell aside from the patterns of the past.



CHAPTER 6

The chapter opens with an excerpt from Thomas Bailey Aldrich's poem "Unguarded Gates": a long list of exotic gods brought to America by immigrants. Shadow can't process what he is seeing as he rides the carousel, looking at Mr. Nancy but also seeing a bejeweled spider and an extraordinarily tall man with a feather headdress and a young black boy and a small garden spider overlaid on Mr. Nancy's body. He turns his head to Czernobog and sees there a small dark thing with coals for eyes and a dark-haired prince wearing a bearskin and riding a creature with blue swirls all over its body. Wednesday rides his wolf, now detached from the carousel, over to Shadow, and tells Shadow all his many names and titles – including Odin, the all-father. Two huge ravens come and perch on Wednesday's shoulders. Shadow doesn't know what to think, but remembers the Buffalo Man telling him to "Believe everything."

Aldrich's poem names the many peoples who brought new gods to America, though Gaiman uses it with a far more positive connotation than the original. Where Aldrich saw this diversity as a threat (to him, America's "gates" should be guarded), Gaiman sees it as an asset. The godly visages of Mr. Nancy, Czernobog, and Wednesday finally appear, taking different forms that have arisen through the centuries as legends about these gods have morphed and changed. Their current forms are simply how modern Americans choose to view them, without knowing their godly pasts. Shadow is reminded that he must accept all of this overwhelming mythology, rather than picking one form as the "true" face of each god.



Shadow suddenly finds himself in a large hall with a thatched roof and a fire burning in the center of the room. Mr. Nancy mumbles about how cold it is in Wednesday's hall, which is called Valaskjalf. About ten people sit on benches against the walls, and Wednesday angrily whispers that there should be many more here. Nancy brushes past him to start off the meeting with a story. He opens by acknowledging that their gathering is few, and may seem powerless, but then tells a story about the time that he, a spider, stole Tiger's balls and blamed the monkeys for the theft. The moral of the story is: just because you're small, doesn't mean you have no power.

In Norse mythology, Valaskjalf is a hall with a roof made entirely of silver, where Odin can oversee the whole universe. As Wednesday is attempting to impress his guests right now, it makes sense that he would choose a location for their meeting that best suits him. Though it is not said here, Shadow later finds out that this hall is part of the "Backstage" of America where the mythical foundations of the country are laid bare. But for all Wednesday's preparations, the Old Gods are too weak and set in their ways to respond to his call to action. Mr. Nancy uses his particular talent for story-telling to bring the few people that are here together and remind them that they still can accomplish mighty things with enough belief and effort.



Wednesday stands up and walks into the firelight. He gives a speech about the coming storm, and the loss of power that all the gods have faced in America. Now that they, the Old Gods, have little influence, New Gods are arising to take their place. Wednesday thinks that the Old Gods should band together and fight against the New Gods. A woman in a red sari, Mama-ji, stands and protests that Wednesday is just looking for his own glory, and that the New Gods will not stand the test of time. She thinks that they should wait for the New Gods to become obsolete again, like what happened with the gods of railroad and iron. Other gods agree with Mama-ji.

The fire in the hall goes out, and Mr. Nancy tells Shadow to be careful not to use the word “god” once they get back to the House on the Rock. The group then magically returns to the room with the carousel, and Shadow asks if everything in the hall really happened. Mr. Nancy tells Shadow to hush. Wednesday directs Shadow to take his car and shuttle the other gods, now in mundane human forms, to a restaurant near the House on the Rock. On his second trip, Shadow drives Mama-ji and a young man with a chest shaped oddly like a barrel, who hums the entire way to the restaurant (Alviss).

Shadow gets to the restaurant and waits outside while his passengers go in. Then he overhears a half-familiar voice telling a group of men dressed in suits to “round them all up.” A bag is then thrown over Shadow’s head and his wrists and ankles are bound with tape. Shadow is taken to a small room with no windows and left alone for hours. Finding he still has coins in his pocket, Shadow practices coin tricks to pass the time and keep his attention so that he can’t worry about whether whoever kidnapped him is going to kill him. Eventually, he takes out the **silver Liberty coin** and just holds it, waiting.

At three in the morning, two men in suits come in to Shadow’s cell, one with nice-looking hair and bitten fingernails, and the other with glasses and well-kept nails. The men ask how long Shadow has been working for “Cargo,” which they clarify is their name for Wednesday. Shadow tells the men that he has known Wednesday for three days, and one of the men twists Shadow’s ear painfully, telling him not to lie to them. The two men start a good-cop, bad-cop routine, one asking Shadow to cooperate while the other man punches him. Shadow asks their names, to which they answer Mr. Stone and Mr. Wood.

Wednesday finally makes it clear that the gods live off of human belief, and are in trouble in America because so many Americans follow new gods of technology or other modern things, so there is no belief left for the Old Gods. Wednesday’s references to a coming storm echo Sam Fetisher, Shadow’s fellow prisoner from Chapter One who also sensed a storm coming. Yet Mama-ji makes it clear that Wednesday is trying to cause this storm, like Shadow caused the snow storm for the bank robbery, by getting enough gods to believe that there’s a fight coming so a fight actually happens. Mama-ji acts as the voice of reason that would let time take care of the New Gods in the way it always has, keeping only those strong enough to endure.



Shadow still isn’t sure whether he should believe that the men he is working for are gods at all, somewhat explaining why Mr. Nancy is wary of sharing their identities freely. America does not accept gods now, and would simply think that these people are crazy. The Old Gods must take on mundane human forms in order to fit in and avoid showing the few humans who do still believe in them how far they have fallen.



The half-familiar voice belongs to Mr. World, who Shadow will meet again later and again half-recognize (as his cellmate Low Key). Shadow’s coin trick distraction echoes his attempts to keep his mind off of Laura when he was in the Motel America, but this time Shadow actually does want to live. He is starting to wake up to his life and truly care whether he lives or dies. The silver coin promises to protect Shadow, as he grabs it subconsciously, tapping into its power.



The two “spooks” who come to interrogate Shadow were inspired by what Gaiman saw as America’s obsession with “Men in Black” and the possibility that the government has a secret spy network. They fall into the classic pattern of having two “bad guys” who work together and are barely distinguishable. Their names also reflect the materials humans first used to make tools.



Mr. Stone gives Shadow a Snickers bar and asks Shadow to explain what happened at the House on the Rock. Shadow refuses to answer, so Mr. Wood starts beating him. Shadow knows that he could take on both men and incapacitate them, but refuses to let his mind go to that kind of violence again. Shadow clutches his **Liberty coin** until the beating finally stops. Mr. Stone gives Shadow one more warning to cooperate and then leaves Shadow alone in the cell.

Shadow falls into a restless sleep on the small cot in his cell and dreams that he is 15 again, watching his mother die. He wakes and wonders if Wednesday has been caught as well, then notices that the **Liberty coin** is still in his hand and still cold. The coin makes Shadow think of Zorya Polunchnaya, and he is able to fall back to sleep soundly.

When Shadow wakes again, Laura is shaking his shoulder. For a minute, Shadow thinks that this entire adventure was a dream and he is at home with Laura, where he belongs. Then he notices that Laura is covered in blood, which she says comes from the guards she murdered. Shadow is disturbed, but Laura says that taking a life is no longer a big deal now that she herself is dead. Laura tells Shadow to leave while he can. Shadow notices that Laura still has the **gold coin**, now hanging from a chain at her neck.

Shadow thanks Laura for protecting him, then opens the door in the corridor to find that it leads outside and that he is in an old abandoned railroad car parked in a forest. He asks how Laura found him here, and Laura says that Shadow is a beacon in the darkness for her. Shadow remembers Zorya Polunchnaya's advice, and asks Laura what she wants. Laura says that she wants to be alive again, fully. Shadow says that he will try to figure that out, but Laura has already disappeared. Shadow sees the sun rising in the east, turns himself towards the south, and begins to walk.

The silver coin protects Shadow's body, but it also protects his soul, keeping him from devolving into violence that he knows would damage his psyche. Gaiman hints that Shadow was arrested for a similar situation in which he beat up two guys.



Gaiman gives this vague reference to Shadow's mother, but says nothing about his father. Shadow's loner persona makes it likely that Shadow is an orphan. The silver coin, still cold as a sign of its magical nature and relationship to the night, is also able to watch over Shadow's dreams, helping him escape pain there as well.



Shadow still hopes that his life will turn out to be normal, but finding out that his beloved wife (who's also still dead) has murdered two people ruins any illusion of that. Laura, on the other side of the boundary between life and death, sees little difference between the two. Yet Shadow has woken up enough that he now considers life to be precious, and not worth taking. The gold coin continues to sustain Laura, and allows her to act as protection for Shadow, helping him reap the life-giving power of the coin as well.



The silver coin was able to protect Shadow enough to survive, but only the gold coin is powerful enough to help him escape from harm altogether. Shadow's connection with the coin may explain his "beacon"-like shining, though it also may be because of Laura's emotional attachment to Shadow. Either way, Laura wishes to return to life fully, rather than living the half-life that she now possesses. Aside from helping him escape, the sun also helps Shadow figure out which way to go next.



CHAPTER 7

At the start of the chapter, an excerpt from O’Flaherty’s *Hindu Myths* explains that the Hindu gods are less “godly,” but a completely different type of being—archetypes that symbolize the life and roles of all humans. Shadow walks south for several hours through what he assumes to be southern Wisconsin. He hides from a fleet of jeeps on the road and two helicopters flying overhead. He considers the question, “What do I want?” but doesn’t have an answer. The only thing he really wants at the moment is not to be caught and blamed for the murders Laura committed, which he realizes is really a desire for everything to go back to normal.

Shadow keeps walking and comes across a large black bird picking at the body of a dead fawn. The bird calls out to Shadow and tells Shadow that Wednesday will meet him in “Kay-ro.” Shadow realizes that this bird must be one of Wednesday’s ravens. The raven tells Shadow to follow the Mississippi and find Jackal. Shadow shakes himself out of the weirdness of this situation and tries to get more information, but the raven just flies up to a tree. Shadow realizes that he is supposed to follow the raven as it flies from tree to tree.

The raven leads Shadow to a Culver’s Frozen Custard restaurant and a gas station. Shadow orders a burger at the Culver’s and then goes into the bathroom to clean up. He asks the attendant at the gas station where to rent a car, and the woman responds that the closest place to do that is Madison. Shadow says that he is hoping to get to “Kay-ro” and the gas station attendant finds a map and points to Cairo, Illinois. The woman explains that this area of Illinois is called “Little Egypt” because there was once a famine that affected the whole state, but it didn’t kill the crops in that region, like the famine in the Bible where only Egypt still had stores of food. Shadow asks how he should get there, and the woman says that her brother-in-law sells used cars.

Shadow still has some money from the bank heist with Wednesday, so he buys a junky used car from the brother of the woman at the gas station. He drives for hours through Wisconsin and into Illinois, through small towns and open farmland. He turns off into a field and decides to go to sleep for a couple of hours. He dreams again of the Buffalo Man, who asks why Shadow is still working for Wednesday. Shadow feels that he is obligated to, as he drank Wednesday’s mead. Shadow asks the Buffalo Man if the gods are real, but the Buffalo Man only turns the question back to Shadow.

Though gods can be worshiped in order to give life meaning, they can also teach lessons through archetypal stories that can apply to all humans. Gaiman begins to introduce this function for the gods, weaving it into their place as idols. The New Gods have technology and civilization on their side, meaning that Shadow must return to nature if he wishes to escape them. However, Shadow still has no long-term goals for himself, outside of surviving the present moment and returning to the status quo in which Laura controlled his life.



This raven is either Hugin or Munin, the two ravens associated with Odin. The raven pronounces the word “Kay-ro” because the town called Cairo in Illinois is actually pronounced this way, unlike the original Egyptian city. Again Shadow simply accepts things that are odd and allows others to make his decisions for him instead of continuing to examine what he really wants.



Culver’s is one of the most popular chain food restaurants in the Midwest United States, but somewhat unknown outside of that region. As with the House on the Rock, Gaiman celebrates these real places that are often overlooked in popular conceptions of America. The gas attendant’s explanation for why America has a Little Egypt again recalls the idea that things in America recall the same basic patterns from other countries. It also shows the importance of story-telling, as people identify with stories like those in the Bible and apply them to their own lives.



Gaiman spends time describing places usually known as “flyover country,” because it is so boring to drive through endless fields of corn and other crops. Yet Gaiman revels in this side of America that is rarely seen. The Buffalo Man tries to make Shadow consider the real reason why he is following all of Wednesday’s orders, but Shadow simply stays loyal to his promise. However, the Buffalo Man doesn’t let Shadow take the easy way out, refusing to tell him for sure whether the gods are real or not. Shadow must decide for himself what to believe.



Shadow wakes to find someone tapping on his window, asking if he is all right. Shadow gets out of the car and meets Sam, who clarifies that she is a girl Sam, not a boy Sam. Sam says she's hitchhiking down to El Paso, Illinois from Madison and has chosen Shadow as her next ride. They get in the car and Shadow drives in silence for a few minutes. Shadow then asks if Sam is really human. Sam says yes, and asks Shadow to reassure her that he is not an escaped convict or a mass murderer. Shadow hesitates, then admits that he served time but he never killed anyone.

Sam asks Shadow why he went to prison. Shadow explains that he hurt some people badly, noticing that Sam's features look somewhat stone-like. Sam comments that Shadow looks like he has Indian blood, then points out a restaurant coming up along the road that has good food. Shadow stops the car at the restaurant and tells Sam that they can decide who pays with a coin toss. Then he rigs the toss so that he has to pay for the food.

As they eat, Sam asks Shadow what he does. Shadow tells Sam that he is going to Cairo to meet his boss, as he works as an errand boy. Shadow then guesses that Sam is a student who studies art history and women's studies, and casts her own bronzes. Sam is annoyed, and a bit disturbed, to admit that all of this is true. Sam asks if Shadow is married and Shadow admits that his wife died. Sam sympathizes that her sister also suffered a loss last winter: the death of her 13-year-old son. Shadow tries to ask about it a bit more, but Sam just says that it happened in a sweet little town where bad things usually do not happen. Sam questions how Shadow really knew what she studied, and also asks if he's sure that he isn't part Native American.

Shadow and Sam finish eating and pay. While walking out to the car, Shadow asks Sam if she's ever read Herodotus. Sam is confused, wondering how Shadow can seem like such a big, dumb guy and then talk about Herodotus. Sam has heard of Herodotus, calling him the "father of lies." Shadow adds that Herodotus described gods in a matter-of-fact way, as if they were actually real. Sam adds that she once read that primitive belief in gods actually came from people hearing their own thoughts and not knowing that the voices in their head were their own.

The Midwest United States includes many cities that have doubles elsewhere, including in other parts of America itself (the more famous El Paso is in Texas). Gaiman focuses on these places that tie America to second versions of other places, just as the gods are reincarnated here as well. Again, Shadow has the chance to lie to make himself look better, but chooses to tell the truth anyway.



Shadow compares Sam to features of the land, marking her as someone uniquely American among the foreigners Shadow has met. Shadow shows his kindness by only using his ability to trick people for good causes, rather than taking advantage of them as Wednesday would have done. Shadow again seems racially-ambiguous, appearing differently to different people.



Shadow's strange knowledge about Sam could be a nod to his semi-divine nature, or it could just be Gaiman's joke about stereotypes of liberal arts students. Sam, a bit like Shadow, is also able to accept strange things, as she tends to tolerate and embrace everything about other people in a true representation of the best features of diversity in America. The first reference to the town that will later be revealed as Lakeside captures Lakeside's strange dichotomy: Lakeside is known as a good town where nothing bad ever happens, but inexplicable bad things do happen there.



Sam at first saw Shadow as everyone else does, expecting that his physical strength would outweigh his intelligence. Yet Sam also has no expectations for Shadow, so Shadow is able to show his true character instead of becoming what Sam wants him to be, as he does with other people. Sam's reference to Herodotus as the "father of lies" is a reminder that there is a fine line between history and fantasy—an overarching theme of the book itself.



Sam begins to tell her favorite story about gods: a Viking king who decides to sacrifice one of his men so that Odin will send a wind to push their ship to land. The Vikings draw lots to see who will be sacrificed, and the king himself loses. The Vikings decide that they will just symbolically hang the king, and play act at hanging him. As they go through the motions, though, their symbolic rope becomes a real rope and the king truly dies. Sam comments that white people have some terrible gods, explaining that she herself is half Cherokee.

In Sam's story, every symbolic action becomes real, as Odin takes control of the sacrifice and demands the full price instead of the symbolic gesture. This foreshadows how the vigil Shadow symbolically agreed to hold for Odin will also later become a real sacrifice. Sam differentiates between the gods of foreign white people and the Native American gods who teach lessons and give advice rather than exacting payment.



Shadow stops in El Paso and makes sure that Sam gets safely into her aunt's house before driving away. Shadow keeps driving, until at 11 pm he starts shaking and has to stop. He gets a room at a motel and turns the TV on to unwind before he goes to sleep, setting the timer so the TV will shut off automatically. He watches an episode of the Dick Van Dyke Show, noticing that the tone of the episode seems oddly dark for the normally cheery show. The picture then dissolves and suddenly becomes an episode of "I Love Lucy." As the episode of continues, Lucy stares out of the TV and talks directly to Shadow.

The television is another element that has become worshipped in modern American culture, receiving its own goddess who takes on the form of "I Love Lucy." This goddess shows the dark side of television, even in a show that is supposed to be happy, exposing the difficult circumstances that can lurk behind even the nicest of facades. In American Gods, if it seems too good to be true, it usually is.



Lucy explains that she is really the god of television (Media). Lucy offers Shadow a job, working for the New Gods instead of the dead-end Old Gods. Reminded of Technical Boy's speech, Shadow asks if Lucy knows him. Lucy responds that Technical Boy is a great kid, who happens to be bad with strangers. Seeing that Shadow has not been persuaded, Lucy offers money, and then starts unbuttoning her shirt to offer Shadow a peek at Lucy's breasts. Just then the timer Shadow had set kicks in and the TV goes dark. Shadow, relieved, rolls over and goes to sleep, thinking that he would rather have roadside attractions than shopping malls.

The New Gods are willing to promise anything to win human followers and maintain their supremacy over the Old Gods. Yet their rewards are empty, and Shadow knows from his unpleasant experience with Technical Boy that it's unlikely the New Gods will follow through. Media acts like a public relations representative trying to smooth over Technical Boy's rudeness, as if saying he is "bad with strangers" excuses the fact that Technical Boy kidnapped and beat Shadow. Though Shadow recognizes that roadside attractions, associated with the Old Gods, are a bit run-down and odd, he would rather have that authenticity than the shiny new packages of the New Gods and their shopping malls.



The next morning, Shadow gets back on the road. He drives through East St. Louis and notes the beginnings of plantation-style architecture in the houses and all the features unique to this part of the Mississippi River. It makes him think of the old waterway of the Nile, a trading center for the known world thousands of years ago. He makes it to Historical Cairo and parks his car so he can walk along the river.

Gaiman again describes facets of the American landscape that might not be shown in other media about America. Here, the architecture pays homage to the past in the South's plantation roots. Shadow again links the "new" country of America to parallels in older countries, as America seems to bring new life to these places.



A small brown cat joins Shadow as he strolls down the river, and he comes across a young girl dressed in ill-fitting clothes. Shadow shows the young girl some coin tricks and then laughs as he notices that the small cat and a large black dog seem to watch them as well. Shadow asks the girl if she liked the trick, but the dog answers, saying that Shadow is not as good as Harry Houdini. The young girl runs away, terrified at this. Then a crane-like man walks up and scratches the dog's ears. Shadow asks which one of them is Jackal. The black dog answers that it is him. The crane-like man introduces himself as Mr. Ibis, and invites Shadow to have lunch with him. He then leads Shadow into a building whose door says "Ibis and Jacques. A Family Firm. Funeral Parlor. Since 1863."

Shadow again shows kindness to a child, always hoping to use his coin tricks to bring joy to people. The girl reacts the way that most people would to a talking animal: with fear. Shadow again accepts all the oddities around him with no complaints. He has begun to fit into this world and anticipate how it will work, imagining that Jackal – a kind of wild dog associated with the Egyptian god Anubis – must be one of these talking animals. Meanwhile, the "crane-like" man is actually related to the ibis, a water bird in Egypt associated with the Egyptian god Thoth.



SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA

Salim sells samples in New York City, though the presence of so much diversity in one place scares him. His brother-in-law, who controls the family trinket business, has booked him a room in the Paramount Hotel where he feels small and alone. Food, tipping, and riding the subway all confuse Salim, as he has only been here for a week, and he is further discouraged by a telegraph from his brother-in-law that tells Salim he had better start selling or they will no longer be able to send him any money.

Modern America, though built on immigrants, can often be a hard place for newcomers to integrate into, especially those not used to experiencing all the cultures that mix into American life. The trinket business acts as a commentary on how tempting it is to reduce America to a small model of the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State building, using these monuments to stand in for the crazy whirl of unique cultural practices that actually makes up America.



Salim takes his sample case to the next office where he hopes to sell ornamental souvenirs. He gets there at 10:30 for an 11 am appointment, but is forced to sit and wait in the lobby for five hours and doesn't even get in to see the executive. Salim smiles robotically at the receptionist who tells him to leave, and goes outside to catch a cab. He considers just throwing himself into traffic, knowing that no one but his sister would miss him in his family because he has shamed his family with his romantic preferences. A taxi pulls up and Salim decides to get in instead.

Salim is trying so hard to be the "model immigrant" who assimilates into American culture, is always polite, and takes whatever Americans want to give him, but the harsh reality is that he is not accepted here. Like the Old Gods, Salim can't seem to get a foothold into modern American life. As he considers suicide, Salim represents another character that sees little difference between the misery of his life and the relief of death.



The taxi driver swears in Arabic when he gets cut off by a truck, and Salim happily speaks to the taxi driver in his native language. When the taxi driver falls asleep at a red light, Salim touches his shoulder to wake him. The taxi driver laments the long hours and poor pay he must put up with and Salim commiserates about his own job. At the next traffic jam the driver falls asleep again, and when Salim wakes him up he catches a glimpse of fire where the taxi driver's eyes should be. Salim then knows that the taxi driver is an ifrit jinn.

The taxi driver is another god who has had to debase himself with a poorly compensated job as a taxi driver in terrible labor conditions. In a way, the taxi reframes the old myths about jinn, as the taxi could be seen as the jinn's lamp, and the master is anyone who opens the door, since the taxi driver must go where they say. An ifrit is a kind of Arabic fire demon.



The taxi driver assures Salim that he will not kill him, and explaining that jinn in America do not grant wishes. The driver drops Salim at his hotel and picks up his next fare. Salim goes to get dinner and is then surprised to find the driver in the lobby when he returns. Salim invites the driver up to his room, where the driver showers, then makes love with Salim. Salim falls asleep with the ifrit in his bed, then wakes to find that the ifrit has stolen all his sample cases, wallet, and ticket back to Oman, leaving his own clothes and wallet with a license bearing the name Ibrahim in exchange. Salim puts on the ifrit's glasses, hiding his own, newly fiery eyes, and goes out to drive the taxi.

Gaiman rejects popular myths about "genies" and goes back to the roots of the mythology about ifrit jinn. They are not wish granting machines, but spirits of fire who have the power to create magical change in the world when they wish. The love scene between Salim and the jinn is one of the few mutually beneficial exchanges between gods and men. Salim may have had to give up his life, but he truly did not want the life he was living anyway. In a way, the jinn did grant Salim's earlier wish to die. This acceptance of death allows Salim to more fully enjoy his moments of pleasure with the jinn. However, the jinn still takes more from Salim than he gives, as the jinn is now free and Salim is chained to the taxi in its place.



CHAPTER 8

A small quote from Robert Frost's "Two Witches" questions whether the dead have souls and says that "there's something the dead are keeping back." At supper in Cairo with Mr. Ibis, Shadow learns about the funeral parlor business. America usually values nationwide brand names, but people still want their funeral parlors to feel local, so large companies buy up the smaller funeral homes but keep the management the same to maintain the illusion.

The question of whether the dead have souls will come up again once Shadow meets Mr. Jacquel, Mr. Ibis's partner. The thing that the dead are "keeping back" is left vague, possibly referring to the things that Laura says she understands now that she is dead. While the funeral business has changed over time in America, Mr. Ibis explains that it has changed less than other industries, as death is one of the few things that makes Americans crave consistency and tradition, which they feel in smaller "family owned" funeral parlors. Yet even this can be faked in many places, as large corporations deceive people into thinking that their funeral parlor really is locally owned.



Ibis and Jacquel's parlor is one of the few that is still completely independently owned. Jacquel has dominion over the dead, while Ibis has skill with words and writes accounts of lives. Together, they give continuity to this funeral parlor that has been here for almost two hundred years, since even before people with skin like Mr. Ibis's dark caramel were considered black.

Jacquel, as the modern incarnation of the Egyptian god Anubis, who had dominion over the underworld, naturally helps people reach that place in this life. Meanwhile, Mr. Ibis is the disguise for the Egyptian god Thoth, the god of wisdom and writing. He reveals that he is the one who has been writing the "coming to America" accounts interspersed in the book (as stated in Essie Tregowan's story). Mr. Ibis also explains the ways that America has changed with regards to racial categorization and stratification.



Mr. Ibis explains that the region “Little Egypt” actually gets its name because it was an Egyptian trading post three thousand years ago. Columbus was certainly not the first to come to America, as Mr. Ibis’s accounts attest. Mr. Ibis clucks that most American historians don’t want to believe this. He and Shadow leave the restaurant and return to the funeral parlor, where Mr. Jacquel (now in human form) is doing an autopsy of a young girl who died after she told her boyfriend she was pregnant and her boyfriend stabbed her.

Shadow watches as Mr. Jacquel methodically opens the girl’s body cavity and catalogues the state of her organs. He notices that Mr. Jacquel takes a small slice from each organ, placing it in a small jar. Mr. Jacquel takes an extra slice from the heart, liver, and kidneys, and chews on the small pieces. Mr. Jacquel tells Shadow that he is welcome to stay here as long as he is comfortable with and respectful of the dead. Thinking of Laura, Shadow responds that he is fine as long as they stay dead. Mr. Ibis comments that it is much harder to bring people back to life these days.

Mr. Jacquel and Mr. Ibis go into the kitchen and pour a glass of beer for Shadow. They brew it themselves, saying that they do a lot of things for themselves now that Set has left them and Horus has gone wild. Mr. Jacquel adds that he still sees Horus sometimes, flying around in his hawk form. Shadow offers to pitch in with whatever help they need. The small brown cat from the street rubs against Shadow’s foot in appreciation.

Mr. Ibis shows Shadow to his bedroom, then the bathroom where Shadow showers, shaves, and takes stock of his layers of bruises from the past week. Shadow finds himself holding his razor to his throat, thinking how easy it would be to take this way out. The cat (later revealed as Bast) comes in before Shadow can do more than nick his skin, and Shadow leaves the bathroom.

Mr. Ibis claims to know all the “real” stories of how people came to America, rejecting the fiction about Little Egypt being named for a famine as the gas attendant said in the previous chapter. This trading group would have been the ones to bring Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jacquel to America, through their belief in Thoth and Anubis. This discussion of the other “first arrivals” that preceded Columbus recalls the opening to Essie Tregowan’s story, where Mr. Ibis again exposed that many of the ways we think about American history are false.



Mr. Jacquel’s careful autopsy recalls the embalming processes of the Ancient Egyptians, in which all the organs would have been preserved separately in special jars. Mr. Jacquel seems to take the slices from these organs as sacrifices, using them to sustain his power as he would have in Ancient Egypt. However, Jacquel has updated these practices somewhat, as the Ancient Egyptians would have left the heart in the body as the center of intelligence and the soul of a person, while Jacquel leaves the brain, possibly in deference to the American belief that the brain is the center of intelligence and emotion in the human body. Mr. Ibis’s comment about bringing people back doesn’t say it’s impossible, leaving open the possibility that Shadow will find some way to help revive Laura here.



Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jacquel seem to be doing better than many of the other Old Gods, as death is still an area where Americans feel they need something to believe in. After discussing the other gods of the Ancient Egyptian pantheon and their animal forms, the small brown cat is obviously Bast (sometimes written Bastet), an ancient Egyptian warrior goddess who was represented in a cat form.



Shadow still has trouble deciding whether he wants to live or not. Bast, the warrior goddess, was also a goddess of protection. As Shadow has agreed to help Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jacquel, Bast seems to reward him by ensuring that Shadow survives.



Shadow drives Mr. Jacquel in their hearse to pick up the body of an old woman who has just died. The woman's husband babbles to Shadow about his ungrateful children and grandchildren as Shadow packs up the body and carries the old woman tenderly out to the car. As they leave, Jacquel comments that the old man himself will be dead within six months. Shadow asks Jacquel if he believes in the soul. Jacquel agrees somewhat, saying it was more straightforward in the old days when the human soul was weighed against a feather after death.

It starts to snow as Shadow drives back to the funeral parlor, and Jacquel comments that Jesus will have a white Christmas for his birthday once again. He goes on to say that Jesus does better here than in Afghanistan, as everything depends on where one is. Jacquel sighs that he and Ibis have some savings for the lean years but won't be able to last much longer in America.

Shadow carries the old woman's body into the funeral parlor, counting himself lucky to have an identity as a strong man when he spent so much of his childhood small, lost, and drifting, following his mother around all the various embassies in Europe where they had lived before they moved to the USA. When Shadow was 13, he had grown and caught the attention of the local football coach, and then discovered that he could use his physical size to his advantage as an athlete now that he could no longer disappear into the background. Shadow appreciated that nobody expected more of him than occasionally helping people move furniture, until Laura came along.

Mr. Ibis has dinner waiting in the dining room: vegetables and rice as well as a bucket of KFC for Shadow. Shadow comments that he had a friend in prison who believed that KFC changed its name from Kentucky Fried Chicken because it was no longer legally allowed to call its food chicken. Shadow thinks that it is more likely that KFC simply wanted to draw attention away from the unhealthy word "fried." After dinner, Shadow goes up to bed and falls asleep reading old Reader's Digests.

The poor grieving husband echoes the complaints that the gods have about new generations who do not give them the attention or praise that they feel they deserve. Jacquel's belief that this man will soon die is a show of his power in the realm of the dead. Jacquel's answer about the soul is yes on one hand and no on the other—he makes it sound as though the dead have souls if people believe they do, as people believed in the old days that all humans had souls that had a corporeal form and could be weighed, but beliefs about souls are now so complicated and varied in America that it is impossible to give one answer.



Jesus, though not a character in his own right, is impossible not to include in a book about American gods, as Christianity has such influence in America. Yet Gaiman refocuses on the lesser known gods and religions present in America, just as he highlights the lesser known regions and tourist attractions, relishing things he considers underappreciated.



Shadow again shows his changeable nature, like a shadow that takes many forms. His childhood in embassies may explain why he feels such sympathy for the Old Gods – in some ways Shadow is also an outsider to American culture, having spent his childhood abroad. Yet Shadow is also quintessentially American, playing the American game of football and disappearing into the persona of an American jock because it was easier than finding his own path in life.



Gaiman suggests that it is human nature to look for conspiracies and lies, such as KFC hiding the fact that they do not really use chicken. Yet Shadow always looks for the truth, imagining that the development of the KFC brand represents another way that America has changed, becoming more health conscious.



Shadow starts to dream that he is with a woman dressed in a leopard-print skirt (Bast) at a lake. The woman directs Shadow down to her crotch and he can feel his erection even in real life. Shadow, now in his bed, rolls on top of the woman and kisses her, then starts to have sex with her, suddenly back in his old jail cell. The woman purrs and rolls on top of Shadow, scratching his back with her nails. Shadow looks into the woman's amber eyes and asks who she is, but the woman just kisses him more passionately. Shadow lets go of his question but warns the woman that Laura will come after her. The woman shakes her head and continues to rock against Shadow until he orgasms. Afterwards, Shadow's sleep is deep and dreamless.

Shadow wakes early the next morning and notices that all of his old bruises have vanished, but that there are scratch marks on his back and sides. Shadow realizes that the woman last night was not a dream. Shadow dresses in more clothes left in his room by Mr. Ibis and then walks out into the fresh-fallen snow. As he approaches a bridge, Shadow sees Mad Sweeney, looking scared.

Mad Sweeney jumps when he sees Shadow, nervously starting to explain that he has made a huge mistake while trying to follow Wednesday's orders, and needs Shadow to give **the gold coin** back. The coin that Shadow took comes from the treasure of the sun and belongs only to the King of America. Mad Sweeney starts frantically producing coins to replace Shadow's coin, but Shadow has to tell Mad Sweeney that he gave the original coin away. Mad Sweeney starts to cry, blubbering that he is now damned and doomed. He pulls himself together enough to tell Shadow not to trust Wednesday, and asks Shadow for \$20 so he can get out of here. With one last warning that Shadow's neck is already in a noose, Mad Sweeney walks away.

On the 23rd of December, Jacquel and Ibis receive a call from the police and send Shadow to go get the body discreetly. Shadow drives the hearse, thinking about how hearses are no longer driven in town now that Americans want to pretend that death does not happen. Shadow pulls up behind the police cars and sees Mad Sweeney's frozen body next to a dumpster, with a bottle of Jameson Irish whiskey still in his lap. A police officer, registering Mad Sweeney as a John Doe, writes out the instructions for the autopsy for Shadow to take back to Jacquel, and Shadow loads Mad Sweeney into the hearse. As Shadow drives back to the funeral parlor, Mad Sweeney reanimates his body long enough to ask Shadow to give him a proper wake, as it was Shadow's theft that caused his death in the first place.

Bast is described with cat-like language, purring and scratching even when she is in human form. As a protector goddess, she also has the ability to heal Shadow of his wounds, both mental and physical. This "dream" suggests that Shadow is able to actually have a healing sexual encounter with someone, unlike the mercenary and selfish relations enjoyed by Wednesday, Bilquis, and others. As this is right after Shadow's thoughts of suicide, and taking place in a funeral home, the thought of death is directly linked to their life-affirming actions.



Shadow is unsure whether this sexual experience with Bast was a dream or not, raising questions of whether Bast simply took what she wanted (like the other gods) while Shadow was asleep. Yet Shadow did consent to their relations in the dream, so it seems that this act was consensual and healthy.



That Shadow was even able to take the coin meant for the King of America suggests that something about this title actually applies to Shadow. It is unclear exactly why Mad Sweeney needs the coin back so badly, but the coin also seems linked to Mad Sweeney's life in some way. Without the coin, which has the power to give life, Mad Sweeney will die. Yet Shadow gave it to Laura, granting her its life-giving powers. Mad Sweeney's reference to a noose is another reminder that Odin is a gallows god, making the warning about Wednesday more sinister – as he could be the one planning Shadow's hanging.



Americans still want to believe something about death, as shown by Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jacquel's continued presence here, yet there is a taboo on speaking about it out loud. This is part of the reason why Mr. Jacquel and Mr. Ibis's powers are waning, as they need people to accept death and the underworld in order to survive. Meanwhile, Mad Sweeney has managed to kill himself, drinking his body to death in the freezing cold. Gaiman later hints that Mad Sweeney would have simply been resurrected from this experience if enough people believed in him, but belief in true leprechauns was so faint that Mad Sweeney stayed dead. The careful instructions the policeman writes about the autopsy suggests that the police know that there is something odd about how the coroner does his business.



That evening, Shadow, Ibis, and Jacquel drink Jameson Gold in honor of Mad Sweeney, with Mad Sweeney's body propped up in a chair. Ibis reads his account of Mad Sweeney's life and the girl who brought belief of Mad Sweeney to America during the Irish famine. Mad Sweeney begins to add asides to Ibis's account and tries to explain all about the gods from Ireland, until Ibis gets mad at Sweeney's changes to what he considers his story. Mad Sweeney then teaches Shadow how to do the **gold coin** trick one more time.

Ibis shares one of his coming-to-America stories, and the whisper of belief that the story carries is enough to reanimate Mad Sweeney's spirit long enough for the wake. Story telling is one of the ways that the gods transmit their power, explaining why Mr. Ibis considers his story about Mad Sweeney so sacred, when he himself earlier acknowledged that any history is messy and includes many things. Mad Sweeney's parting gift is to show Shadow how to do the coin trick again, but there is only one gold coin that belongs to the King of America, so Shadow cannot simply produce another one to bring Mad Sweeney back.



The next morning, Shadow wakes up with a horrible hangover and is relieved to see that Mad Sweeney is still in fact dead. Mr. Wednesday comes into the kitchen and tells Shadow to get ready for a long drive. Shadow asks to say goodbye to Ibis and Jacquel, who are away at a burial, but Wednesday says that goodbyes are overrated. They get in the car and drive north. As they head out of town, Shadow lets go of his time at the House of Rest.

Wednesday cares little for goodbyes, another sign that he has a fundamental insecurity with death and assumes that he will live forever – or at least long enough to see everyone again. Meanwhile, Shadow is comfortable with death, considering the funeral home a house of rest in a positive way, relieving him from the strain and stress of the past days.



CHAPTER 9

The chapter opens with a line from Wendy Cope's "A Policeman's Lot" that describes mythical creatures in the rubble. Shadow asks Wednesday about Mr. Stone and Mr. Wood as they drive into Wisconsin. Wednesday replies that they are members of the opposition, who believe that they are doing the right thing—the most dangerous kind of people. Wednesday happily comments that Shadow's kidnapping convinced a lot of the gods to join his side. They drive all through Christmas Eve and into Christmas day, stopping for lunch at a diner where Wednesday shamelessly flirts with the teenage waitress.

As well as the obvious similarities of mythical creatures in an urban setting, "A policeman's lot" also describes the necessity of policing an author's mind as all the mythical creatures spring to life from the author's thoughts, tying into Gaiman's idea that the gods are created when people dream them up and believe in them. The immense power of belief is also shown through Wednesday's discussion of the New Gods' belief that they are right, which fuels them to do more drastic things than they would for a cause in which they did not believe.



Wednesday begins to talk about some of his favorite grifts (cons or swindles) over the years, like the "Fiddle Game." This two-man con involves one man pretending to be a down-on-his-luck fiddler who has to leave his fiddle as collateral for a stay at a hotel while he goes to get money. Meanwhile, the second man comes to the hotel and appraises the fiddle as a one-of-a-kind rare instrument worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. If the hotel owner is greedy, he will buy the fiddle from the first man when he returns, paying at least a couple thousand so he can make a bigger profit. The two men then skip town before the hotel owner can figure out that the fiddle is only a cheap imitation.

Wednesday especially likes the fiddle game because it preys on humans' weakest impulses. If the hotel owner is not greedy, he will just give the fiddle back to the first man and the two con men will have to try again. It seems as though Wednesday enjoys having at least a semblance of justice in his cons, taking money from people who "deserve" to have their money taken.



The waitress brings Shadow pie and Wednesday talks about his absolute favorite gift: The Bishop Game. One man dressed as a clergyman goes to a jewelry store and buys an expensive necklace with cash. As one of the bills is smudged, the jewelry store is forced to check if the bills are real, though they are reluctant to distrust a bishop. The bills are real, so the jewelry store owner apologizes and packs up the necklace for the bishop. As the bishop leaves, a “policeman” appears and exposes the bishop as a con man, arrests him, then takes the cash and the necklace as “evidence.” The bishop and the policeman leave town with their cash, a valuable necklace, and no one the wiser that they are working together.

With his stories over, Wednesday arranges to meet the waitress at a nearby hotel, explaining to Shadow that this is the best way to make himself feel alive when Shadow questions the legality of his actions due to the waitress’s age. Wednesday gives Shadow the keys to an apartment and a wallet with identification for Mike Ainsel, with directions to board a Greyhound bus headed for a small town named Lakeside. As Shadow and Wednesday walk out of the restaurant, Shadow notices that Wednesday prefers cons that require two people. He asks if Wednesday used to have a partner. Wednesday sighs that he did once, but no longer.

Shadow boards his greyhound bus and falls asleep. He dreams of the cave with the Buffalo Man again, and the Buffalo Man asks if Shadow “believes” yet. The Buffalo Man tells Shadow that “this is not a land for gods,” but a land of dreams and fire. Shadow asks how he can help Laura, but the Buffalo Man only points to a small skylight in the roof of the cave. Shadow’s dream changes, and he feels as though he is being pushed through the small hole in the cave roof. Afraid that he will be crushed in the rock, Shadow offers himself as a sacrifice in order to escape. The land pushes Shadow out of the hole, as if birthing Shadow anew. A voice that sounds like fire whispers to Shadow that the star people are coming and will make heroes out of men.

The bus driver shakes Shadow awake at a rest stop for a break. Two teenage girls board the bus and sit directly in front of Shadow, one trying to gossip about sex (Sophie) while the other speaks about her volunteer work at an animal hospital (Alison). The bus reaches Lakeside, which the bus driver emphasizes is a good town. Shadow and the two girls get off, the girls still chatting. Shadow tries not to eavesdrop, but accidentally catches the eye of the girl talking about animals. He smiles and says, “Merry Christmas,” and the girl smiles back. Sophie tells Alison not to be such a “spaz” and the girls go to get in a car that has just driven up.

Both of these cons require two men working together, even though they look like they are foes—foreshadowing how Odin and Loki are actually working together in Wednesday’s con, while seeming to be enemies. Wednesday’s nostalgia for these gifts is another sign that he is struggling to adapt to a changing America, where cons and gifts are more likely to take place online than in person.



Wednesday again takes advantage of a young woman in order to give himself power. The alias Wednesday gives Shadow recalls a fairy tale from Ireland, in which a character introduces himself as “my own self” (M. Ainsel in an Irish accent) in order to disguise his true identity. Taking on this name will force Shadow to figure out what his own identity actually is. Wednesday’s reference to an old partner makes it very strange that he is now working alone – partly explaining why Wednesday wanted Shadow to work for him, but also hinting that Wednesday might have a partner who is hidden for now.



The Buffalo Man is again tied to the American land itself, speaking for the land about what belongs there. Shadow’s experience being pushed through the earth parallels Odin’s formative myth, in which Odin sacrifices himself to himself in order to gain more wisdom. Shadow might receive some wisdom in return for the sacrifice of his body, as the voice tells him—but it also symbolizes Shadow’s rebirth as Mike Ainsel, a new identity in which Shadow can come into his own instead of constantly shadowing and mirroring others.



Sophie seems to represent the worst stereotypes of the modern American teen while Alison maintains more innocence and the values of a by-gone time. Shadow does not want to scare the girls, aware of the danger his appearance connotes to most strangers, but he also cannot help but show his kind soul. Alison is more receptive, another sign that she is a remnant of a friendlier and safer time in which people could be nice to strangers on the street.



Shadow wonders how he is going to get to his new apartment, when an old man gets out of his car and offers Shadow a ride wherever he needs to go. Shadow gratefully agrees, as it is freezing, and gets in the old man's vintage Wendt Phoenix. The old man introduces himself as Richie Hinzelmann, and Shadow responds that he is Mike Ainsel. Hinzelmann gives Shadow a short tour of the town, including the frozen lake at the end of Main Street. Hinzelmann tells a dubious story about a deer that got frozen into the lake one year when the freeze came fast. They reach Shadow's new apartment and Hinzelmann lets Shadow out.

Hinzelmann's name tips off those with knowledge of German forest spirits, as it is the name of one of the most mischievous "kobolds" of German legends. Furthermore, his very niceness stands out in a novel full of duplicitous people who hide their malicious intent behind a fake smile (such as Media and Wednesday). Hinzelmann's vintage car shows that he is very connected to maintaining the past, even if it is expensive or difficult. Similarly, Hinzelmann's tall tales come across as nostalgia for a lost era, when magic was more alive in America.



Shadow's new apartment is freezing and Shadow hopes that the cold won't keep him awake all night. He wonders when Wednesday will come get him again, and decides to practice his coin tricks to keep himself busy while he lives in Lakeside. His mind wanders to Laura, and suddenly Shadow feels like he can see her, standing outside her mother's house in Eagle Point with her hands pressed against the window while her family celebrates Christmas. Shadow struggles not to cry and turns over in bed, trying to keep his mind away from Laura. He feels as through wings brush through his mind, and then is able to sleep.

Shadow's coin tricks both show how he is similar to Wednesday—constantly practicing tricks and cons—and different, as Shadow only practices these illusions for amusement and distraction, not for personal gain. Meanwhile, Laura is feeling the ill effects of living a lie, as her half-life as a corpse allows her to get just close enough to see all the family, love, warmth, and life she is missing. The wings that beat through Shadow's mind possibly belong to one of Wednesday's ravens, which have control over thought and memory.



MEANWHILE. A CONVERSATION.

A man in a suit named Mr. Town knocks on Sam Black Crow's door. When Sam answers, Mr. Town asks if Sam knows anything about the disappearance of his colleagues, Mr. Wood and Mr. Stone. Mr. Town asks if Sam knows an escaped felon who was arrested for aggravated assault of his partners after they stole his cut of a bank robbery. Looking at a picture Mr. Town shows her of Shadow, Sam makes fun of Mr. Town's name and refuses to cooperate with Mr. Town at all. Sam slams her door and Mr. Town leaves.

Sam aligns herself with the Old Gods, distrusting the New Gods on sight because she is so resistant to what she sees as the ills of modern American culture. Mr. Town, another of the "men in black" type New Gods, represents Americans' worship of the civilization, comfort, and luxury that can be found in suburban towns.



CHAPTER 10

The chapter starts with song lyrics about secrets and lies of the past, from Tom Waits' song "Tango Til They're Sore." During his first night in Lakeside, Shadow dreams that he is a child who has been kept in darkness and away from humans his entire life. A woman comes to get him from his cage and takes him out to a bonfire, where the child laughs with the happy crowd that has gathered. The woman then sacrifices the child. Shadow wakes up hungry and cold, unable to remember details about his dream except a sense of misery and darkness.

The Tom Waits lyrics call attention to the fact that there are secrets and lies in Lakeside's past, no matter how nice it seems on the surface. Shadow's dream is also a dark omen, an later suggested to be a vision of Hinzelmann's origins. Yet Shadow does not remember, and so is not on guard in Lakeside.



Shadow decides to walk in to the town center, knowing that it will be cold but hoping he can walk fast enough to keep himself warm. He goes outside, thinking of Low Key's stories about winter in Minnesota where it was cold enough that a man's urine would freeze before it hit the ground. Shadow thought it was only ten minutes to the town center, but he keeps walking without seeming to get any closer to the bridge over the lake that leads into town. He is so cold that he has lost all feeling in his hands and feet, but has no choice but to keep walking. A cop car passes and asks if Shadow needs help, and all Shadow can do is shiver.

The cop pulls over and tells Shadow to get in and get warm. Shadow climbs in the back, trying not to think about the last time he was in the back of a cop car. The cop chatters about how cold it is, then introduces himself as Chad Mulligan. Chad offers to drive Shadow anywhere he needs to go today, starting with breakfast. Shadow notes the stark beauty of Lakeside in winter, wishing that he could see it in its summer glory. At breakfast Shadow eats a pasty, a meat pie originally brought to Michigan by Cornishmen, while Chad arranges for Shadow to buy a car from one of the families in town. As Chad outlines the plan for getting Shadow groceries, warm clothes, and the keys to the car, Shadow asks why the police aren't busy with crime. Chad answers that Lakeside is such a good town that there are rarely any issues that require police intervention.

Chad takes Shadow to get clothes and groceries, introducing Shadow to everyone they meet as Mike Ainsel. Shadow explains that he works for his "uncle," naming Wednesday as Emerson Borson and pretending that he has a normal life. Chad and Shadow go to pick up a car for Shadow from Mrs. Gunther, a used Toyota 4Runner that the Gunthers' son had painted a horrific shade of purple. Shadow drives back to his apartment, deciding that he likes living here where everyone is so nice.

At 2 that afternoon, Shadow is unpleasantly surprised by a knock on his door, but it's just Hinzelmann. Hinzelmann has brought some things for Shadow, explaining that Shadow can pay him back by buying a raffle ticket for the "klunker," a charity raffle where people bet on what day the frozen lake will thaw enough to let an old beat-up car that has been pushed out onto the ice fall through into the water.

Low Key had been almost entirely absent from the novel since Shadow left prison. His reappearance in Shadow's thoughts here is a subtle reminder to not forget about this character. Lakeside has already proven to be dangerous, as it is cold enough to kill Shadow if he walks much further. It is only the help of a person that saves Shadow. Clearly, it is the people that make Lakeside such a good place, not the location.



Shadow still has an interesting relationship with the law, not always doing the right thing legally but usually doing the right thing by his moral code. Yet Chad treats Shadow with nothing but kindness, not the suspicion that Shadow usually receives. This, and the fact that Chad is completely free to act as chauffeur for Shadow, are another reminder that Lakeside is not a normal place. Shadow notices its stark beauty, a reminder that the majority of Shadow's story so far has taken place in winter – a "dead" season where very few things grow. In order for Shadow to grow as a person, he must reach spring.



Living as Mike Ainsel gives Shadow the chance to pretend at the normalcy that he craves. Aside from the fact that Laura is not here, this town and its kind and caring residents are almost exactly what Shadow pictured when he daydreamed about his release from prison and swore to keep himself out of trouble. Yet the novel has already shown that things that seem too good to be true usually are, as when Sam outlined the tragedy that happened to her family in a "nice town" like this.



Even in such a nice town, Shadow is still paranoid about any knocks on his door, retaining the sense of urgency and suspense that has followed him in the novel. The klunker appears again and again in the novel, functioning as a count-down to the spring and the new life that spring will usher in. The car is a sort of sacrifice to make sure that the winter will actually end, but it also has more significance that Shadow does not yet know.



Hinzelmann cracks jokes about how this cold is nothing compared to how cold it used to be in the old days, then sadly explains that the winters here are bad enough that they sometimes drive the kids a bit crazy. Lakeside teenagers sometimes run away in the winter, presumably looking for somewhere warm. But Hinzelmann emphasizes that Lakeside is better off than most towns in this area, now that the mining, logging, and tourism industries are dying. Hinzelmann passionately points out how hard everyone in Lakeside works to make sure it is a good town. Hinzelmann leaves, telling Shadow to visit him any time.

Shadow's apartment gets colder and colder, though he has the heater on. Finally Shadow goes to the apartment next door, hoping to find out how to make it warm. A tired-looking woman with black hair answers warily and explains that Shadow has to heatproof his windows and buy a space heater, then introduces herself as Marguerite Olsen. Shadow comments that most Olsens he has met are blonde, and Marguerite explains that the name comes from her ex-husband. Shadow tries to chitchat about Marguerite's job on the local paper, which he heard about from the woman who sold him a car, but Marguerite just clucks about Mrs. Gunther's constant gossip. Shadow has the odd feeling that he has met Marguerite before.

A couple of days later, Wednesday shows up at Shadow's apartment. Wednesday explains that Shadow has to stay in Lakeside so that he will be out of sight from the New Gods, commenting that no one can really accomplish anything in the dead winter months anyway. In the meantime, Wednesday and Shadow will be taking trips to rally the troops. Their first stop is in Las Vegas, where they will visit a god who Shadow knows that he has met before, but can never seem to remember.

Gaiman describes the entrance to a casino, reveling in the sights and sounds of the money and the worship that humans offer when they give up their money freely, not really expecting anything in return. A man in a charcoal suit (The Unknown God) oversees everything, walking down the Vegas strip, soaking up the beauty of the money changing hands with frightening speed, then settling himself at a bar.

Hinzelmann longs for the old days, unwilling or unable to accept the good things about modern times. He also presents a story that tries to explain why kids might want to leave a town as good as Lakeside, if the surrounding country is so nice. Given that Hinzelmann is prone to hyperbole and tall tales, it is hard to know whether he is serious about kids running away.



Marguerite is the first person in Lakeside who has not been oddly nice to Shadow, a sign that she is actually a real person and not faking her personality for some other agenda. The mismatch between her last name and her looks is another reminder that American families and American populations include more diversity and cultural mixing than many other places. Marguerite's non-nonsense demeanor and black hair are reminiscent of Sam Black Crow, possibly explaining why Shadow feels as though he has already met her.



The war between the Old and New Gods is put on hold for the winter, as the symbolism of death in winter is so important for gods who depend so deeply on stories and symbols. Lakeside acts as their home base while Wednesday and Shadow visit more exotic locales such as Las Vegas, allowing Gaiman to include more parts of America while maintaining focus on the Midwest. Shadow's inability to remember The Unknown God is one of the most identifying features of this mysterious god.



Casinos offer another alternative place of worship for modern Americans. The Unknown God seems to have adapted to this, though it's hard to tell because his identity is left so vague. He has a connection to money and chance, and is possibly the god of Chance itself, but Gaiman has refused to reveal the Unknown God's inspiration in interviews.



Another man in a light grey suit (Wednesday) follows the man in the charcoal suit (The Unknown God), sitting down at the bar next to him. The man in the light grey suit apologizes for “what happened in Wisconsin,” then answers the man in the charcoal suit’s question about a woman who hasn’t been seen for two hundred years. The man in the charcoal suit says something else, making the man in the light grey suit offer a bottle of “soma” if the man in the charcoal joins his rigged game – after all, he says, it’s the only game in town. The man in the grey suit leaves, and the man in the charcoal suit takes pity on a bar waitress, telling her where to find a man who has just won \$400,000 and needs help spending it. The waitress listens, but is unable to remember the advice afterwards.

As they walk through the Vegas airport afterwards, Shadow asks who Wednesday came to visit. Wednesday explains, but Shadow doesn’t hear the name. Wednesday says that getting this mystery man on their side will cost Wednesday a bottle of soma, a drink made from distilled prayer and belief. Shadow and Wednesday board their plane, and Shadow asks if there is any way he can bring Laura back to life. Wednesday names the many charms he learned as his prize for hanging from the tree, but explains that he cannot bring people back to life. Shadow confesses his fear that it is his own fault that Laura is half-alive, as he gave Laura **the gold coin**. Wednesday asks Shadow not to look for “eagle stones” and “thunderbirds” to bring Laura back, but just to keep his head down in Lakeside. Wednesday looks so sad that Shadow wants to comfort him, but Shadow hesitates and the moment passes.

CHAPTER 11

The chapter opens with Ben Franklin’s adage: “Three may keep a secret, if two are dead.” Back in Lakeside, Shadow spends his days trying to stay warm and out of trouble. He visits Hinzelmann, looking at his collection of fishing lures and listening to Hinzelmann’s tall tales about the old days. Shadow buys a ticket for the klunker raffle, guessing that the car that was pushed out onto the ice will break through the melt on March 23rd, between 9 and 9:25 am. Shadow asks Hinzelmann if he has ever heard of eagle stones or thunderbirds, but Hinzelmann tells Shadow to go look in the library.

Wednesday’s apology for what happened in Wisconsin refers to the incident at the House on the Rock, meaning that Shadow has definitely seen this god before, even if he can’t remember him. Given that they are in a Vegas casino, the “woman” could be Lady Luck, but, as with everything about The Unknown God, this is left a mystery. Even The Unknown God’s dialogue is not shared with the reader, as Gaiman does not even give speech patterns to help identify who this god actually is. The Unknown God seems to guess that Wednesday has rigged the fight between the Old and New Gods. It becomes ever clearer that Wednesday is manipulating the coming battle in some way.



The connection between The Unknown God and soma, a divine drink of Hindu mythology, suggests that the Unknown God might be of Hindu origin, but it also shows another way that gods ingest the prayers (worship) and belief that sustain them. Wednesday again shows his roots as Odin, naming all the charms that Odin learned while hanging on the tree as a sacrifice to himself. Again, the constant reminders of sacrifice suggest that Shadow will have to sacrifice something in order to save Laura. Ever the con man, Wednesday doesn’t help Shadow outright, but he does indirectly give him the information he needs. Wednesday’s help and Shadow’s urge to comfort Wednesday show that Shadow and Wednesday are also getting closer, despite all the people who have warned Shadow about Wednesday.



The Ben Franklin quote may be a warning about telling one’s own secrets to too many people, but it also acts as a reminder of the violence often used in the name of keeping secrets. Shadow predicts when spring will arrive, seemingly choosing a morning in March at random, even though spring usually comes later in April in this region of Wisconsin.



Shadow goes to the library and gets a library card form from a stern woman, thinking of a man he knew in jail who stole half a million dollars-worth of books and hid them in a garage. Shadow goes to the single shelf of “Native American Beliefs and Traditions” books and soon has information about thunderbirds, which live on mountaintops and cause storms. He finds no mention of eagle stones.

Shadow notices a young boy watching him, so he takes out his **Liberty coin** and does a few coin tricks for the boy. The boy brings his mom over, who turns out to be Marguerite Olsen. Marguerite does not look any happier to see Shadow this time, and icily tells Shadow not to do magic in front of her son. Shadow wanders down to the library book sale and decides to buy a book on parlour illusions and a book of the minutes of the Lakeside City Council 1872-1884 (because he doubts anyone else will ever buy that book).

On his way home, Shadow looks at the dark green car on the ice, hoping that he will win the raffle when it falls. Back at Shadow’s apartment, Chad is waiting to check in with him. Shadow asks if Marguerite is always so stern, and Chad explains that “Margie” suffered through a bad marriage to a weak man and had a vicious custody battle when she sued for divorce. Marguerite’s older son, Sandy, took the divorce hard and ran away last year, presumably to find his dad. Shadow notices that Chad seems to be in love with Marguerite himself.

Shadow tries to learn coin tricks from the Parlour Illusions book, but can’t make sense of the directions. Bored, he flips through the Lakeside City Council Minutes, noting the family names of many current residents, including Mulligan and Hinzelmann, and then falls asleep.

Shadow dreams that he is above the cave where the earth pushed him out. Star people land next to him, with faces that remind Shadow of Marguerite, and Shadow asks them where to find a thunderbird. One of the star women points up to the sky. Shadow climbs a nearby rock spire to get closer to the sky, realizing as he climbs the sharp material that the spire is made of skulls, not all of them human. Birds begin to circle the spire, flying gracefully with lightning crackling in their wings. Shadow reaches out and tries to grab a feather, thinking oddly that he will never be a man in his tribe if he can’t get a feather. He hears the Buffalo Man tell him who the skulls all belong to, and Shadow falls from the spire.

The high value attributed to books recalls Wednesday’s comment on the plane when he first met Shadow—that information is power. The more Shadow knows, the more powerful he will be. Yet Americans seem to have forgotten all the wisdom of the Native American tribes, relegating all the history, beliefs, and knowledge of hundreds of tribes to just one shelf. As America continues to grow and add new voices, it unfortunately forgets old ones.



Marguerite is again wary of Shadow, though Shadow truly did just want to entertain the young boy. Shadow aligns himself with the nostalgic Old Gods by buying a book of old coin tricks and the Lakeside history book.



Shadow’s hope that he will win the raffle is one of the first thoughts of the future he’s had, another sign that Shadow is building a personality and life of his own in Lakeside. Chad’s nickname for Marguerite suggests that she was once softer and more approachable, but that the tragedy in her life has changed her. Sandy’s disappearance echoes Sam Black Crow’s description of a child that was lost, as it is another horrible thing that happened in a town that is supposed to be so good.



While Shadow assumes that the surnames in the Lakeside history book are ancestors of the Mulligan (Chad) and Hinzelmann that he knows, the lack of first names adds some doubt to this situation.



Marguerite’s presence in Shadow’s dream suggests that she also belongs with the land and possibly has Native American heritage. Thunderbirds have incredible significance in the Lakota mythology, capable of both created fierce storms, as in Shadow’s dream, and bringing the spring. Following from Shadow’s previous dream, where he was reborn, this dream now signifies his journey to manhood, as if Shadow were a member of a Native American tribe and had to undergo a coming-of-age ritual with the thunderbird feathers. But Shadow falls without getting a feather, showing that he’s not yet ready.



The telephone wakes Shadow, and Wednesday angrily asks Shadow why he is drawing attention to himself by dreaming of thunderbirds. Wednesday calms down and then tells Shadow to be ready to leave the next morning for San Francisco. Wednesday hangs up and Shadow can hear Marguerite sobbing through the thin walls in the early morning stillness.

San Francisco is much warmer than Lakeside, but Wednesday is still giving Shadow an angry cold shoulder as they walk down Haight Street. Shadow comments that San Francisco hardly seems to be in the same country as Lakeside, and Wednesday snaps that all of America may be on the same land, but it's not all the same country. Wednesday then warns Shadow to be very careful with the next woman they are visiting.

Wednesday and Shadow meet a woman sitting under a tree in a park with a picnic spread around her. The woman is curvaceous and beautiful, but complains about getting fat in New Orleans. Shadow blushes and the woman is delighted. Wednesday introduces the woman as Easter, and Shadow can hardly speak for being intoxicated by her smile and her scent. Easter flatly refuses to join Wednesday's cause, but invites Shadow to stay and eat and lets Wednesday fill a plate.

Easter asks Shadow where his name comes from, and Shadow explains that he traveled with his mother to US embassies and didn't know how to interact with other kids when his mom got sick and was transferred back to the states. Shadow took to following adults like a shadow, and the name stuck. Easter warns Shadow to stay out of secret societies, then takes Shadow and Wednesday to a nearby coffee shop.

Easter revels in how well she is doing as the mortals worship her festival with grand feasts and egg hunts that get bigger every year. Wednesday sniffs that today's mortals don't know anything about Easter's true nature. He proves his point by asking a woman in the coffee shop what Easter means—the woman says she is a pagan who doesn't believe in any of that Christian stuff. Wednesday asks the woman what gods she does believe in, and the woman replies that she believes in the female principle, the goddess inside all women. Wednesday offers to repeat the exercise with thousands of people on the street, betting that none of them will know that Easter comes from Eostre of the Dawn. Easter looks like she's about to cry, so Wednesday apologizes sincerely and asks Easter once more to join their fight against the New Gods. Now Easter agrees.

Wednesday again has the ability to see into Shadow's dreams, suggesting that they are really happening somewhere that gods like Wednesday can notice. Marguerite's continued pain, presumably from Sandy's disappearance, is another sign that all in Lakeside is not as it should be.



The huge size of America makes it hard to define with the qualities of any one region. In Lakeside, the winter is cold and brutal, but San Francisco is as warm as it would be in spring in Lakeside. Each region has its own character, but the land itself is what they have in common.



Easter's curvy figure follows from her identity as a fertility goddess, who also has dominion over rebirth and new life. Her time in New Orleans refers to the huge Easter parades now thrown in this city, celebrating the Christian holiday and the arrival of spring. As with Czernobog and Mr. Nancy, Easter warms to Shadow even when she does not like Wednesday. Shadow acts as Wednesday's buffer amongst the Old Gods, as well as his bodyguard and driver.



Shadow's name has been a source of many questions throughout the novel, and he now admits that it is only a nickname. The nickname refers to the way that Shadow does not make decisions for himself, instead simply following others around. Shadow's real name remains secret, as Shadow still has not accepted his true identity or begun to make important choices for himself.



Easter seems to be gaining more power as her holiday becomes less about Christianity and more of a "secular" cultural celebration. Many people who are not Christian still celebrate Easter as the beginning of spring, thereby giving their worship to the goddess Easter. Yet Wednesday is correct that almost no one in America knows Easter's true identity as the Germanic goddess Eostre of the Dawn. In order to enjoy her current power, Easter must reject some old aspects of herself and mold herself into the image that Americans now want. The waitress seems to reflect the belief that humans do not need gods, as their own selves are sufficiently sacred to worship.



Wednesday pays for the coffee, trying to stiff the waitress until Shadow slyly covers the difference. As they leave, Easter asks Shadow about his thunderbird dream. Shadow shudders and confesses that the spire in his dream was made of thousands of skulls—skulls that the Buffalo Man said belonged to Shadow himself in previous lives. Easter calls Shadow a “keeper” and then walks away. Meanwhile, Wednesday is irate that Shadow blocked his small con on the waitress, pointing out all the sins the waitress herself has committed against other people. Wednesday delights in taking these small victories against the mortals who made him and forgot him, but Shadow says that it’s more important to do the right thing.

Back in Lakeside, it’s still cold but no longer quite as freezing. Chad Mulligan comes to Shadow’s apartment the day after he returns from San Francisco. Chad brings a picture of Alison, the young girl from the bus, and the news that Alison is missing. Shadow proves that he was away on business and had nothing to do with the disappearance yesterday, and he joins the search party looking for any sign of Alison.

Hinzelmann, Shadow, and a man named Brogan are assigned to search County road W for any sign of Alison. Brogan shudders and says that he hopes Alison gets found, but he doesn’t want to be the one to find her. They look all day, but find nothing. Back at the local bar for a drink after a disappointing day, Brogan asks Shadow not to think badly of Lakeside because of this tragedy, saying that it is a good town. Another woman chimes in that Lakeside is far better than most of the towns in the area where farmers are committing suicide and all the big factories are shutting down. Shadow does a coin trick with eight quarters to cheer the bar patrons, realizing with pride that this is his first adult audience.

On his way home from the bar, Shadow stops to get milk and notices that the checkout girl is Alison’s friend Sophie, who was with her on the bus. Shadow tells Sophie that they looked for Alison all day with no luck, and Sophie bitterly says that she is getting out of this town where kids like Sandy Olsen, Alison, and others disappear every year.

Where Wednesday uses his skill at sleight of hand to take advantage of humans, Shadow uses his talents to help others. Easter’s knowledge of Shadow’s dream makes it even more likely that Shadow’s dream happened on some mythical plane that all the gods have access to. From the number of skulls that apparently once belonged to Shadow, it seems that Shadow has been reincarnated many times, linking him to these American reincarnations of gods. But Shadow still looks on the world with optimism and interest, while Wednesday chooses to become bitter and vengeful in the face of his waning power.



Alison, the animal-obsessed girl on the bus, is another tragedy in a town where no bad things are supposed to happen. Hinzelmann’s explanation that kids sometimes just run away doesn’t seem to fit with Alison’s character. It would be easy for Lakeside to scapegoat Shadow, as he is an unknown newcomer, but Chad trusts Shadow enough to let him join the search party.



Brogan’s distaste for finding Alison shows that he expects to find her dead rather than alive. That the search party finds nothing, not even signs of a struggle anywhere, makes this disappearance even more mysterious. The town people rally around Lakeside despite this tragedy, as if by sheer belief in Lakeside’s goodness they can force tragedies like this to stop happening. Shadow again uses his skill for coin tricks to delight people at a time when they need distraction from their problems.



Sophie connects Alison’s disappearance to a string of other missing children, all supposedly with good explanation. Her grim resignation makes it clear that this has been happening for a while, though no one seems to be doing anything about it.



COMING TO AMERICA. 1778.

Mr. Ibis writes about a girl being sold by her uncle, just one example of the horrors that happen every day in this world. Humans must put up their guard in order to keep these stories from overwhelming them. As no man is in fact an island, Mr. Ibis says, people have to band together in order to survive this world, but mortals also need individual stories so that the events of the past are not reduced to numbers and faceless masses. It is especially easy to identify with fictional stories because one doesn't have to pity them as much as they would another human.

This specific girl was born in a village that had lost a war, and she had a twin. Her uncle sold both her and her twin, despite the usual respect for twins as magical beings. The girl, Wututu, asks her twin, Agasu, what will happen now. An older man answers that they will be taken across the sea to the white devils. Wututu and Agasu board a huge ship, where Wututu stays with the children while Agasu is herded into chains with the men. After a week at sea, the passengers are allowed to mingle again.

The voyage is long and unspoiled food soon runs out. Wututu and Agasu huddle together when they can, counting their few blessings and wondering what the white devils will be like. One of the black crewmen takes special notice of Wututu and threatens to rape her. Wututu, channeling the god Elegba, says that she is a witch girl who can hurt him if he hurts her. Some passengers try to escape overboard or starve themselves to freedom. These attempts are met with harsh whippings.

The slave ship lands in Bridgeport, Barbados, and Wututu and Agasu are separated. Agasu is bought by a seasoning farm and punished severely each time he tries to run away. When he is 16, he is sold to a sugar plantation in St. Domingue. There, he continues to worship the old gods, using his limited free time to sing and worship with the other slaves even though that means he has no time to sleep or tend to his own food. When he is 25, he gets a spider bite that infects his entire arm, and his right arm has to be amputated. In 1791, Agasu (now called Hyacinth and Big One-Arm) takes part in the slave revolt—channeling the spirit of Elegba as the slaves fight for freedom. After 12 years, the slaves manage to take control of the island, but Agasu never gets to see the Republic of Haiti, having died two years earlier.

Mr. Ibis's explanation of the importance of individual stories points to the significance of using stories to make a community, as mythical stories pull together all the people who believe in them. The gods give humans a place to put their hopes and fears that is not tied up in actual suffering, allowing people to experience these necessary emotions without getting overwhelmed by the sheer amount of awful things that real people must endure.



Wututu and Agasu were essentially offered as sacrifices so that their village could continue to exist after they lost the war. As Mr. Ibis said in his introduction, people's power comes from banding together, not from trying to exist as individuals. This idea resonates with the larger plot of the book, as the Old Gods must band together in order to survive.



Wututu is helped by the god Elegba, borrowing some of his power to stand up for herself. When the gods have enough power and worship, they do try to protect their followers, if only to maintain the amount of worship that they are receiving. Yet Elegba cannot save Wututu from the larger sufferings of the slave ship and the institution of slavery itself.



Agasu's devotion to the gods he worshipped in Africa brings these gods to St. Domingue. His faith also gives him the strength to live long enough to help usher in the slave revolt and take control of Haiti. Agasu then becomes a kind of sacrifice, one of the many deaths that had to happen so that the slaves could win their freedom.



The moment that Agasu dies, Wututu feels the bayonet pierce her own flesh as well. Her twin babies, the latest of many she has been forced to have by sleeping with other slaves or being raped by her masters, wail and cry with her. It is the first time she has cried since becoming a slave, though she has endured horrors in every plantation she has lived at in the Carolinas. When she was 25, her right arm withered for no apparent reason, and she was sold to a master in Louisiana when her owners in North Carolina found the withered arm unsettling.

While she lives in New Orleans, Wututu (now called Sukey) practices voodoo and sells her charms to both black and white people. She continues to dance and worship the old gods, just as the slaves did in St. Domingue. When she hears the news of the slave revolt, she notices that the white folks stop talking of the Republic of Haiti altogether, as if through the power of their collective belief they can will the new country to stop existing.

In 1821, Wututu (now called Mama Zouzou) takes on an apprentice of mixed race who calls herself Widow Paris. Wututu tells Widow Paris that her husband, Jacques Paris, is cheating on her, pretending to divine this through magical means though it is common knowledge throughout New Orleans. Widow Paris brings gifts in thanks for this service, and then Wututu tells Widow Paris that she will teach her all she knows of voodoo. Widow Paris learns the charms and rituals well, but has no interest in the gods behind the magic. Wututu is disappointed that Widow Paris refuses to see what is truly valuable in the charms and worship, but understands that this land is not a good place for gods. It is precisely the lack of fertile ground for gods that keeps the American slave revolts from succeeding as the revolt in Haiti did.

After Agasu's death, Wututu's soul dies as well. Now she lives only to hate her white captors. She teaches the Widow Paris, who will later practice under the name Marie Laveau, all her sacred dances and tries to explain that there is more to voodoo than making yourself prosper and your enemies fail. Widow Paris does not learn, having only pity and revulsion for the bitter version of Wututu who has lived through so much pain. One night, while dancing a sacred ceremony with Widow Paris, Wututu has an odd vision of Agasu as a grown man with all the scars that a life as a slave has given him. Wututu reaches out her own left hand and promises to be with Agasu soon.

The magical connection between Wututu and Agasu comes from their identities as twins. Twins are considered sacred in many cultures, including the Fon culture from which Gaiman takes Wututu and Agasu's names—the Fon believe that twins are two parts of the same person, and a direct conduit to the ancestors. Wututu thus loses a part of herself when Agasu dies, but must carry on in order to pass the Fon beliefs to her children and grandchildren.



Wututu, whose name means messenger bird, continues to pass on the cultural practices of her homeland to people in America, but does not reap the same benefits that her countrymen in Haiti did. Regarding white people and Haiti, Gaiman again explores how people can be so convinced of a certain belief that they manage to shape the physical world around them. Cut off from any news by her white masters, it is as if Haiti does not exist for Wututu.



Wututu's many names follow the same pattern as the gods who go through many names as they are reincarnated in different places. Wututu again acts like a conduit to the gods and the ancestors by passing on her craft, but her American student is only interested in how the voodoo charms can benefit her and not in the worship behind the rituals. Old Gods cannot exist in America when the people only look for what can benefit themselves. Wututu sees the lack of gods and godly assistance as the reason why American slaves are still enslaved. Though the truth is more complicated than that, the shared belief that the slaves in Haiti had in their gods did sustain them to fight as a more cohesive force, possibly contributing to their victory.



Marie Laveau, like her daughter Marie Laveau II, was a famous practitioner of voodoo in New Orleans, where a house of voodoo dedicated to her name still exists. As the Widow Paris, Marie seems to use Wututu's pain for her own benefit, learning the rituals but refusing to recognize the sacred aspects of them and focusing only on their outcomes. Her attitude towards Wututu is reminiscent of the attitude of modern Americans toward the Old Gods, as interesting objects worthy of pity or revulsion, but not as sacred beings. Wututu can only become complete again in death, where she will be reunited with her twin, the other half of her soul.



CHAPTER 12

At the start of the chapter, an excerpt of Agnes Repplier's *Times and Tendencies* says that America's religion and morality are all wrapped up in the idea that America deserves all its blessings. The scene then opens with Shadow driving Wednesday across the Midwest to South Dakota, in a Winnebago that Wednesday has bought. Wednesday comments on Mount Rushmore, calling it another sacred place of America where white people felt that they needed to build an excuse for people to visit. Shadow adds that he had a friend once who told him that the Dakota Indians climb Mt. Rushmore in order to pee on the presidents' noses.

The chapter opener introduces the idea of American exceptionalism—the belief that America is special because it deserves to be, and it somehow will always be superior to other countries. Mount Rushmore was a sacred place for the Sioux Native American tribe, among others, before the land was made “public” by the American Government. Modern Americans still feel that this land is special somehow, but had to inscribe images of presidents on it in order to feel they could worship it, instead of just worshipping the land itself. The Dakota who pee on the president's noses seem to be rejecting the man-made (and colonialist) changes to the land, rather than disrespecting the land itself.



After driving a while longer, Shadow tells Wednesday that a girl disappeared in Lakeside. Wednesday calls it a tragedy, but focuses more on the sadness of the question that used to be on the milk cartons that displayed missing children: “Have you seen me?”

Wednesday again can't seem to care about the things that bother humans. The missing child question—“Have you seen me?”—resonates with Wednesday, who is trying to force the other gods and the humans of America to see him, and worship him once more.



Wednesday tells Shadow to exit the interstate, but finds a roadblock in front of them and a fleet of black cars behind them. Wednesday uses chalk to scratch a design on the Winnebago's dashboard, then tells Shadow to drive the Winnebago off the road. Shadow reluctantly does so, as the Dakotan landscape dissolves around them. Wednesday tells Shadow to park the Winnebago, and he and Shadow walk into a strange version of the Dakota hills with bright stars overhead, though it is daytime. Wednesday laughs at Shadow for simply accepting all these fantastic events, but Shadow says that nothing has surprised him since he learned that Laura was sleeping with Robbie.

The roadblock and black cars seem to have been built by the New Gods in order to trap Wednesday and Shadow. Wednesday takes Shadow to the mythic dimension “behind” America, which can only be accessed by the gods. Shadow is starting to have some qualms about Wednesday's plans, questioning his desire to take the top-heavy Winnebago off road, but he still follows Wednesday's orders. Ever since Laura's betrayal, Shadow's whole world feels so unstable that no strange event seems out of place.



Wednesday and Shadow walk in silence, as Wednesday warns Shadow not to speak and not to get too close to the odd spider-like contraptions and shards of bone that dot the landscape. Shadow accidentally touches a bone and finds himself transported into the body of a policeman at the roadblock. The other policemen chatter about how odd it is that they lost the Winnebago that was coming down the road, but all Shadow's policeman can think of is how badly he needs to pee. Shadow's policeman, Mr. Town, calls Mr. World and tells Mr. World the bad news that the Winnebago got away. Mr. World says not to worry about trying to intercept the Winnebago later. Shadow's own thoughts interrupt to think that Mr. World's voice sounds familiar, and Mr. Town struggles to imagine why he would think that when he talks to Mr. World every day.

The spider-like contraption seems to be a monitoring device left by the New Gods, while the shards of bone act as conduits into the minds of different people and gods. The bone that Shadow touches transports him into Mr. Town's head, as Mr. Town is trying to keep up the roadblock that Mr. World wants, while also ensuring that the human police don't think anything strange is happening. The New Gods do not want humans to see magic, as that could spark belief in Old Gods once more. Shadow's thoughts break into Mr. Town's head when Shadow recognizes Mr. World's voice, which he has heard once when Mr. World ordered the raid on the House on the Rock—but also because it's the voice of Low Key.



Shadow snaps back into his own body as Wednesday removes Shadow's hand from the bone shard. The two men watch the spider-like contraption light up green, then fade to blue, then red. Wednesday says it is now safe to speak. Shadow asks where they are, and Wednesday answers that they are "behind the scenes." Shadow recounts his experience in Mr. Town's head and Wednesday is happy to hear that the police don't know where they are. Shadow begins to get a headache as they keep walking, so Wednesday gives him a sip of a sweet liquid to keep him from getting sick from being "Backstage." Finally Wednesday tells Shadow to walk between two mounds of glassy rock and Shadow emerges back in the real world.

Wednesday and Shadow walk down a hill to a mobile home where a dark-skinned man warns "two white men who lost their Winnebago" that they are on Lakota land. Wednesday snorts that the man, Whiskey Jack, is not himself Lakota. Whiskey Jack invites them into his mobile home, where Wednesday introduces Shadow to Johnny Appleseed, who is sitting at the table. Shadow says his name is Mike Ainsel, but Johnny corrects him. Whiskey Jack serves stew for them all while Johnny pours apple cider.

After they eat, Johnny Appleseed asks Wednesday why he is leading the old folks on a war path. Whiskey Jack comments that the New Gods have already won and that he doesn't want to fight for another lost cause, like when the Native Americans continued to fight even after the white men had already won. Johnny chimes in that he wouldn't be worth anything in a fight, now that people no longer believe in him after Paul Bunyan took over his place in the minds of the American people.

Whiskey Jack suddenly focuses on Shadow and says that Shadow is hunting for a debt he wishes to pay. Shadow thinks of Laura and nods. Whiskey Jack tells a story of Fox and Wolf, with the moral that the dead must stay dead. Whiskey Jack asks Shadow to tell him his dream, and Shadow explains about the skull spire and the thunderbirds. Whiskey Jack nods and tells Shadow that a thunderbird would bring Laura back, but that she is meant to stay dead. Finally, Whiskey Jack tells Shadow to come visit him again when Shadow has found his tribe.

On Mr. World's orders, the New Gods stop monitoring Backstage, the mythical godly dimension behind America. This place seems to be the magical foundation underneath America that can only be accessed by gods, and is not a place where mortals like Shadow should be. Wednesday gives Shadow what seems to be either ambrosia (a divine liquid from Greek mythology) or soma, the divine liquid from Hindu mythology, to help him tolerate the place. Yet there must be something special about Shadow, as he seems to be accessing Backstage in his dreams. Gaiman hints that Shadow is not entirely mortal.



Whiskey Jack, also called Wisakedjak, is a trickster and friend to humankind in the Native American Algonquin, Menominee, and Cree cosmologies. Like Johnny Appleseed, Whiskey Jack is more of a culture hero used to teach morals or lessons, rather than a god. Johnny Appleseed, the culture hero named for John Chapman, was famous for planting apple trees across the Eastern and Midwest United States as well as advocating for conservation of natural resources. Whiskey Jack's description of Shadow as white again highlights his racial ambiguity.



Whiskey Jack has already fought a hopeless battle, and does not consider Wednesday's cause important enough to fight again. None of the gods that Wednesday visits seem interested in his war, most just hoping to survive themselves rather than get involved in a bloody battle. Even Johnny Appleseed, angry about the "fakelore" of Paul Bunyan—a cultural figure similar to Johnny Appleseed, but one that was partly made up by lumber companies—does not want to destroy the New Gods.



Though Whiskey Jack admits that it's possible to bring Laura back, there would be consequences beyond what Shadow is willing to pay. Unlike Wednesday, who goes for what he wants no matter what, Whiskey Jack follows the Native American tradition of advocating for balance above all. Whiskey Jack's reference to Shadow's "tribe" suggests that Shadow himself might have Native American heritage, which would help explain Shadow's racial ambiguity and his unique connection to America itself.



Whiskey Jack asks Wednesday if he is going back for his “Ho Chunk,” the proper name for the “Winnebago” tribe. Wednesday says that it is too risky, and Whiskey Jack offers his nephew Harry Bluejay’s Buick in exchange. Johnny Appleseed then takes Shadow and Wednesday to find Harry. As they walk, Johnny explains that he once had a wife who was Choctaw but that she died, making Johnny go crazy for a bit. After walking for half an hour, the three men catch a ride from a Lakota woman. She explains that the Lakota call Whiskey Jack Inktomi.

Whiskey Jack highlights how modern American culture exploits Native Americans, taking the name of a tribe and using it for a motorhome. Adding insult to injury, the commercial product doesn’t even use the right name. Johnny’s grief after his wife’s death offers a parallel to Shadow’s situation, as Shadow feels like he’s going crazy from all the events that have transpired since Laura’s death. Whiskey Jack’s name among the Lakota tribe is Inktomi, another reminder that the gods have different names and even different characteristics according to what different groups of people believe about them. Yet Inktomi is still a trickster figure, maintaining the essential core of the god.



Shadow and Wednesday find Harry Bluejay at the reservation rec hall. Harry angrily explains that he is not Whiskey Jack’s nephew (as Shadow realizes that they have all been saying “Wisakedjak” this whole time), but agrees to give them his Buick. Shadow drives to St. Paul, with Wednesday sulking the whole time. At a restaurant, Shadow sees a paper and notices that the date is the 14th of February, though it was only the 21st of January when they left for South Dakota. Wednesday, still grumpy, grunts that they spent a month walking Backstage. After seeing Johnny Appleseed, Wednesday is very aware that America forgets even its own legends, much less the stories of the gods brought to America.

Though Wisakedjak may be a friend to humankind, he still expects humans to follow his will even when it’s inconvenient. Shadow has also had to sacrifice his time to Wednesday, spending almost a month Backstage, where time moves at a different rate. Wednesday is nowhere close to grateful for all that Shadow is doing for him, focusing instead on his imminent fading away if all people in America forget him. It is clear that Wednesday will do anything, no matter who it hurts, in order to stay present.



Shadow and Wednesday drive back to Lakeside, seeing notices about the missing Alison McGovern as they get closer to the town. Shadow buys the “Lakeside Reporter,” looking for news of Alison, but the newspaper is full of fluff human interest pieces. Back in Lakeside, Wednesday takes the car and leaves, while Shadow walks out to the lake to look at the car on the ice. There, he sees Marguerite Olsen and asks about Alison. Marguerite says darkly that she hopes Alison is dead, because the alternatives are worse. Shadow realizes that Marguerite is really talking about her own missing son Sandy.

Lakeside puts so much stock in being a “good” town that they even curate their newspaper in order to keep anything distressing appearing on the record. Marguerite, the only one who seems to still remember all the kids who have disappeared, obviously does not buy the story that Sandy ran away with his father. If Marguerite hopes that both Alison and Sandy are dead, she must be sure that there is something horrible lurking in Lakeside.



Through the month of February, Shadow spends his time taking long walks on the trails around Lakeside. He watches the wildlife and tries not to think about gods, or Laura, or strange dreams. Getting a haircut at the local barber one day, Shadow sees Chad Mulligan. Chad welcomes Shadow back to Lakeside and tells Shadow to consider a career in law enforcement if the job with his “uncle” ever falls through. Chad then changes the subject, asking advice about whether he should pursue a relationship with a second cousin who was recently widowed and may have a thing for him. Shadow tells Chad to go for it.

Shadow finally gets a chance at a normal life, growing into his “role” as Mike Ainsel and finding he likes the fit. Without the baggage of Shadow’s criminal record, Chad goes so far as to offer Shadow a job on the other side of the law. After all the talk of gods and battles, the small detail of Chad’s love life comes as a welcome respite from the tense situations elsewhere in the novel.



Shadow follows a trail out of town that leads him to a tiny graveyard. Laura is there, but she asks Shadow not to look at her because she now appears very obviously dead. Shadow's time at the funeral home in Cairo makes him more comfortable with the dead, though, and he is able to admit to Laura that he misses her. Laura explains that she hasn't been able to find him lately, as his presence only flares up for a couple of days all over the states. Shadow says that he has been staying in Lakeside.

Laura's soul may be kept alive by the gold coin, but her body is decomposing exactly as if she really were dead. This is another sign that Laura really should accept death fully, rather than continue to lie that she is alive. Shadow's presence seems to be hidden from Laura when he is in Lakeside, suggesting that there is something magical about this "normal" town after all—and this is probably also why Wednesday insisted that Shadow stay here to "lie low."



Shadow and Laura begin to walk, and Shadow revels in how normal it feels to walk with his wife. Laura stops and says that she may be dead, but Shadow never truly seemed alive even when they were together. She goes on to chatter that she liked Robbie because he was actually somebody who wanted things. Shadow is hurt, and Laura apologizes, but she asks Shadow if he's sure *he's* alive. Laura then leaves, telling Shadow that he will see her again before the end.

In this moment, Shadow has practically everything he wanted when he was in prison—yet Laura reminds him that this is not enough. Shadow needs to figure out some long-term goals and desires so that he can start living purposefully rather than floating around as he did when he and Laura were married. Shadow dislikes that Laura went to Robbie in his place, but he does not contradict her, as Shadow seems to agree that he needs to become more fully "alive."



INTERLUDE

The narrator describes the many events of the war between the gods, which mortals try to explain as normal events despite their strangeness. At this point, it's still a "cold war," with casualties on both sides but no outright fighting. Bilquis, who used to be worshipped as the Queen of Sheba, sells herself on the street in Los Angeles but is forced inside when it starts raining. After a week of rain, she places ads on sites like LA-escorts.com and Adultfriendfinder.com to try to drum up some more business and ease her withdrawals from lack of worship.

Gaiman helps match up the crazy world of the gods with reality, making it seem possible that the events of this novel were really happening underneath the surface of everyday life, and adding to the idea of American Gods as a kind of modern myth. Bilquis, in her attempts to go online, tries to adapt to modern life in America instead of staying stuck in the old ways that are no longer serving her.



When the rain stops, Bilquis goes back outside, hoping to attract some of the businessmen driving by. A car pulls up behind her and Bilquis gets in, hoping to find a customer. A smug looking teenager (Technical Boy) greets her, saying that he can pay for whatever he wants, as a technical boy. The boy then calls Bilquis by her name and sings "You're an immaterial girl living in a material world," badly. Bilquis realizes she is in danger and jumps out of the car as it is moving.

It seems that Bilquis' forays online caught the attention of Technical Boy, alerting him to her presence so that he could target her as one of the first casualties of the war between the gods. He is still smug in his sense of power, stealing the lyrics of a Madonna song to taunt Bilquis, calling attention to the fact that Bilquis is immaterial – made of belief, a substance which is rapidly disappearing.



Running down the Los Angeles street, Bilquis whispers passages from Song of Solomon, desperately trying to tap into her power to help herself escape. The car speeds behind her and crushes Bilquis into the street, as Bilquis curses the boy inside. Technical Boy gets out, still singing about an analog girl in a digital world, sneers at "all you fucking madonnas," and walks away.

While Bilquis quotes the beautiful language of the Bible, Technical Boy can only continue to regurgitate old pop songs—again displaying a lack of creativity and "staying power" in the New Gods. His reference to "Madonnas" references the singer of the song "Barbie Girl" that he is ripping off, but also nods to the "Madonna-whore" complex that expects women to either be immorally promiscuous or virginal.



INTERLUDE 2

Marguerite calls her sister, Sam, telling her about her new next door neighbor who does coin tricks and the strange disappearance of Alison McGovern. Sam asks more about the neighbor, fishing to see if Marguerite is interested in him, but Marguerite says that her neighbor seems too melancholy. Hearing the sadness in Marguerite's own voice, Sam says that she is coming to visit. They end the phone call laughing about Hinzelmann's tall tales.

The familiarity Shadow felt with Marguerite is explained by the fact that she is Sam's sister. As such, Marguerite's tragedy with Sandy was actually the loss Sam was referring to when she sympathized with Shadow. Though Lakeside initially existed as an oasis apart from the main plot of the novel, it is now becoming integrated into the rest of the events, as Sam plans to come to Lakeside, not knowing that Marguerite's neighbor is Shadow.



INTERLUDE 3

Laura applies for a job on the night shift at a gas station. The attendant seems off put by Laura's ill appearance and warns Laura that the night shift is hard because the weirdos come out. Laura promises that she can cope.

Little does the gas attendant know, Laura herself is one of the "weirdos"—she's just better at hiding it.



CHAPTER 13

The chapter starts with an ode to failing old friendship from Stephen Sondheim's song "Old Friends." One Saturday, Marguerite invites Shadow to dinner, making it clear that this is not a romantic occasion. Shadow accepts and goes out grocery shopping, buying wine and a plant for Marguerite and stopping at Mabel's restaurant for a pasty. The gossip there is that Chad's cousin has come into town.

Stephen Sondheim's "Old Friends" speaks to the difficulty of maintaining friendships as times and people change – exactly the challenge that Wednesday is facing as he tries and fails to recruit the gods he once knew. Shadow is still reveling in his normal life, though he knows it's all a deception to distract him until he returns to his "real" life of serving strange gods.



Shadow gets back to the apartment, where his disconnected phone rings. Wednesday is on the line, sounding exhausted as he grumbles about how hard it is to gather the gods and how much pain the gods have faced being forgotten in this country. He tells Shadow about Thor, a god who committed suicide rather than keep living in Philadelphia. Finally Wednesday explains that he is going to a peace talks meeting with the New Gods in the Kansas City Masonic Hall, but that Shadow should stay out of trouble in Lakeside.

Wednesday seems to be the only person from outside who can locate Shadow when he is in Lakeside, as Shadow is safe there from all the other turmoil. As the war continues, Wednesday cannot convince the Old Gods to make a change and fight for their survival instead of wasting away in their old ways. Wednesday's reference to Thor makes him seem like a random god—but Thor is actually Odin's son in Norse mythology, meaning that Wednesday is probably repressing or hiding great pain about his death.



With plenty of time to kill before dinner, Shadow starts reading the Lakeside Council minutes he bought at the library sale. He finds out that a Mr. Hinzelmann was responsible for building the lake that gave Lakeside its name, and he marks the page, imagining Hinzelmann's pleasure at reading about his ancestor. At 5:30, Shadow gets ready to go to Marguerite's apartment.

The Hinzelmann family legacy would explain why the current Hinzelmann feels so much ownership over Lakeside and is so concerned with keeping it "good." Even the town's name seems specifically chosen to be as generic and nice as possible. It seems more and more likely that something sinister is going on with Hinzelmann and the lake.



Marguerite's son Leon is watching "The Wizard of Oz" when Shadow comes in. A minute later, Sam comes in with some groceries. With Marguerite busy putting the groceries away, Shadow asks Sam to pretend that she doesn't know him. Leon excitedly practices coin tricks, as Shadow explains that Leon has to work on his misdirection: the art of making people look in the wrong place so that the illusion seems more surprising.

At dinner, Marguerite and Sam explain that they are half-sisters, with their Cherokee father in common. Sam asks Shadow to tell them about the Ainsel family, but Shadow just says that they are too boring. After showing Leon a few more coin tricks, Shadow goes with Sam to the local bar. He brings along the Lakeside minutes, on the off chance that Hinzelmann will be there.

On the way to the bar, Sam asks Shadow to explain his alternate identity, and she tells him that a Mr. Town came to her house looking for him. Shadow is reluctant, saying that Sam would never believe the explanation, but Sam gives a long monologue describing all the many things, both serious and irreverent, that she believes. Shadow decides to tell Sam all about the war between the gods and his wife coming back from the dead. Sam hesitantly accepts his story, with the assurance that Shadow is one of the good guys.

In the bar, Shadow greets Chad with a wave and starts to walk toward a table before he is stopped by a loud scream. Chad's cousin, who turns out to be Audrey Burton, recognizes Shadow and says she wants him arrested as an escaped convict and a murderer. Chad asks "Mike" to come down to the station to figure this all out, obviously reluctant to distrust Shadow after months of being his friend. Sam steps up and insults Audrey, then kisses Shadow in a display of support, rather than any sense of romantic feeling. Shadow agrees to go with Chad, denying any charges of murder and hoping that no one blames him for Alison's disappearance.

Shadow waits at the police station while Chad makes many phone calls trying to straighten out who Shadow is. Shadow asks to make a call and gets in touch with Mr. Ibis down in Cairo. Shadow asks Mr. Ibis to get a message to his "uncle." Mr. Ibis says that his uncle is busy, but that they managed to get ahold of his "Aunt Nancy."

Misdirection comes up again, significant especially in a chapter that focuses on a mundane dinner party in Lakeside when Wednesday is ostensibly off to go make a deal with the New Gods. The two plots meet as Sam, who knows Shadow's name and background, agrees to go along with Shadow for now.



Both Marguerite and Sam have Native American blood, tying them to America more than the gods who all have their stories of coming to America. Sam hints at Shadow's false identity by asking about the "Ainsel" family.



Sam's monologue on belief cements her status as what Gaiman sees as the future of healthy American belief, which incorporates some of the old traditional gods, some new gods, and some principles all Sam's own. Gaiman has said that this speech is the closest thing to a statement of his own beliefs in the novel. Shadow finally gets a chance to be honest about what is happening to him, though he has to think for a minute before saying that he is one of the good guys, given that both sides think that they are right.



It seems especially odd that two people who know about Shadow's criminal past have distant ties to Lakeside and show up on the same day. Given how the gods have manipulated other events in the novel, it seems likely that someone is working behind the scenes in this instance as well. It's unclear why Audrey calls Shadow a murderer, though it's possible that he has been blamed for Laura's murders of Mr. Wood and Mr. Stone, taking the fall for his wife once again. Sam's kiss, more than a romantic gesture, is a symbolic act of putting herself on Shadow's side. Sam shows that she believes that Shadow is trustworthy, hoping that others will be swayed by her belief.



Shadow hopes that Mr. Ibis can get in touch with Wednesday, carefully maintaining the lies that he and Wednesday have built in Lakeside. Aunt Nancy is another name for Mr. Nancy—and his tales were told by slaves in the American South using that name as well.



Shadow sits back down to wait, picking up the Lakeside Minutes he still has with him to pass the time. Reading a random page, Shadow notices that a pre-teen girl disappeared in the winter of 1876. Flipping to winter of 1877, Shadow sees that a young “Negro child” disappeared that January. As Shadow scans the minutes for winter of 1878, Chad interrupts and regretfully tells Shadow that he is under arrest for violating his parole.

Chad processes Shadow as a prisoner, where Shadow signs the paperwork as Mike Ainsel to say goodbye to that identity. Shadow changes into orange clothes and gives up his wallet, secretly hiding some money and the **silver Liberty coin**. The woman guard in charge of the holding cells lets Shadow sit out in the lobby with her as long as he wears handcuffs, as the toilet in the holding cell is broken and stinks.

The woman guard begins to doze as Shadow watches an episode of “Cheers” on the lobby TV. The characters in the show then begin talking to Shadow, telling Shadow that he has the right to believe in the wrong things, but it’s not too late to come to the winning side. The show switches to a documentary style, where Mr. Town explains that they are “freedom fighters” working to make a difference, and then introduces a Live Feed of the Kansas City Masonic Hall.

Mr. World, with his back to the camera, asks Wednesday to take a peace treaty, which Wednesday refuses on the grounds that he cannot speak for all the individual Old Gods involved in this fight, and since that they have no guarantee that the New Gods will keep their truce. Mr. World assures Wednesday that all the gods can be shown a video tape of this conversation, and that the camera does not lie. As Wednesday keeps talking, Shadow notices an odd red glint on Wednesday’s glass eye. The red blur slips around Wednesday’s face, then focuses on his eye once more. Suddenly, there is a bang and Wednesday’s head explodes—he’s been shot. The live feed repeats his murder again in slow motion.

“Cheers” returns on the TV as the phone in the police hall rings and the guard startles awake. After the guard hangs up, she apologizes that she has to put Shadow in the holding cell until the Lafayette sheriff’s department comes to get him. Shadow sits in the cell playing with his **Liberty coin** to pass the time and to avoid thinking of Wednesday. A door opens in the lobby and Shadow hurries to put the Liberty coin back in his sock. Chad Mulligan comes in to the holding cell and sympathizes with Shadow before delivering him to two officers in brown uniforms. The men escort Shadow to a black car outside.

The Lakeside minutes begin to take on significance as more than just a dry history book, as Shadow begins to see a pattern of a child disappearing every winter. This looks like the work of a god who asks for a sacrifice every winter, but Shadow is interrupted before he can put everything together.



Shadow regretfully sheds the Mike Ainsel name, a role that he liked. Mike gave Shadow good practice at making his own choices, but now Shadow must come into his own under his own identity, without a persona to hide behind. Keeping the liberty coin ensures that Shadow will have protection no matter what comes next.



Media twists the American ideal of religious freedom into a skewed perspective on Shadow’s right to believe the “wrong” thing. Mr. Town’s definition of “freedom fighters” makes it clear that this term depends on one’s perspective, as someone who believes the opposite might call a freedom fighter a terrorist.



Mr. World’s assurance that the camera does not lie is both false and a reminder that everything is not as it seems at this meeting. Having the meeting in a Masonic Hall makes sense, as the Freemasons were (and are) a secret society in America that encouraged worship of a Supreme Being without specifying who that god was, making it a kind of neutral ground for both Old and New Gods. Yet the Freemasons (and their European predecessors, the Knights Templar) are also surrounded by mystery and credited with starting a number of wars, making it the perfect spot for Mr. World and Wednesday to start their war instead of signing a peace treaty.



Though Shadow had a strange relationship with Wednesday, he is still sad to see him killed—and his death is shocking to the reader as well, since Wednesday has been such a major character thus far. Playing with his liberty coin again invokes the protection of the moon, which Shadow will need if the officers in brown uniforms are New Gods in disguise, as seems likely from their sinister black car.



In the car, one of the officers asks if Shadow heard about Wednesday. Shadow recognizes the voice, realizing that the officers are Mr. Nancy and Czernobog. Shadow thanks them for getting him out, and asks if Wednesday is really dead. Mr. Nancy doesn't answer, but his face looks hopeless enough that he doesn't need to.

The Old Gods Mr. Nancy and Czernobog rescue Shadow even after Wednesday's death, suggesting that the Old Gods are still going to band together even if the man who was leading them is gone.



COMING TO AMERICA. 14,000 B.C.

A holy woman named Atsula performs a sacred ritual with the elders of her tribe. Each elder takes turns wearing the mask of their god Nunyunnini, as the mammoth god explains that their tribe must leave their land before a great comet can strike. Nunyunnini tells the tribe to travel towards the sun for two months. Atsula interrupts that this journey is too dangerous and foolish. Nunyunnini speaks again, saying that the tribe will still reach the new, safe land, but Atsula's faithlessness means that the tribe will not keep this land forever.

Gaiman fictionalizes what could have been the first arrival in America, when ancient tribes came over the Siberian land bridge. As the tribes' people take on and off the mask of Nunyunnini, they in some sense "become" the god, strengthening the idea that gods exist because humans believe in them. Gaiman also incorporates a possible explanation for why so many groups come to America: Atsula's faithlessness means that many invaders will come.



The tribe packs their things and walks east, crossing the land bridge and arriving at the base of ice cliffs. Atsula tells the tribe that she will die at the base of the cliffs, offering the sacrifice that will ensure that the rest of the tribe reaches the new land safely. Behind them, the tribespeople see a bright flash in the land where they once lived and know that they have escaped a terrible disaster. The elders praise Nunyunnini for delivering them, but Atsula slowly realizes that the gods are only as great as the human hearts that create them. A sudden roar from the west interrupts Atsula before she can say more.

Atsula provides the sacrifice necessary to get her people safely to this new land—with gods, as usual, everything has a price. Before she dies, Atsula has an epiphany that the gods are only powerful because humans choose to give them power. Should people stop believing in gods, they would no longer mean anything. Yet it seems as though some force does not want Atsula to fully finish that thought, as she is interrupted by a "roar" from the west.



Atsula dies just as she said, and the tribe reaches the new land and settles in a spot with plenty of fish and easily hunted wildlife. Generations pass, and the tribe's descendants spread out and choose new gods, abandoning Nunyunnini. After many years, slavers come and find the valley of the First People, and they discover the cave where the mammoth mask of Nunyunnini was hidden all these years. They throw the mask into a ravine, so that their own gods will not be jealous. Nunyunnini is entirely forgotten.

From the start in America, gods were brought over only to be replaced by new gods and forgotten. The invaders that Nunyunnini promised do arrive, and they spell Nunyunnini's downfall by keeping their own gods instead of incorporating another god. Nunyunnini joins the halls of gods who are no longer worshipped once there is no more belief left to sustain him, and no evidence that this god was ever even here.



CHAPTER 14

The chapter starts with Greg Brown's song, "In the Dark with You." Shadow, Mr. Nancy, and Czernobog reach Minneapolis and meet up with some of the other Old Gods. Alvis, the barrel-chested god, promises to avenge the all-father's death. Mr. Nancy, Czernobog, and Shadow keep going in Alvis's 1970 VW bus, driving south into Kentucky. Shadow is amazed to see that spring has already arrived in this region and he becomes painfully aware that time is an illusion. Czernobog wakes in the backseat and describes a strange dream in which he was also Bielebog, both the god of darkness and the god of light. He lights another cigarette, and when Shadow mentions lung cancer he scoffs that gods are hard to kill.

Shadow, Mr. Nancy, and Czernobog stop at a restaurant for lunch. The waitress comes to their table saying that there is a call at their payphone for Mr. Nancy. Mr. Nancy comes back to the table, saying that the New Gods have offered to hand over Wednesday's body at a neutral location. Czernobog thinks it's a trick, until he hears that the New Gods want to meet in the "center."

The exact center of anything is hard to find, but people attempted in the early 1900s to find the exact center of the continental United States. They came up with a spot outside of Lebanon, Kansas. As the precise location is in the middle of a privately owned hog farm, a monument is built two miles north of Lebanon. Nobody comes to this tourist attraction, but a dreary park remains. Mr. Nancy explains that the exact location of the center doesn't matter, as long as people decide to believe that this sad park is the center of America.

Back on the road, Mr. Nancy drives and Shadow tries to sleep, but can't ignore the bad feeling in his stomach. They keep driving, back north to Kansas where it is still winter. Czernobog forces them to stop in a meadow outside Cherryvale, Kansas, where mortals once sacrificed people to him and buried the bodies. Happily refreshed by this memory of blood, Czernobog reminds Shadow that he will get to kill him with a hammer when this is all over. Shadow changes the subject, asking why they can trust the New Gods to hold a truce this time when they already killed Wednesday. Nancy answers that the center of America is so "negatively sacred" that no god can have any power there.

The Greg Brown excerpt suggests that the gods are now "in the dark" of despair after Wednesday's death, but they are also "in the dark" about Wednesday's entire plot. Alvis, the King of the Dwarves in Norse Mythology, shows how Odin's death galvanizes many of the gods who were previously unwilling to enter the fight. Wednesday had to sacrifice himself so that the battle would be fought at all. Czernobog's dream foreshadows the idea that Czernobog and Bielebog really are the same person, coming out at different times – especially significant next to a mention of spring, as the change of the season controls Czernobog/Bielebog's aspect. Czernobog's mention that gods are hard to kill hints that Wednesday might not actually be completely dead.



Gaiman includes another scene at a diner, highlighting another quintessential but often overlooked American tradition. Czernobog is right to think that the New Gods may try to trick them again, but the center apparently is truly a neutral location – enough to pacify even Czernobog.



Finding the geographical center of the United States seems to be a misplaced desire to find the "soul" of America, as Wednesday had previously mused. Instead of unifying Americans, this small park in the middle of nowhere actually scatters them more by creating a place where no one wants to go, instead of a place where everyone wants to gather. Gaiman shows that finding the center of America is a fruitless effort, as America's identity and "soul" are ever-shifting.



Czernobog is sustained by blood sacrifices, a steep price for a god to ask, especially in modern times when violence of the sort that Czernobog enjoys is seen as barbaric. Czernobog is able to revive himself on the fumes of past sacrifices, explaining that the memory of blood is one of the strongest forces. Again, sacrifice is extremely powerful, but does no good when it is given for the wrong reasons. Shadow seems to be two steps behind Mr. Nancy and Czernobog, who have already thought through the relative merits of going to the center. It seems that the center of America is fundamentally unfriendly to gods, as something about the nature of American land is resistant to the gods' power. This is the only place where all the gods can be neutral, but it is nonetheless a risky place.



Shadow parks the VW bus outside the motel next to the park at the center of America, noticing sadly a large black car with a chauffeur—which means that the New Gods are already there. A perfectly polished young woman comes out of the motel and greets them, introducing herself as Media. She explains that Wednesday’s body is in the fifth room of the hotel, and that Shadow and his friends can make themselves comfortable in any of the other rooms until it is time for the handoff. Shadow goes into room 9 and tries to sleep.

Shadow dreams that he is walking through a snowstorm with a grey wolf by his side. He comes to a grove of trees with a bonfire burning in the center. A man who sounds like Wednesday welcomes Shadow to Sweden 1,000 years ago, explaining that this is the place where people would hang nine different animals for nine days. One animal was always a man, sacrificed to Odin. Shadow looks at the trees in the grove, noticing animal shapes hanging from the branches. The Swedish Wednesday explains that, for gods, death doesn’t matter – only the opportunity for resurrection.

Passing by the bodies of dead men in the trees, Shadow asks what his part is in all this, and Swedish Wednesday tells Shadow that he is a diversion, the thing that made it possible for Wednesday to pull off this trick. The fire burns brighter and Shadow sees that it is built on bones rather than wood. Swedish Wednesday says, “Three days on the tree, three days in the underworld, three days to find my way back.” The Shadow’s dream goes dark.

Media knocks on Shadow’s door and invites Shadow to dinner. The New Gods’ chauffeur passes out burgers and fries from McDonald’s and Shadow asks what time the handoff of Wednesday’s body will take place. Both Mr. Nancy and Technical Boy answer “Midnight.” Shadow grumbles that no one ever tells him the rules to all this. As the Old and New Gods snipe at each other, Shadow decides to go see the center of America. Mr. Nancy follows.

In contrast to the New Gods’ sleek car, the Old Gods’ VW bus looks pathetic and out of touch, another sign that the Old Gods are hopelessly outmatched. Wednesday’s place in the 5th room is significant, as it is the exact center of the hotel, next to the center of America. Meanwhile, Shadow is in room 9, a number significant to Odin—it’s the number of days he hung on the tree, as well as the number of runes he learned, acting as a subtle reminder that Shadow promised to sit Wednesday’s vigil.



The grey wolf is most likely representative of Geri or Feri, one of Odin’s wolves. Shadow’s dream includes an older incarnation of Odin, one who has not been driven so mad by lack of power. He gives Shadow the basics of Odin’s vigil. As the gallows god, this incarnation of Odin demanded incredible sacrifice from his people (and there is indeed evidence of human sacrifices to Odin in ancient Sweden). The Swedish Odin makes it clear that Wednesday could be revived if enough blood were spilt in his name.



After all Shadow’s talk about being bad at misdirection, it turns out that he is the distraction. Wednesday needed someone else to make him look credible, as all his cons are two-person affairs. The nine days on the tree are separated into three sets of three days, recalling the significance of threes in the Norse creation myth.



The New Gods obviously love fast food, as a new trend in America. Both the New Gods and the Old Gods agree on the rules of the ritual for handing over the body, showing that there are some things that all the gods agree on, even if they claim to be complete opposites. Shadow has to learn all these rules as the human “ambassador” to the gods.



Mr. Nancy lights a cigarillo and sighs that it is bad to have this many gods in one place, no matter who's side they're on. But with Wednesday dead, no one can give up the fight now. Mr. Nancy goes back inside and Shadow goes closer to the monument marking the center of America. He hears a click behind him and turns to see Mr. Town holding a gun. Mr. Town says that he won't shoot Shadow, as they'll all soon be dead anyway, but tells Shadow that he should be back in prison. Shadow reminds Mr. Town that the only person to whom Jesus personally promised a place in heaven was the convicted thief who died on a cross next to Jesus.

Mr. Nancy sees gods as fundamentally jealous, unable to share worship or space without hurting one another as they all compete for the same resource of human belief. Yet Wednesday's death has become such a defining moment that the Old Gods continue their fight for the sake of their pride. As the god of civilization, Mr. Town naturally hates the disorder that an escaped convict like Shadow creates. Shadow gives one of the few references to Jesus and Christianity in the novel—in a story of redemption. Like the thief, Shadow can prove to be a hero despite his background.



Shadow goes back to the motel and finds Media in his room. She offers to make Shadow famous beyond his wildest dreams if he joins their side, and then threatens to make him infamous when Shadow refuses again. Shadow makes Media leave and lies on his bed thinking of Laura, trying to recall good memories but unable to get the thought of Laura and Robbie out of his mind. Technical Boy knocks on Shadow's door, complaining about the lack of technology in this motel and practically shaking with withdrawal pangs. Shadow tells Technical Boy to go rest and locks his door. Through the wall, Shadow can hear Technical Boy banging his head on the wall.

The New Gods again use any methods they can to convince Shadow to join them, though Shadow is not swayed by their tricks and empty promises. Their very insistence on recruiting Shadow shows that they are not as secure in their position as they seem, just as Technical Boy's breakdown while away from technology shows that the New Gods can be as easily stripped of their power as the Old Gods were.



Shadow walks out of his room and runs into the New Gods' chauffeur in the motel parking lot. Shadow recognizes him, realizing that it is his old cellmate Low Key. Suddenly, saying Low Key's name out loud makes Shadow realize that his name is actually "Loki Lie-smith." Shadow and Loki go back to Shadow's room, where Loki admits that he lied to Shadow but says that Shadow needed help his first year in prison. Shadow asks why Loki is driving for the New Gods, as he should be particularly loyal to Wednesday as another member of the Norse pantheon. Loki responds that he and Wednesday were never friends. Shadow reminds Loki that the Old Gods are more organized and unified now that they can avenge Wednesday's death, but Loki just shrugs.

Low Key, having disappeared at the beginning of the novel, now reappears to reveal one of the biggest surprises of the book. Despite living together for three years, Loki was never honest with Shadow, and Shadow never realized that his cell mate was actually a god. Loki's comment that Shadow "needed help" suggests that the gods have been manipulating Shadow's life for far longer than he suspected. And given Loki and Odin's history—legend tells of Odin throwing Loki out of Asgard, the home of the Norse gods—it's not entirely surprising that a trickster god like Loki would choose to betray his kind and fight for the other side.



At five minutes to midnight, Loki tells Shadow it is time to go to Wednesday's room and light candles. In Room 5, Wednesday is lying peacefully on top of the bed, though his face still shows the violence of his death. The other gods come in, arranging themselves around the body and bringing a religious atmosphere into the room that Shadow has never felt before.

Gaiman describes this scene with mythic language, making this part of Shadow's journey seem like an old legend. Though the gods are in an abandoned hotel, it has the atmosphere of a church, again highlighting the idea that the truly divine places in America are not the organized houses of worship, but the places where people feel the call of belief.



The time comes to say some words over the body and Technical Boy deliriously cites the opening lines of Yeats' "Second Coming," ending at "the center cannot hold." Czernobog and Mr. Nancy speak of the Old Gods' obligation to give blood for blood, making Mr. Town scoff that the Old Gods have no chance. Czernobog curses Mr. Town with a coward's death while Media attempts to persuade everyone to think of the happiness of birth during this time of sadness and death. At midnight, the New Gods turn to leave on Loki's signal, with Technical Boy murmuring "call no man happy" to Shadow as he goes.

The Old Gods wrap up Wednesday's body in the sheets and Shadow picks him up. As Shadow walks down the corridor, he remembers his pledge to sit Wednesday's vigil if Wednesday died. Shadow places Wednesday in the back of the VW bus. As he turns, Mr. Town gives Shadow Wednesday's glass eye. The new and the Old Gods pack up and leave the motel at the center of America.

By dawn, Shadow, Mr. Nancy, and Czernobog have reached Princeton, Missouri with Wednesday's body. Mr. Nancy advises Shadow to run to Mexico or Canada, but Shadow decides to stay with Wednesday. Mr. Nancy explains that they have to take the body to a "world tree" in Virginia, where someone must sit vigil for Wednesday in order to fulfill the old traditions while the New and Old Gods battle Backstage. Shadow offers to sit the vigil, but Mr. Nancy protests that the vigil would kill Shadow – he would have to hang on the world tree for nine days and nights without food and water. Shadow is adamant that he has to do it, because it is the "kind of thing a living person would do."

As Mr. Nancy keeps driving, Shadow is filled with pride that he has finally made a decision. He hopes he lives through the vigil, now that he knows what it is like to be alive. He wonders about the big picture in all of this, but can't quite grasp it. Once in Virginia, Mr. Nancy finally makes it to the world tree after getting lost multiple times on the unmarked farm roads. Shadow gets out and stretches his legs, having lost all sense of time while they were driving.

Yeats' line "the Center cannot hold," a reference to an unspooling of reality at the apocalypse, suggests that the center of America cannot maintain itself with the number of gods gathered here – something will have to give way. Czernobog again brings up the necessity of sacrifice, as there is a price for every action. But the New Gods focus on meaningless platitudes that connect death and life in one balance. Meanwhile, Technical Boy seems to have gone crazy, but manages to remind Shadow of the Herodotus quote from the beginning of the novel, while leaving out the part that makes this quote purposeful. As Technical Boy says it, no one can ever be happy. Oddly, the New Gods seem to be following Loki's orders, though Loki claimed to be just their chauffeur.



Gaiman has already shown that Shadow keeps his promises, unlike the gods. By taking Wednesday's eye, Shadow commits to following the same path that Odin took, hanging on the tree as a sacrifice to earn wisdom.



As Shadow drank Wednesday's mead and pledged to hold his vigil, Shadow now has to honor that promise by the rules of the Norse gods. Yet even if Shadow had not done so, it would still be traditional, according to the old legends about Odin, for someone to hang for Odin after he died. These rules are the pattern of mythology that makes stories retain their meaning in all the times and places they are retold. Shadow knows that Odin's vigil may kill him, but he has decided that keeping his promise and finally making a bold choice are worth it. A living person would feel strongly enough about something to die for it, and Shadow wants to prove (mostly to himself, but also to Laura) that he is truly alive.



Significantly, Shadow is not agreeing to potentially die for Wednesday because he doesn't care about his life—rather it's because he finally does care. His sacrifice to Odin is thus more meaningful, as Shadow really does have something to live for. Yet Shadow still doesn't see how his sacrifice will fit into Wednesday's larger plan. Unlike most of the locations in the novel, the farm where the world tree stands is not an identifiable place in America.



Wednesday's body is still fresh in the back of the bus. Shadow manipulates Wednesday's glass eye as he would a coin, looking at the abandoned farm house next to the World Tree. The tree itself is taller than the farmhouse and looks exactly like Wednesday's tie pin. Three women (The Norns) are standing by the tree, reminding Shadow of the Zorya sisters. The biggest woman takes Wednesday's body out of the back of the bus, and then all three sisters ask if Shadow will perform the vigil. Mr. Nancy again gives Shadow a chance to back out, but Shadow accepts the vigil.

The biggest sister pantomimes to Shadow to take off his clothes, and the Norns prop a nine-stepped ladder against the tree. Shadow climbs the ladder and the sisters begin to tie Shadow's entire body to the tree trunk with thin ropes. Shadow is amazed at how evenly the ropes hold his weight, such that even the rope around his neck doesn't hurt. The sisters take the ladder away, leaving Shadow hanging from the tree with Wednesday at his feet. The sisters leave, and Shadow is alone.

CHAPTER 15

The chapter opens with lines of the old spiritual, "Hang me and I'll be dead and gone." Shadow hangs for the first day, noticing only boredom and discomfort rather than pain. After that, the prickling in his limbs becomes worse and his vision starts to blur. He starts chanting a motto: It's easy, there's a trick to it, you do it or you die. A squirrel climbs down the tree, chattering "ratatosk" in Shadow's ear. Shadow hopes the squirrel will not bite, and manages to fall asleep. He sleeps restlessly, the pain waking him often from disturbing dreams.

Shadow dreams of an elephant-headed man who says he could have made Shadow's journey easier. The elephant man further tells Shadow that he will lose many things while he hangs on the tree, but he should not lose "this," showing Shadow an illusion with a mouse disappearing into the tree and then cryptically telling Shadow "it's in the trunk." It starts to rain, waking Shadow again, and Shadow tries to catch some water in his mouth. He can't even feel the cold, his body numb as he watches lightning in the distance.

As the storm beats on Shadow's body, he feels an odd joy at being fully alive – and feels that the sacrifice is worth it for this one perfectly clear moment. He drinks more rainwater and then feels warm and comfortable, sleeping deeply and dreamlessly.

In Norse mythology, the World Tree (also called Yggdrasil) is a magical ash tree that connects all the world, both the mortal and godly realms of the nine worlds that make up the Norse cosmology. The Norns are the women who protect the tree, in some legends standing for the past, present, and future, and in others simply acting as guardians over the powerful forces housed in the well at the tree's base (but also roughly corresponding to the Fates of Greek mythology). At the tree, Shadow is adamantly making his own choices, even going against what other people tell him to do for the first time in the novel.



Shadow's nakedness makes him more vulnerable, showing that he is baring his entire being during this sacrifice. Rather than hanging Shadow by his neck, ensuring certain death, the Norns tie Shadow carefully so that he has a chance of surviving this experience. In order to properly perform the vigil, Shadow has to be willing to die, but he does not actually have to perish.



The spiritual, once sung by slaves in the American South, adds a uniquely American flavor to a ritual that would otherwise be entirely of the old Norse tradition. Shadow sees the ritual as a "trick," yet another magical illusion that he must get through, though he doesn't know that he really was tricked into doing this sacrifice by Wednesday, as will be revealed later. The squirrel probably references Ratatoskr, the messenger who carries news from the top branches of Yggdrasil to its roots.



The elephant-headed man is the Hindu god Ganesh, who does in fact remove obstacles from journeys for those who worship him. Gaiman plays with the many meanings of "trunk," referring to both the trunk of the tree and the trunk of the elephant (and, ultimately, the trunk of a car). The lightning in the distance shows that the storm that Sam Fetscher predicted in the very first chapter has finally come, as the gods begin to go to war.



Shadow appreciates his life most at the moment he's closest to death. Hanging on the tree was his choice, and his choice alone, showing that Shadow has finally learned to go after what he wants.



The next morning, Shadow's entire body is in pain. He spends the day alternately burning and freezing as the squirrel continues to visit him periodically. As the storm clouds gather again, Shadow sees his whole life spread out before him, especially his wedding day with Laura. He hallucinates that Laura is there and laughs about her silliness as they got married, kisses the hallucination once, then sleeps again.

Shadow wakes again, feeling distant from his body and the tree. The squirrel comes again with a walnut shell of water and tips it into Shadow's mouth. Refreshed, Shadow struggles against the ropes, but the knots hold. Delirious, Shadow feels that he is the tree and tries to distance himself from the pain of the man who is hanging on the tree. He feels connected to everything: the tree, the sky, the wind, the storm clouds, the squirrel. Shadow, as the tree, manipulates the stars as he would coins.

In a rare moment of clarity, Shadow comes back to his body. He sees a naked man standing before the tree. The man explains that he saw Shadow in Cairo, and Shadow realizes that this dark-skinned man must be Horus, who Mr. Jacquel mentioned lived in Cairo as a hawk. Horus greets Shadow as a fellow sun god, then turns into his hawk form and catches a rabbit to eat. While perched on a branch of the tree, Horus turns back into a man, and asks Shadow's name. When Shadow tells him, Horus nods that the shadow and the light go together. Horus comments that Shadow is dying, then turns into a hawk and flies away.

During the night, Laura arrives at the tree. Shadow asks hoarsely how Laura found him, and Laura explains that Shadow is the nearest thing that Laura has to life, and so Shadow shines like a beacon in an otherwise grey world. Laura offers to cut Shadow down, but Shadow explains that he has to stay here in order to be truly alive. Laura nods, then complains that she lost her job at a gas station for looking too dead, and says she is very thirsty. Shadow tells her to go to the farmhouse and tell the sisters there (the Norns) that Shadow said to give her water. Laura says that she should go, but Shadow asks her to stay the night.

Shadow sleeps, then wakes again and sees that Laura is gone. He has a vicious headache and cannot fight the pain in his body to keep breathing. As his heart stops beating, Shadow falls into a darkness lit by a single star, the final darkness.

Both the squirrel and the hallucination of Laura help Shadow, showing that he cannot survive this ordeal alone. While Odin forbade anyone to help him while he was on the tree, Shadow depends on this community and welcomes their presence.



Shadow begins to gain the knowledge that the vigil for Odin promises, learning what it is to actually be the objects around him. He conspicuously becomes every natural thing in the area except the land itself, as the land in America is too sacred to be a part of this ritual. Shadow's coin trick hobby again distracts him from pain and suffering, as it has throughout the novel.



Horus, one of the most important gods of Ancient Egypt, is associated with the sun, the sky, and the falcon. As he continues to lose power in America, Horus has completely given in to his animal aspect, no longer remembering how to live as a human. Horus identifies Shadow as a sun god, the first hint that Shadow is truly Baldur, the Norse god of light and the sun. Horus also emphasizes the importance of balance, as Shadow's status as a uniquely American god shows that he has both light and shadow, instead of entirely one or the other.



Shadow shining like a beacon also echoes the mythic descriptions of Baldur, in which light is said to stream from Baldur's head. Laura also reverses her earlier statement about Shadow being "a man shaped space in the world" – now that Shadow has become fully alive, he is the only thing in Laura's world. Shadow now takes on an assertive role with Laura, giving her advice rather than loyally following her orders. He also asks her to stay out of gratitude for her protection, rather than the sense of neediness and desperation that Gaiman described in Shadow's interactions with Laura earlier in the novel.



Shadow dies on the tree after hanging there for three days, following the prophetic words of the Swedish Odin. He now has three days to travel through the underworld and three days to return, in order to follow the traditional sun god path of death and rebirth found in many mythological sources, including Celtic and Egyptian legends.



CHAPTER 16

The chapter starts with the Canada Bill Jones quote, “I know it’s crooked, but it’s the only game in town.” Shadow finds himself in a rocky landscape with a midnight sky. He feels achy, but nothing near the pain he imagines he should after his vigil. He looks at his clothes and notices that he is wearing the same jeans and white t-shirt that he wore when Zorya Polunochnaya gave him the **Liberty coin**. As Shadow walks down rock steps, he sees Zorya Polunochnaya waiting at the bottom. Zorya Polunochnaya warns Shadow that he can now have any answer he wants, but he can never unlearn what he finds out here.

The rock path in front of Shadow splits and he knows he must choose which way to go. Before deciding, he turns to Zorya Polunochnaya and gives her back the **Liberty coin**. Zorya Polunochnaya closes her hand on the coin and then the coin floats above Shadow’s head and becomes a small moon. Shadow asks Zorya Polunochnaya which path to take, and Zorya Polunochnaya gives him the choice between hard truths or fine lies. Shadow chooses hard truths. Zorya Polunochnaya tells him the price of taking that road is his true name. Shadow allows Zorya Polunochnaya to take his true name from his head, and Zorya Polunochnaya points him down the right-hand path.

Shadow walks down the path, thinking that the Underworld is like the House on the Rock. He sees dioramas of the worst moments of his life, including when he beat the two men who stole his cut of the robbery and was arrested and put in prison. The only saving grace is that Laura’s name is never mentioned at the trial. He keeps walking, almost wishing he had chosen the lies, and reaches a hospital room where his mother is dying. A 16-year-old Shadow sits at her bedside, trying to escape into a book and pretend that this is just another sickle-cell crisis. Shadow wants to shake his younger self and tell him to do something, but he can’t touch himself.

Shadow keeps walking his path and comes across a scene of his kid-self asking his mom about his dad. Though he knows it will lead to a fight, his kid-self refuses to accept his mother’s desire not to talk about it. He keeps walking the path of hard truths, and finally comes across a scene of his mother as a young woman, dancing in a bar. Wednesday, looking the same as when Shadow knew him, starts dancing with her. Wednesday leads Shadow’s mother out of the bar and Shadow does not follow, not wishing to witness his own conception.

Wednesday previously quoted Canada Bill in Las Vegas, the first hint that he had somehow rigged the fight between the gods. In the Underworld, Shadow will find out exactly how. The rocky landscape is reminiscent of both Shadow’s dreamscapes and the Backstage experience, making it clear that the underworld is part of that mythical place “behind” reality. Zorya Polunochnaya appears to warn Shadow of the double-edged sword of wisdom – it gives power, but also involves sacrificing one’s innocence.



As Zorya Polunochnaya turns the Liberty coin into the moon, it becomes clear that the coin really was the moon in some sense, watching over Shadow at night and protecting him from harm—and now it lights his way in the underworld. After all the lies that Shadow has endured in his time with the gods, he is now ready to face the truth, no matter how difficult this may be. Zorya Polunochnaya does not reveal Shadow’s true name, but the evidence suggests that it is Baldrur from the Norse legends.



The House on the Rock included strange dioramas of life, as Shadow now looks at these scenes from his own life as if they were simply stories that happened to someone else. But the distance from these scenes does not make them any less painful for Shadow to watch. Unanswered questions about how Shadow got arrested are finally answered (at least in part) as it becomes clear that Laura somehow arranged for Shadow to be part of a robbery that broke down when his partners betrayed him and Shadow took out his rage through violence. Additionally, clues to Shadow’s heritage are given, as the prevalence of sickle-cell illnesses in African American communities makes it more likely (but not certain) that Shadow’s mother was African American. Shadow sees his former passivity and now completely rejects that way of drifting through life.



Shadow finally finds out that he is the son of an American woman and Wednesday, the Norse god Odin. This makes Shadow a demigod, part mortal and part man, as well as a hybrid between the Old Gods conceived in other countries and the New Gods created here. His status as a bridge between these supposed “opposites” makes him uniquely able to understand the position of gods in America.



When the path splits again, Shadow stops to catch his breath. He feels a hand on his back and a smoky voice purrs his name. Bast comes up behind Shadow and explains that one path will make him wise, one will make him whole, and one will kill him completely. Shadow doesn't know which way to go, so Bast offers to choose for him. Bast reminds him that there will be a cost. Hearing that his name has already been taken, Bast takes his heart, saying that she will save it for later. Bast grabs Shadow's heart out of his chest and tells Shadow to take the middle path. Shadow asks Bast what gods really are, and Bast explains that gods are the dreams that humanity needs to make sense of life.

Shadow glances down the first path, recognizing it as the museum of gods that he saw in a dream. He glances down the path to the far side and sees a Disneyland-like funhouse. He then moves down the middle path, the only one that feels right. It leads to a lake in a cavern, and a low flat boat comes up to the edge where Shadow is standing.

The boat's pilot is a long, thin man with a bird's head. The pilot greets Shadow and the voice is familiar. Shadow boards the boat and realizes that the pilot is Mr. Ibis from the Cairo funeral parlor. Mr. Ibis explains that he is a psychopomp, someone who escorts mortals through the underworld to the world of the dead. Life and death are not actually mutually exclusive, he says: more like two sides of the same coin. Shadow begins to wrap his head around the idea that he is dead, as Mr. Ibis tells him that he asked to be the one to escort Shadow. Even if Shadow does not believe in the Egyptian gods, Mr. Ibis believed in Shadow.

Mr. Ibis steers the boat to the opposite shore and leads Shadow up to Mr. Jacquel, who looks like a gigantic dog-headed creature. Mr. Jacquel picks Shadow up and examines his soul. Shadow can feel him measuring all of Shadow's failings and weaknesses, all the things that mortals usually try to lie about and cover. Shadow starts to cry until the examination is finally over. Mr. Jacquel asks who has Shadow's heart, and Bast appears. Mr. Jacquel then weighs Shadow's heart on a giant golden scale. Bast explains that Shadow will get to choose his own destination if the scale balances, but he will be eaten by Ammet if the heart is too heavy.

Though Shadow has already sacrificed his body on the tree, and his name and innocence to Zorya Polunochnaya, he has to make one more sacrifice in the underworld. This third sacrifice is the costliest, three being a significant number in Norse mythology. Bast takes Shadow's heart, the center of Egyptian intelligence and emotion, essentially stealing Shadow's soul so that it can be weighed later. Assuming that Bast names the paths in the order they appear, the middle path is most likely the path that will make Shadow whole. Shadow gets one last piece of wisdom, finally understanding that the gods are created by humans, but that humans need the gods just as badly to give meaning to their otherwise chaotic lives.



Bast may have chosen for Shadow, but Shadow ensures that he himself wants to go down the path she suggested before taking it. It is likely that the first path is the path that would make him wise, sharing all the wisdom of the forgotten gods, and the third path would kill him, as a deceptive fun house would most likely be full of dangers in this book where appearances are always deceiving.



Mr. Ibis takes the role of guiding Shadow to judgement, as he did as Thoth to the ancient Egyptians. Thoth had a close association with the sun god Ra, partially explaining why Mr. Ibis likes Shadow so much (another sun god), but Thoth also has a deep appreciation for balance, which Shadow provides by being both light and dark, sun and shadow. Mr. Ibis continues this balance in his description of the relationship between life and death, recalling the gold coin that both gave life to Laura and indirectly brought death to Mad Sweeney.



As Anubis, Mr. Jacquel is the final arbiter who judges the dead. Shadow must again face difficult truths about himself and what he has done in his life, as Gaiman shows that most people lie out of a sense of self-preservation so that they do not have to consider all these faults. Yet Shadow makes it through the examination, proving that he can handle the truth and actually use it to his benefit. Again Shadow hopes for balance, as that would mean that he has enough light in him to keep his darkness from overwhelming him. Ammet (or Ammit) was the "devourer" in Egyptian mythology, a crocodile-headed goddess who consumed the souls of the damned.



As the scales tip and turn, Shadow hopes aloud for a happy ending. Bast reminds him that there are no happy endings and, indeed, no endings at all. Finally, the scale balances and Bast sighs that this means another skull for the pile. Relieved, Shadow asks to make his own choice – he wants rest, with no heaven and no hell, just nothing. Mr. Jacquel opens a door for Shadow and Shadow steps through it with a sharp, fierce joy.

Bast's comment about endings recalls the fact that myths continue to be retold and changed even after they are "finished," meaning that no mythological character can ever truly end his or her story. Bast's reference to "another skull for the pile" recalls Shadow's dream, in which he had to climb a pile of his own skulls from past lives to reach the thunderbirds. Shadow has apparently been reincarnated many times, and will most likely be reincarnated again after this experience. Yet Shadow chooses rest for himself, feeling the joy of making his own decisions even as it means that he no longer gets to live.



CHAPTER 17

The chapter opens with an excerpt of a letter from Lord Carlisle, dated 1778, that expounds on the grand scale of everything on the American continent. The chapter begins by describing the most important place in the southeastern United States: Rock City, atop Lookout Mountain. The Cherokee considered it sacred, as whoever controlled Lookout Mountain controlled all the land that could be seen from this peak. Now, it is an ornamental garden that hides the entrance to caverns housing fairy tale dioramas.

1778 is close to the start of America as a separate country, and Lord Carlisle's letter is full of the incredulity he felt at seeing America as one of the first British ambassadors. It makes it seem almost inevitable that America would become a great country, with the scale of American dreams matching the scale of its land. The American gods have large ambitions as well, and Gaiman places their ultimate battle at another real yet often overlooked location in Tennessee. This place is also recognized as sacred because of its land, though it's covered with odd monuments and tourist traps by Americans who do not know how to respond to the divine feeling here (or who seek to exploit it).



Gods flock to Lookout Mountain, from every corner of America and every pantheon and mythology. Gods from Europe, Asia, the Indian sub-continent, and America itself gather, getting what weapons they have ready for battle.

Gaiman tries to include gods from every known pantheon from all the many cultures that have made their mark on America, showing how the Old Gods are strong precisely because they can combine all of these diverse worldviews.



Laura thinks of the spark of life she saw in Shadow when he was hanging on the tree. After staying the night at Shadow's request, she goes to the farmhouse to ask for a drink. The farmhouse is dusty and cold, despite the fire in the fireplace, though Laura thinks that the chill might just be because she's dead. She notices three women (The Norns) sitting on the sofa and tells them that Shadow said to give her water. The smallest woman nods and leaves the room, then returns with a jug of water.

Laura noticed the radical change in Shadow's demeanor after he decided to live life to the fullest. She now follows his advice, going to the Norns as Shadow said. The Norns seem to respect Shadow, whether as a fellow member of their pantheon (due to his identity as Baldur) or because Shadow has shown strength through Odin's vigil. The smallest sister represents the future, and her gift of the water suggests that Laura still has a future even though she is dead.



Laura thanks the small woman for the water, then drinks the entire jug, finding it cold as ice. Laura starts shaking and coughs up bile, formalin, and bugs. All her memories rush around her head, the consequence of drinking the water of time from the spring of fate. Laura passes out, then wakes in the farmhouse alone with a bleeding scratch on her hand. Now that she has drunk the water of time, she knows exactly what she has to do and the mountain she must go to.

On a wet day in March, crowds of people gather in Rock City on Lookout Mountain. New Gods begin to arrive, wearing the confidence of being worshipped and adored. Technical Boy walks among them, looking for Mr. World.

Meanwhile, Mr. Town can't find Ash Tree Farm on his GPS and is forced to ask for directions. He finally finds it, thinking that he is too old for this nonsense. Mr. World has asked him to cut a **stick** from this specific tree (the world tree), but gave him strict orders not to turn Shadow into a martyr for the Old Gods to rally behind. Mr. Town hates Shadow fiercely, but agrees to follow orders.

At the tree, Mr. Town ignores Wednesday's and Shadow's bodies and cuts a branch. He fights an instinctual urge to shove **the stick** into Shadow's side. Mr. Town climbs back down the tree, imagining that he sees a woman in the window of the farmhouse smiling at him, then pantomiming slitting her throat. He shakes his head and gets back in the car. As he drives away, Shadow's side begins to bleed.

Easter watches the crowds at Lookout Mountain, noticing that the few mortals there seem to see nothing strange going on. A barefoot girl, introducing herself as Macha of the Morrigan, excitedly tells Easter that the battle will start soon and prophesies that the Old Gods will win. As the girl walks away, Easter greets a hawk flying above her. The hawk hops towards Easter, slowly transforming into a man. Horus awkwardly tells Easter that the man on the tree needs her, and that this man's fate is more important than the battle.

Laura drinks water from the magical well that the Norns guard, "Urd's well," which holds some of the most powerful forces in the universe (according to Norse mythology) and can reverse time and fate. The water revives Laura's body, bringing her back to when she was freshly dead so that she can continue to protect Shadow.



The calendar creeps closer to spring, and the New Gods are ready to fight once the dead season of winter is over, though they obviously consider the battle to be already won.



As Mr. Town is most comfortable in civilization, the rural location of the world tree naturally confuses him. Mr. World's orders not to turn Shadow into a martyr ironically echo the way that Wednesday's death has already done that, making it seem as though Mr. World knew he was martyring Wednesday when he killed him.



The stick seems to have no significance to Mr. Town, who does not know the old legends, or the fact that Odin pierced his side with a stick in order to die, causing all later sacrifices to Odin to be pierced as well. Mr. Town's desire to stab Shadow with the stick shows how it acts as a literal symbol—on a physical level it acts like the spear it represents, causing Shadow's side to bleed. One of the Norns in the window predicts that Mr. Town will soon die.



The Morrigan are warrior goddesses of Ireland, who are naturally excited by the thought of battle, where they can show their power and be revived by the fight. This battle has the potential to benefit all gods who are sustained by war. Horus manages to convince Easter to come revive Shadow, acknowledging how important Shadow is to the future of all American gods.



Mr. Town has been driving for hours but keeps circling back to the ash tree farm. A storm gathers on the horizon and Mr. Town notices a woman (Laura) walking along the side of the road. He asks her for directions. The woman says she can't explain the route, but she can show him. The woman gets in the car, saying that she actually needs a ride, and Mr. Town is struck by her blue eyes and crooked smile. Mr. Town promises to take the woman as far as she needs to go.

The world tree seems to have a supernatural pull on Mr. Town until Laura is able to break him free of the cycle. Another storm in the distance acts as an omen of the gods' fight. Laura again shows her ability to convince others to do what she wants, using her pretty appearance to hide how dangerous she really is.



Back at Lookout Mountain, Technical Boy finally finds Mr. World and tells him that everything is on schedule. Technical Boy then awkwardly lingers, looking troubled. Mr. World asks him what's wrong, and Technical Boy asks why they are waiting and why they don't just annihilate the Old Gods now, or else just wait for the Old Gods to die out on their own. Technical Boy says that there will be too much bloodshed in this big battle. Mr. World smiles, twisting his scarred lips, and says they have to wait for **a stick**.

Technical Boy's doubts about the war between the Old and New Gods echoes the Old Gods' earlier qualms about starting a fight this large. It seems that Mr. World has had to rally the New Gods into fighting just as Wednesday had to go about recruiting Old Gods. Mr. World's plan is actually more complicated than simply eliminating the Old Gods, and seems to have a connection to Odin through the stick from the world tree.



Disturbed, and assuming that Mr. World is lying about making such a fuss about a stick, Technical Boy says he doesn't need to know the truth. Mr. World confesses that he needs **the stick** so he can throw it across the battle field before the fighting begins and dedicate the battle to Odin. Technical Boy doesn't understand, so Mr. World says he will give a demonstration. He whips out a knife, rams it into Technical Boy's throat, and dedicates the death to Odin. As Technical Boy dies, Mr. World hears a gruff voice in the shadows tell him, "good start."

Technical Boy seems to recognize that Mr. World trades in lies, but he doesn't realize how deep the lies really go. It turns out that Mr. World has been working with Odin this whole time, leading the New Gods into battle so that Wednesday will be revived by all the blood shed in his name—after Mr. World uses the stick from the World Tree to honor Odin in the battle. The gruff voice seems to belong to Wednesday, showing that even the death of one god is enough of a sacrifice to start bringing him back to life.



CHAPTER 18

The chapter opens with commentary on the song "The Ballad of Am Bass" that points out that poetry doesn't always have enough room to include the truth. The narrator tells the reader to think of this whole book as a metaphor if it makes them more comfortable, given that religions are metaphors by definition anyway. Religions are vantage points from which to view the world, just as Lookout Mountain offers a view over the surrounding area.

The chapter opener suggests that this entire book cannot be both mythology and truth, though Gaiman has been blending real locations with these supernatural elements. The narrator offers a way out of reconciling these things, telling the reader to stop expecting truth and think of the metaphorical shades of religion as its strength, rather than wondering if religions are literally true or not.



The Old Gods gather at the foot of Lookout Mountain, arguing about when to attack. Some say to strike now, when it is least expected, while others advise waiting for a more advantageous time. Finally, one of the Morrigan cuts through the noise and says that it is the time now, whether it is a good time or not. The other gods agree.

The Old Gods seem to following some unspoken rules when it comes to their plan of attack, reaching back into the old mythologies rather than creating a new strategy for this present moment.



The narrative returns to Shadow, who is still in the underworld. Shadow is in the “Nothing” that Mr. Jacquel showed him, when Whiskey Jack’s voice breaks through the darkness. Whiskey Jack asks if Shadow has found his tribe, and Shadow says that he found his family but not his tribe. Whiskey Jack invites Shadow back to his house for a beer and Shadow suddenly finds that he is in Whiskey Jack’s house. They go outside and sit at the top of a hill near Jack’s mobile home and watch a waterfall.

Shadow comments that Whiskey Jack’s home is in a new place. Whiskey Jack asks if Shadow remembers Harry Bluejay, his nephew, calling the boy the best poet in America. Unfortunately, Jack says, Harry was diabetic because of too much processed sugar in his food, and he slipped into a coma while driving and died. Whiskey Jack then decided to move up north away from white men, their diseases, and their civilization. Shadow asks if they are really here, or if he is really still on the tree. Whiskey Jack just answers, “Yes.”

Shadow asks if Whiskey Jack is a god. Whiskey Jack says that he is a “culture hero,” someone who can mess up and is not worshipped. Whiskey Jack says that his people learned early on that America is no land for gods, so they give thanks to a creator spirit and worship the land for giving them food and shelter instead of making up gods to worship. Shadow comments that the gods may not belong here, but they are still going to war. Whiskey Jack says that it will not be a war, but a bloodbath. Shadow suddenly sees everything that is going on in the big picture—the gods’ war is just a two-man con. Shadow walks back to the door of Whiskey Jack’s mobile home, says goodbye, and walks through the darkness back to the sun.

Meanwhile Easter walks past the site where there used to be a farmhouse and up to a huge silvery tree. She steps through the old bones at the foot of the tree and starts to loosen the ropes that hold Shadow to the tree. Horus (as a man) helps her, and they lay Shadow’s body down in the meadow. Horus, at Easter’s request, then turns back into a hawk and flies up into the sun. A single sunbeam shoots down through the cloudy sky and focuses on Shadow’s lifeless body.

Spending time in the place of “nothing” ensures that Shadow really did die, rather than just spending time in the underworld. Now he can be truly resurrected, with all of the knowledge that he learned while dead intact. Shadow now knows who both his parents are, but he still doesn’t fully know his heritage. There are still clues that Shadow has yet to discover his identity as the King of America, or his Native American ancestry.



Harry Bluejay represents another group that has difficulty adapting to the circumstances of modern American life, as many Native Americans succumb to health problems such as diabetes, which didn’t exist on American soil before the arrival of Europeans and the subsequent development of American consumerist culture. Whiskey Jack laments these changes, and tries to return to the land and live off it the same way he used to. It’s unclear whether Shadow is dreaming this experience or not, but given the “real” nature of his dreams, Whiskey Jack suggests that it doesn’t matter (especially since Shadow is technically still dead anyway).



Culture heroes help people learn important lessons about how to live with the land rather than demanding worship or sacrifice. Whiskey Jack explains that the land really is the most important thing in America, as it is both wiser and more helpful to humans than gods are. Shadow is finally able to put together all the clues, using what he knows about Odin gaining strength through sacrifice, Czernobog’s comments that blood is the sacrifice that lasts the longest, and Wednesday’s penchant for two-man cons. Wednesday is working with the other side somehow.



The Norns’ farm seems to shift through time at a different rate than the rest of the world, having completely disintegrated back into the land in the time it takes Easter to arrive at the world tree. The sun, focused by Horus and his control over the sky, has the ability to restore life to Shadow, explaining the life-giving powers of the gold coin that represented the sun.



Easter gently places her hand on Shadow's heart, then kisses him, breathing air into his lungs. The wound in Shadow's side begins to bleed and Easter tells Shadow to wake. Shadow wakes, puzzled to be alive again after going through the underworld and facing judgment. Easter asks him if he remembers what he learned, and Shadow says that he does, for now. Easter tells Shadow that the gods are about to fight, and that she has played her part by bringing Shadow back. Now it is up to Shadow to play his part.

Back at Lookout Mountain, the Old Gods proceed up the side of the mountain as snipers shoot them down from the summit. Meanwhile, Mr. Town and Laura are still driving back to Tennessee. Mr. Town is elated at all that he and Laura have in common, and tells Laura how sad he is now that Mr. Wood and Mr. Stone are dead. Laura confesses that she too was unhappy with her life and decided to go out and have an adventure. Mr. Town thinks he is falling in love with Laura.

Mr. Town and Laura reach Rock City and Mr. Town tells Laura to stay in the car while he delivers **a stick** to his boss. Laura asks for a hug before he goes in, and Mr. Town obliges. As they hug, Laura whispers in Mr. Town's ear that he must want to find out what happened to Mr. Wood and Mr. Stone. Mr. Town says that he does, so Laura kills him, in the same way that she killed Mr. Wood and Mr. Stone.

Shadow walks around the meadow, looking at the trees and plants as if seeing them for the first time. Easter waits for him to speak, wary of the million-year stare in his eyes, as Shadow gets dressed in his old clothes. Shadow comments that all of his coins are gone, but he is not upset. Easter leads Shadow to the thunderbird that she rode here on, a bird like a condor the size of a black bear. Horus proudly says that he brought the thunderbird here. Shadow remembers that he once had a dream of thunderbirds and hesitantly touches the thunderbird's head. Easter tells Shadow that riding a thunderbird is as easy as riding the lightning. Shadow mounts the bird, says goodbye to Easter, and they take off into the sky.

Laura takes the **ash stick** from the back of Mr. Town's car and walks into the network of caverns that make up Rock City. She goes into a cavern where Mr. World is reading the paper. Mr. World welcomes her as the spear carrier and Laura introduces herself as Shadow's wife. Mr. World asks Laura why she looks so freshly dead, and Laura tells him about the sisters and their water. Mr. World is shocked that she was able to access Urd's Well.

Easter's place as a fertility goddess of rebirth and resurrection gives her the power to bring Shadow back from the dead. He wakes, finally whole after having learned the truth about his identity and the many lies that Wednesday has told. Shadow must now remember these truths and share them with others, doing his part to end the war.



The Old Gods fight on, though it looks like the battle will be a massacre. Yet Mr. Town has not yet returned with the stick, meaning that there is still a chance for Shadow to stop the war. Laura uses seduction as a way to control Mr. Town, recalling the ways that gods like Bilquis put sex to work in giving them life. Mr. Town becomes a more complex character here, as Gaiman ensures that few characters are purely good or purely evil.



Laura again proves herself a formidable guardian for Shadow, fulfilling Czernobog's curse that Mr. Town would be killed not in battle, but by a woman who has controlled him.



Shadow appears both newly reborn and a million years old, finally in touch with the wisdom from his past lives, yet filled with a conviction to live in the present. Armed with the truth, Shadow no longer needs his coins for distraction or misdirection. He finally touches the thunderbird, overcoming his failure to catch one in his dream. Now Shadow has fully matured and can ride the thunderbird into battle.



Mr. World refers to the stick as a spear, showing that he already thinks of the stick in terms of the weapon that it symbolizes. Mr. World also shows knowledge of the old Norse mythology, odd for a supposed member of the New Gods who professes to hate all the history that the Old Gods carry.



Mr. World asks for his stick, but Laura asks for a cigarette and some answers first. Laura asks why they used Shadow in the plot, to which Mr. World responds that Shadow was simply part of a pattern and misdirection. Mr. World plans to complete the pattern by going back to the ash tree and killing Shadow with a stick of mistletoe when the battle is over. Laura asks why Mr. World wants **the ash stick**. Mr. World responds that the stick symbolizes a spear, and that symbols are the only things that matter. Lastly, Laura asks what side Mr. World is on. Mr. World says, “the winning side.”

Laura says she will give Mr. World **the stick**, turning away from Mr. World to look out the cavern door. Mr. World comes up behind her to take it, and Laura waits for the exact right moment.

Shadow’s thunderbird ride is joyful and electric, as they are tossed through the storm and the lightning. Shadow tells the bird that he once had a dream where he tried to take a thunderbird’s feather, and the thunderbird nods that people used to take thunderbird feathers to prove their manhood and smash open thunderbird skulls to find the stones that grant resurrection.

Meanwhile Laura grips the stick tightly and waits for Mr. World to get close enough. Mr. World cautiously comes right behind Laura and reaches his arm around her, wary that she will throw **the ash tree stick** down the mountain. Feeling Mr. World’s chest against her back, Laura says, “I dedicate this death to Shadow,” then stabs the stick through her own chest and into Mr. World’s. The stick becomes a spear, slicing open Mr. World’s lung. Mr. World tries to stab Laura with his pocket knife, but she does not care. Mr. World slips in his own blood and both Mr. World and Laura fall to the ground.

The thunderbird lands in the Rock City parking lot in the middle of a rainstorm. Shadow sees Mr. Town dead in his car, and knows that Laura has been here. Shadow hears thunder, and wonders if it is the thunderbird returning home or atmospheric discharge or both. He hears a voice yell, “... to Odin,” and he rushes into Rock City.

Mr. World echoes the Swedish Odin’s phrasing in Shadow’s dream—saying that Shadow was simply misdirection—thus tying Mr. World even closer to Wednesday. His reference to mistletoe makes it clear that Shadow really is Baldur, as legend says that Baldur can only be killed by mistletoe. This also hints that Mr. World has ties to Loki, the god traditionally blamed for killing Baldur. Mr. World also quotes Loki by saying that he wants to be on the “winning” side.



Like the Old Gods waiting for the right moment, Laura also understands that timing is key when deciding how to defeat Mr. World.



Now that Shadow is fully alive and has understood what it means to sacrifice himself, he learns the cost of bringing someone back from the dead—sacrificing the thunderbird’s life and giving nothing in return.



By dedicating this death to Shadow, Laura gives Shadow power as an entirely new god, rather than simply the reincarnation of Baldur. Laura’s belief in Shadow is the key factor in his success, and the sacrifice of her own body (but not her soul, as Laura is already dead and damage to her body doesn’t kill her) is the price that she has to pay to kill Mr. World. As when the stick pierced Shadow’s side while he was on the tree, Laura’s symbolic motions turn into real violence as the stick becomes the spear that it represents.



As Shadow still considers whether these myths have a place in reality, he concludes that a myth’s truth doesn’t matter as long as someone believes it. It seems as though Shadow is too late, having arrived after someone managed to dedicate the deaths to Odin anyway.



Shadow then hears Wednesday's voice telling Shadow that he has done everything exactly right, drawing everyone's attention when Wednesday needed it and giving him the power of the sacrifice of a son. Shadow responds, telling Wednesday that the whole thing was just a crooked set-up for a massacre. Wednesday agrees, saying it may be crooked, but it's the only game in town.

Shadow asks for Laura and Loki. Wednesday doesn't answer, so Shadow walks farther into the caverns and finds Loki, who is lying on the floor covered by a blanket. Loki rasps at Shadow that he is too late, and Shadow explains that he knows all about the two-man con that Loki and Wednesday were pulling, as Loki has been Mr. World this whole time, setting the Old and New Gods against each other for his and Odin's own gain.

Wednesday then steps out of the shadows and explains that he had to do it to bring all the Old Gods together. Shadow calls him a Judas goat, betraying the Old Gods, but Wednesday proudly corrects Shadow. He says he was betraying everyone in order to cause a big enough blood sacrifice to restore his own former power. Wednesday explains that he feeds off of deaths that are dedicated to Odin, and Loki feeds on chaos, making this battleground a huge source of power for them both.

Wednesday and Loki commiserate to each other about the details of their plan, from finding Shadow to making sure he didn't have a wife to go home to any longer—they just didn't account for Laura not staying dead. Loki pants and falls forward, and Shadow then notices the pool of blood and the wound in Loki's back that was previously hidden by the blanket. Wednesday tells Shadow that Laura killed Loki, but that the coming battle will revive him. Shadow says that rigged games are the easiest to beat. He then says goodbye to his father and leaves the cavern.

Wednesday claims Shadow as his son, then uses that power to attach more meaning to Shadow's sacrifice, as Wednesday knew that Shadow was his son but chose to bind Shadow to his vigil anyway. Wednesday will go to any lengths to achieve his power, even causing the death of his own son. He then forces others to go along with his plots through trickery and deception, acting as if that is the only way to reach success.



Mr. World's true identity is finally revealed, as Loki (true to his character as the Norse god of tricks and disguises) actually had two false identities throughout the plot. Shadow sees the con as another in Wednesday's list of two-man cons, where Wednesday incited the Old Gods and Loki instigated the New Gods, all the while planning to betray them both.



A Judas goat is a specially trained goat used for sheep herding that leads the sheep to slaughter while its own life is spared. Similarly, Wednesday leads the Old Gods into battle while intending to take all the power for himself, though Wednesday also had to sacrifice himself in order to make the plan work. Odin and Loki would each draw power from this battle through the blood and chaos that it spreads, as those are traditionally their sources of sustenance in the old myths.



Wednesday and Loki tried to manipulate every aspect of Shadow's life after prison, finally accepting the blame for killing Laura – adding dark significance to Wednesday's lament "if it could have been but any other way" when he first met Shadow on the plane. Laura's death was not in fact inevitable, but another cog in Wednesday machine. Yet Laura is able to redeem herself by becoming Shadow's protector, as Shadow's own power as a sun god flowed through her and allowed her to kill Loki. Shadow now sees that he can disrupt Wednesday's plan just as Laura did, because Wednesday's strict adherence to pattern makes him easier to predict once Shadow knows all his tricks (just like in his checkers game with Czernobog).



Rock City is deserted, and Shadow knows that he has to get Backstage in order to find the battle taking place. He pushes through the thin membrane of reality and finds himself still on the top of a mountain, but at a peak that has been distilled to the true essence of a mountain. Frozen lightning stretches across the sky, and Shadow can feel the energy in this place. He realizes that people's belief is the motor for everything, making the entire world turn.

The Old Gods and the New Gods stand arrayed on the mountain top, making a sort of arena for themselves. Shadow recognizes all of them, now able to see their true natures. He can tell that the New Gods are scared that their time is already over, despite their bravado and arrogance in the face of the Old Gods. Shadow walks calmly into the center of the arena, hearing the voice of the Buffalo Man encourage him.

Shadow tells the Old Gods and the New Gods that they are both deluding themselves. Every god is eventually forgotten and ignored in America, existing only at the whims of a fickle people. He tells them a story about an old god who, depending on sacrifice and war, was forgotten in America and had to make a living as a grifter. That god became partners with the god of chaos and deceit, and together they planned a con that would renew them both to their former glory – a battle between the gods where all the blood and death would be dedicated to them.

One of the Old Gods protests that Odin really did die, and Shadow agrees that Odin's death was part of the plan. Someone else asks who Shadow is, and Shadow replies that he is Odin's son. Shadow then reveals that Mr. World never existed at all. He ends by saying that he would rather be a man than a god, as men don't need anyone to believe in them to keep going. Suddenly the frozen lightning bolt cracks in the sky and the arena goes dark. Shadow realizes that the gods are leaving, one at a time and then by the hundreds. A large spider, Mr. Nancy, scuttles over to Shadow and tells him that he has done well.

Mr. Nancy, now in human form, escorts Shadow back to the normal Rock City. As the gods begin to clean up their injuries, Shadow goes to find Laura. She is lying on the ground in a cavern in a pool of blood. Shadow kneels and tenderly touches her face. Laura greets him in a weak voice and Shadow explains that he stopped the battle, and he thanks Laura for killing Mr. World.

Now that Shadow knows his godly heritage, he can access Backstage at will and presumably exist there comfortably for a while. The frozen lightning suggests that time has been suspended and Shadow still has a chance of interrupting the battle before it starts. Shadow comes to the same epiphany that Atsula had, recognizing the huge role that human belief has in shaping the power of the gods and thus all of human history itself.



Shadow, through his experience in the underworld, now has the same knowledge that Odin earned through his vigil, and uses that knowledge to see the true natures of all the gods. The Buffalo Man, Shadow's spiritual mentor, shows him that he is on the right path by stopping the battle.



Shadow uses the powerful force of the truth to cut through all the lies that Wednesday and Loki have told to the gods. Furthermore, he pushes the gods to see their true place in the human psyche, recognizing that all this turmoil came from Wednesday's fear that he would be forgotten and die. Shadow frames this as a story, allowing the gods to see the universal themes at work in their experience.



Shadow shares with the gods the truth that they are fundamentally vulnerable, despite their great power and their perceived rule over human lives—because it's actually humans who grant them existence. This acknowledgment convinces the gods to leave the battle, restarting time and ensuring that Wednesday and Loki will not return.



Shadow still cares deeply for Laura, expressing gratitude for her sacrifice in a way that the other gods usually don't.



Laura asks if Shadow found a way to bring her back to life. Shadow says that he did, but Laura says that she has decided that she doesn't want to come back after all. She wants to move on. Slowly, Shadow reaches up to the **gold coin** that Laura has worn around her neck. He says, "I love you" one last time, then makes the coin disappear. Laura truly dies, going still at last. Shadow stands, sensing that the storm has cleared and that it will be a beautiful day.

Laura has concluded on her own that it is better to accept death than continually steal power from others to stay alive. Shadow takes back the gold coin that granted Laura temporary life and gives her a chance at reaching peace at last. The storm that's been foretold since the start of the novel has finally cleared.



CHAPTER 19

The chapter starts with a paragraph from Mr. Ibis's notebook, stating that tales are maps which can never be completely accurate but which show the territory nonetheless. Mr. Nancy and Shadow drive south for several hours. Mr. Nancy asks Shadow if he is happy. Shadow answers, "Call no man happy until he is dead," quoting Herodotus. He clarifies that this doesn't mean he is unhappy, just that you cannot judge someone's life until it is over. Mr. Nancy asks if he has learned anything, and Shadow thinks that he will keep some of the deep lessons but forget the details.

Mr. Ibis compares maps to stories, as both are ways of representing the world that can never be truly complete or accurate. Shadow's story includes important truths about America, but can never represent all that America is or will become as it continues to develop. Furthermore, Shadow echoes the idea that no story is ever truly over by cautioning Mr. Nancy against judging a life, as Gaiman subtly applies the same idea to America—cautioning against trying to judge or stereotype America.



Shadow drives across the border to Florida, then finally reaches Mr. Nancy's small house outside Fort Pierce. Nancy insists that Shadow stay with him, and then tells Shadow that Czernobog will be waiting for him to visit in Chicago. Mr. Nancy and Shadow walk to a small bar at the end of Mr. Nancy's street, where there's an open mic for karaoke. Mr. Nancy gets up and belts out "What's New Pussycat" and "The Way You Look Tonight," then tells Shadow it is his turn. Reluctantly, Shadow chooses "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," and finds incredible release singing to the half-empty bar.

Shadow again stays true to his promises, agreeing to face death by Czernobog's hammer to stay faithful to his wager. He has a brief respite in the karaoke bar with Mr. Nancy, singing a song that reflects his experience through the entire book—as his appearance and character have been continually misidentified and misunderstood. Shadow finally knows who he truly is and can live a better life because of that.



Shadow falls asleep that night on Mr. Nancy's couch, and he dreams of the Buffalo Man sitting next to a small fire. The Buffalo Man praises Shadow for diffusing the war between the gods, commenting that the gods are only here because the land allows them to stay. Shadow asks if Buffalo Man is a god. He answers that he is the land.

Shadow has aligned himself completely with the land, rather than with any of the Old or New Gods. The Buffalo Man, as the manifestation of the land, clarifies that American land is especially sacred (or sacred in a unique way), partially explaining why it is so difficult for the gods to exist here.



Shadow wakes to Mr. Nancy making breakfast and complains about a headache. Mr. Nancy reaches into a lavishly decorated African trunk and pulls out a generic bottle of aspirin. Shadow admits that he misses Wednesday, despite all the trouble he caused. Mr. Nancy assures Shadow that Wednesday will always be present whenever men try to con each other. Shadow asks what will happen if he doesn't go see Czernobog today, but Mr. Nancy tells Shadow that they will inevitably run into each other.

Mr. Nancy's fancy old trunk hiding modern aspirin shows how the old traditions can still be acknowledged even as one takes advantage of new conveniences. Gaiman suggests that this hybrid approach is the best way to move forward in America, and furthermore hints that the spirit of the gods can never truly die if humans continue to honor and believe in what those gods once stood for.



Suddenly, Shadow remembers something and asks Mr. Nancy if he knows an elephant-headed god. Mr. Nancy thinks of Ganesh, a Hindu god that removes obstacles and eases journeys. Shadow remembers Ganesh telling him, “it’s in the trunk,” and he feels completely certain that Ganesh did not mean the trunk of a tree. Shadow realizes that he has to get back to Lakeside before the ice melts.

Ganesh’s message, “it’s in the trunk,” referred not to a tree trunk or an elephant trunk, but the trunk of a car. To resolve this final mystery, Shadow must find out what has been hidden in the trunk of the “klunker” on the ice in Lakeside.



CHAPTER 20

The chapter begins with an e.e. cummings poem praising the arrival of spring. Shadow makes it to Lakeside in the morning, surprised at how little it has changed while he was gone. Though the ice is getting thinner, the “klunker” still sits on the ice, reminding all the citizens of Lakeside of their wager over when the lake will take the car forever. Shadow walks carefully onto the ice, feeling like the hero of an action or detective movie as the ice cracks and pops beneath him. He knows this is dangerous, but must know if his theory is correct.

After a long winter, spring dominates this last chapter, as Shadow finally gives everyone a chance at new growth by exposing old lies. In Lakeside, the lies are focused on the klunker car, once a benign harbinger of spring, and now a dangerous omen of the mysterious darkness lurking in Lakeside.



When Shadow reaches the car, he can feel the foul atmosphere surrounding the vehicle. He makes a lock pick out of the antenna and gets into the car, then pulls the handle inside to open the trunk. Ice scatters everywhere as Shadow goes around to check the trunk. Inside, Alison McGovern’s body is curled up, her face frozen in fear. Shadow wonders who put her here and tries to pull her out. At that moment (9:10 on the morning of March 23rd), the ice under the car’s front wheels cracks. The car slips into the water, taking Shadow with it.

Shadow finds Alison, the missing girl, but does not yet have all the pieces as to why Alison was placed in the trunk as a sacrifice. Spring arrives in the form of the ice cracking as Shadow finds the body, as if it were waiting for someone to expose the truth. It is exactly the time that Shadow guessed in the klunker raffle, suggesting that Shadow’s nature as a sun god gave him special insight to when spring would arrive.



Underneath the ice, Shadow opens his eyes and sees the klunkers of years past, impossibly clear through the murky water. He knows that each car will have a sacrificed child in the trunk. Shadow’s foot gets pinned in the mud underneath the fallen car and he struggles to pull it out before he runs out of breath. He manages to wriggle out and rushes to the surface of the lake, but then gets stuck under an ice sheet. His strength leaves him in the freezing water, but Shadow’s fury at dying just as he has come to life gives him enough strength to break one hand through. Another hand grabs his and pulls him up onto the surface of the lake. Shadow closes his eyes to rest for a minute and sees Whiskey Jack, a thunderbird woman, and the Buffalo Man standing in a plain shaking their heads.

Just as Shadow found in the minutes that a child had been lost each winter in Lakeside in the 1800s, it is clear that each year’s klunker must have a sacrificed child inside it, explaining where children like Sandy Olsen actually disappeared. In contrast to Shadow’s passive life, calm acceptance of death on the world tree, and subsequent request for “nothing,” Shadow now fights hard for his life to continue, having seen what good he can do in the world as he continues to find his purpose and share the truth. Whiskey Jack and Buffalo Man seem to tell Shadow that it is not his time to die yet, suggesting that America stills needs Shadow.



Shadow wakes in pain, finding himself in a small bathroom hot with steam. Hinzelmann tenderly helps Shadow ease into a bathtub of hot water, though the sudden change in temperature hurts Shadow's frozen body. Shadow tries to correct Hinzelmann when the old man calls him "Mike," but Hinzelmann doesn't listen. After the bath, Shadow puts on a robe and sips hot coffee with a shot of schnapps in it, sitting in front of Hinzelmann's fire. He thanks Hinzelmann for saving his life, and Hinzelmann bashfully says that he was just there checking the time in case the klunker crashed through, and did what anyone would have done in an emergency.

Shadow's head clears after the shock of the cold water and he wonders how Hinzelmann, a small old man, could pull his own large frame out of the water or carry him into the house. Shadow asks Hinzelmann why he saved his life, given that Shadow had found out that Hinzelmann was the one who killed all the kids each winter. Hinzelmann answers that he owed a debt to Wednesday. Shadow understands that Hinzelmann is the reason that Lakeside has always been a "good" town, making a dark deal with the townspeople that the town will prosper as long as they give up one child per winter – though none of the citizens are consciously aware that this is what they have agreed to.

Shadow realizes that Hinzelmann controls who comes into and out of Lakeside, angrily asking Hinzelmann if he brought Sam Black Crow and Audrey Burton here on purpose so that Wednesday would be forced out. Hinzelmann's imp-like face turns into a gargoyle scowl as Shadow reminds him that this year's klunker's trunk is open and the townspeople will find Alison when she floats to the top. Hinzelmann grabs a poker from the fireplace, and Shadow knows that Hinzelmann plans to kill him to keep the town's secret safe. Shadow goads Hinzelmann, telling him the police force have computers now and can more easily pick up on the pattern of a disappearance every single winter.

Hinzelmann tells Shadow that he is an Old God who was turned into a "kobold" in the Black Forest of Germany. He then seems to challenge Shadow to kill him and set him free from his long years watching over this town. Knowing that he is letting the hundreds of sacrificed children down, Shadow says that he can't kill the being who saved his life. Hinzelmann shows Shadow his secret shame, his body morphing into a five-year-old child pierced with two ancient-looking swords. Shadow then understands that Hinzelmann was a child raised for the express purpose of being sacrificed so that the body could be dried and used as a totem for their god.

Hinzelmann prefers lies to the truth, as seen in his desire to keep calling Shadow "Mike." Hinzelmann revels in his reputation as the "good guy" of the town, yet his house has a sinister atmosphere that suggests that Hinzelmann is not the hero he seems. Hinzelmann is also deeply connected to the klunker, as the one who initiates the contest every year and judges the winner, suggesting that he may have something to do with the missing children.



Noticing Hinzelmann's supernatural strength, Shadow finally realizes that this old man is not who he seems to be. Wednesday has again manipulated Shadow's life, though he saves it this time by using Hinzelmann to protect Shadow. Hinzelmann has been exacting a terrible price from the townspeople of Lakeside, trading one child's life for another year of good jobs and low crime rates. Shadow recognizes that this sacrifice is too much—such means can never be justified by any ends.



Hinzelmann's control explains why Laura could not see Shadow in Lakeside, and also why the only two people capable of exposing Shadow's secret arrived on the same day. Yet Hinzelmann's control on the town is slipping, as his method of keeping the town safe will not survive the newer technology that police could use to track these disappearances, and the townspeople's own suspicions about what is happening to their children. It seems as though Shadow is going to have to sacrifice his life for the truth once more, having arranged for the townspeople to find Alison but rendering himself vulnerable to Hinzelmann's wrath.



A kobold is a forest spirit in Germanic folklore, much like the fairies of Irish myths that can either help or harm human kind. Shadow's vision of how Hinzelmann was created matches the dream that Shadow had when he first came to Lakeside, though he does not remember it. Hinzelmann's true nature makes his sacrifice of children even more perverse, as Hinzelmann should understand the fear and pain of being sacrificed enough not to inflict that suffering on others. Yet Hinzelmann, like all the gods, is willing to do anything to maintain his power.



Chad Mulligan suddenly comes into the room, his gun pointed at the floor, soothingly telling Hinzelmann that he came over to tell him that the klunker went through the ice. Hinzelmann tries to accuse Shadow of threatening him, but Chad reveals that he heard their entire conversation about the lake. Hinzelmann raises the fire poker again, then throws it at Chad. At the same time, Chad shoots Hinzelmann in the head. Hinzelmann misses, but Chad does not.

Chad woodenly shifts Hinzelmann's body so that his head is in the fire in the fireplace. Shadow assures Chad that the shot was self-defense, not murder, but Chad can't seem to hear him. Emotionless, Chad gets Shadow out of the house and sets fire to Hinzelmann's apartment so no one will know what happened.

In the car, Shadow asks Chad what happened with Audrey. Chad tells him that Audrey returned to Eagle Point and broke his heart, while Shadow tells him that the whole thing was Hinzelmann's fault anyway. Shadow asks Chad what he will do now, and Chad explains that his only choice is to commit suicide, now that he is a murderer. Shadow can tell that Hinzelmann is manipulating Chad with his last dying wish, and so Shadow uses his own power of persuasion to convince Chad to let it go. Shadow mentally pushes the dark cloud out of Chad's head, erasing Chad's memories of this awful day, and tells Chad that Lakeside needs him now more than ever, subtly leading Chad to believe that Marguerite needs him as well.

After sending Chad to see Marguerite, Shadow drives south to Madison, Wisconsin. Meanwhile, Samantha Black Crow closes up the coffee shop she works at, putting away the leftover pastries and singing along to the radio. Her girlfriend, Natalie, comes in and reads the paper while she waits for Sam's shift to be over. Natalie points out an article on the changing face of America, while Sam comments that things do feel like the arrival of spring after a long winter.

Natalie's article comments that many Americans have reported strange dreams lately. As the two of them walk out of the coffee shop, Sam admits that she sometimes has odd dreams of people falling from the sky, a woman with a buffalo head, and a man she once knew named Shadow. Natalie starts to ask more about Shadow, and then notices that Sam is now carrying flowers that she didn't have before. Sam pretends that Natalie gave them to her, then takes them home and casts them in bronze. Even after Sam and Natalie break up, the strange appearance of the flowers becomes a story that Sam tells all her girlfriends.

Shadow may not have been able to kill Hinzelmann, but Chad has no such limitations. Significantly, it is not Shadow the demi-god who finally frees Lakeside from Hinzelmann's terrible reign, but Chad, a normal human who had the power to kill a kobold like Hinzelmann because humans created him in the first place.



Though it may have been the best thing for the town that Hinzelmann is gone, Chad still feels the heavy toll of taking a life. Chad respects life, doing what has to be done to keep others safe, but not relishing in the violence as the gods do.



It seems that Hinzelmann demands one last sacrifice even after he is dead, trying to convince Chad to sacrifice himself as the final payment of blood to the kobold. Shadow is able to overrule that control, however, and point Chad in a better direction for his future. Now that Lakeside's peace will not be maintained magically, Chad will actually have to work as a policeman. There is no "happy ending" for Lakeside, but instead a return to reality. Gaiman suggests that the everyday struggles of normal life are better than a supernaturally enforced peace.



Sam and Natalie, a same-sex couple, represent another way that America is changing. Gaiman presents this change as a move to a better, more tolerant culture that is able to accept all people. Sam, still in touch with the supernatural, is able to feel the arrival of spring (both literal and metaphorical) that Shadow caused when he stopped Wednesday and Hinzelmann.



Sam's dreams sound suspiciously similar to Shadow's, suggesting that she too has some affinity for the spirit of the land, which appears to her as a Buffalo Woman. Gaiman ensures that his characters' lives do not end when the book does, here moving into Sam's future and showing how she will change and grow. Though many answers have been revealed, Gaiman avoids tying everything up neatly, and suggests through Sam's mystery of the flowers that life will always include some strange elements that can never be explained.



Shadow parks near the Madison capital building and calls information to find out where Sam will be. He finds the coffee shop where Sam works and waits for her, but then does not want to interrupt Sam's conversation with her girlfriend. He puts the flowers in Sam's hands, goes back to his car, and heads off for Chicago.

Shadow lets go of the past and uses his talent for magic to do one last kindness for Sam. His fundamentally good nature shows through as he gives Sam this gift without expecting anything in return – indeed making it impossible for Sam to repay him by keeping his identity secret. Unlike most gods, Shadow gives more than he takes from other people.



Shadow reaches Czernobog's building in Chicago, noticing that the entire place seems much cleaner than the first time he visited. Zorya Utrennyaya opens the door and tells Shadow to leave and come back tomorrow. Zorya Verchernyaya and Zorya Utrennyaya are busy preparing for Bielebog's arrival, and continue to tell Shadow to come back tomorrow, but Shadow insists on staying today. Zorya Utrennyaya brings coffee, saying that Czernobog went to the park and will be back soon. Shadow waits, knowing that it is his choice to fulfill this promise.

Bielebog, as the light counterpart to Czernobog's darkness, arrives with the spring that Shadow brings, after a metaphorical winter that lasted for many years for the gods. The spring cleaning is a sign that these Slavic gods may be able to update their ways and survive in the present now that they have been woken up by Shadow's speech. Shadow again asserts his own decisions by using his life the way he wishes. He is not coerced into keeping his dangerous deal with Czernobog, but keeps it of his own accord because he finally has control over his own life.



Czernobog arrives home and Shadow greets him, saying that he has come to fulfill his promise. Czernobog tells Shadow to come tomorrow, but Shadow insists that he is ready for the blow. Czernobog reluctantly picks up an old case and takes out a hammer. Czernobog thanks Shadow for bringing spring, then tells Shadow to close his eyes. Shadow feels a gentle tap on his forehead, and Czernobog pronounces the debt paid. Czernobog smiles, brighter than Shadow has ever seen, and invites Shadow back to play checkers whenever he wants once Czernobog has completed his spring transformation into Bielebog.

Czernobog also shows a new facet to his personality, admitting his gratitude to Shadow and choosing not to exact his sacrifice. As Czernobog and Bielebog are actually the same person, Gaiman again pronounces the importance of balance. Winter must end sometime, just as spring cannot last forever, for both have their role to play. Shadow helps usher in a new period of growth for the gods after their long decline—now hopefully they can better adapt to the future in America.



POSTSCRIPT

Reykjavík, Iceland is an odd, volcanic city, full of sunshine almost all day during the summer. There are few tourists, including Shadow, who wanders alone, marveling at the sense of continuity here. Shadow smiles at everyone he sees on the street, gradually becoming aware that someone is watching him. He goes into a restaurant and the waiter wishes him "Happy Fourth of July" after hearing Shadow's American accent. Shadow wonders at how free he feels.

As Gaiman was inspired to write American Gods while on a trip to Iceland, it makes sense to end the book here where it "began," in an homage to the cyclical patterns of myths. It is also an important thematic choice in terms of continuity, as Iceland's connection to the past stands in stark contrast to America's never-ending shifts into the future. Shadow retains his American identity in Iceland, celebrating his new-found freedom and joy on the very day that America celebrated its independence as a sovereign nation. Shadow now governs himself, beholden to no one for his life and choices.



Shadow goes to read in a park and an old man in a dark cloak and a broad-brimmed hat with a feather in it approaches him. Shadow apologizes that he only speaks English, and the man nods, explaining that his people went to America long ago, then came back when their gods could not survive there. The old man reveals that he is Odin, but that he is not the Wednesday that Shadow knew. Odin asks if Shadow will return to America, and Shadow knows that he will have to return eventually.

Apparently some people feel the need for gods too strongly to survive in America, where gods do not thrive. This aspect of Odin reveals the complex nature of reincarnation that the gods go through, as each nation might perceive a different version of the same god and create new versions of that god to suit their particular culture. Just as the gods are dependent on human belief, Shadow is in some sense born of the American land, and so must return once he has traveled enough.



Shadow tells Odin he has a gift, then “magically” makes Wednesday’s glass eye appear in Odin’s hand through sleight of hand. Odin asks for more tricks, so Shadow makes a **gold coin** appear out of the air. Shadow flips the gold coin into the sky, where it hangs like a sun as Shadow walks away.

Odin, true to form, demands more magic, but Shadow now knows that he only has to give the gods as much as he wants to. The last gold coin shines as a reminder of Shadow’s hybrid nature as both an old sun god and the new King of America, with the power to bring both sides together in his own new adventures.





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