



PHOTO BY KYLE CASSIDY

Neil Gaiman

The comic king writes to his younger self: "Stephen King gave me the best piece of advice – but I ignored it"

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At 16 it was 1977 and I was a punk. I talked three school friends into forming a band called XXX – I was the singer and songwriter. I was – “blossoming” is the wrong word but I was moving out of geeky. Many years later I went to a recording of a BBC Radio 4 comedy and I ran into Steve Punt afterwards. He said: “Oh, you’re Neil Gaiman!” So I waited for him to say, my kids loved “Coraline” and instead he said: “I was at your gig.” I saw this little moment of starry eyes. I wish I could go back and give that moment to the teenage Neil doing his first gig in the school hall. And I wish I could also tell the young Neil, who eventually gave up all fantasies of rock stardom, that there will be weird times in the future when he’ll be onstage in Tasmania reading his poetry to an audience with a backing band which includes David Byrne. Or that he’ll sell out Carnegie Hall for a gig which, after readings, he’ll sing the

Neil Gaiman’s book *Norse Mythology* is out now. The TV series “*American Gods*,” adapted from Gaiman’s Hugo-winning novel, premieres in April.

country song *Psycho* with a string quartet. So he’ll get to fulfill those rock star fantasies after all.

It’s been really interesting talking to friends I’ve had since I was a teenager. My friend recently drew a comic that shows all this monstrous chaos going on all around the young me and I’m just calmly walking down corridors reading “*Stranger in a Strange Land*” or “*The Left Hand of Darkness*.” Happy to be living in the land of books. I definitely didn’t feel I fit in. I was awkward, uncomfortable, not terribly happy in the real world but incredibly happy in books. I used them as a survival guide and also as an escape. I dreamt of becoming a writer but it seemed complexly impossible, like dreaming of having invisibility or super-speed.

If I really wanted to show off to teenage Neil I’d show him my five Hugo awards. Those awards for science fiction would matter more to him than the Carnegie medal or any other award. The fact that I’ve collaborated with Harlan Ellison or had dinner with Lou Reed, that would be cool. But the idea that grown-up Neil has Hugo awards, the younger me would think, wow, yeah, I came through. And if I could tell the 12-year-old Neil one day he’ll write a “*Doctor Who*” episode ... wow. Especially as the *The Doctor’s Wife* came from an idea I had watching it when I was about 8.

In 2009 my father died in the middle of a business meeting when I was on my way to New York to do a book signing. I got a phone call from a sister when I was in the taxi, saying dad had a heart attack and died. I stopped, walked around a bit, then I went on to the signing. There were about 12,000 people there and I started signing at one o’clock and finished about nine at night. Then I went home. There was a message from my dad on the answer machine. It was a cheerful message saying: “It was your mother and my 50th wedding anniversary yesterday – beautiful weather and you know, it was a lovely sunny day 50 years ago too. Anyway, just calling to say hello. And you’re not there.” And that was the first time I cried. I just heard his voice and fell apart. If I’d known it was going to happen like that, there are so many things where I look back and think, I wish I’d asked you that, I wish I’d written that down, I wish I’d taped that conversation.

There are friends I thought would be around forever who just went. Douglas Adams. I loved Douglas, he was big and complicated and irritating and wonderful in equal measure. So many people who were part of your life and your landscape – I wish I could go back and encourage myself to spend more time with those people, learn more from them. Whenever somebody dies I feel I’m kicked up the arse by the universe.

Time is a beef. I wish I’d known how fast it goes. I wish I’d enjoyed it more. Stephen King – and again, I wish 16-year-old Neil had been able to be there, he’d have been in complete joy – he showed up at a book signing of mine in Boston in 1992 and afterwards we went to his hotel. He gave me the best bit of advice. He said, you know, you’ve got to enjoy this. This is magic. You do a signing and hundreds come. You’re one of the most beloved comics writers in the world. Enjoy it. But I never did. I just worried. I worried it would all go away. I

worried I’d break it. And it wasn’t until I was 48 and met my wife (American artist Amanda Palmer) that I thought, oh, you run your life completely differently to mine. You fill it with doing the things you like, and meeting the people you like and eating the things you like. I suppose I could try that too.

I still worry. I suspect it’s how I’m built. The fear I can’t do it is probably the driving force that keeps me writing. That part of me is actually in my books too – I do a really good “menace is just around the corner.” My novel, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*... it’s not actually autobiographical but

that kid is me. I was going back to the 7-year-old me and giving myself a peculiar kind of love that I didn’t have. I was saying to him, it’s OK, everything’s going to be fine. I never feel the past is dead or young Neil isn’t around any more. He’s still there, hiding in a library somewhere, looking for a doorway that will lead him to somewhere safe where everything works.

If I could live one day again, I’d take my 50th

birthday party in New Orleans. In the morning my wife, who was still my fiancée then, inveigled me into a hat shop and bought me a top hat. Then she said she was off to find a tea shop and she’d text me when she found one. Ten minutes later I headed off to meet her and crossed a big square on the way – there was Amanda, dressed as a bride, posing as a human statue. And then a load of our friends stepped out of the crowd and my friend Jason performed a non-binding marriage ceremony between an author in a top hat and a human statue dressed as a bride. The whole thing was wonderful.

Amanda is an amazing thing. There was this point where I thought, I think I want to marry you because I’m never going to be bored again. She’s enough like me. Well, we’re from the same planet. But she does these amazing, surprising, peculiar things that I would never think of doing. These Amanda things where you think, really? You’re really going to do that? Okay. I’ll stand here and hold your clothes and if you get arrested I’ll bail you out. I love you.

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