

WARPED REALITY

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WORDS + PICTURES: a benefit for the
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund Exene Cervenkova •
Lois Maffeo • Gilbert Hernandez • Dame Darcy •
Roberta Gregory • *etc.*

his name is alive/prolapse flexi

(A FEW WORDS

WITH Neil

Gaiman)

Neil Gaiman has single-handedly made it okay for adults to read comics. In the old days, you read comics until you were twelve, and then your mother threw them out (including that copy of *Detective Comics* #1 that is now worth half a mil). Now, you won't appear to be a psychotic, maladjusted sociopath if you read comic after the age of sixteen (OK, it depends on the comic).

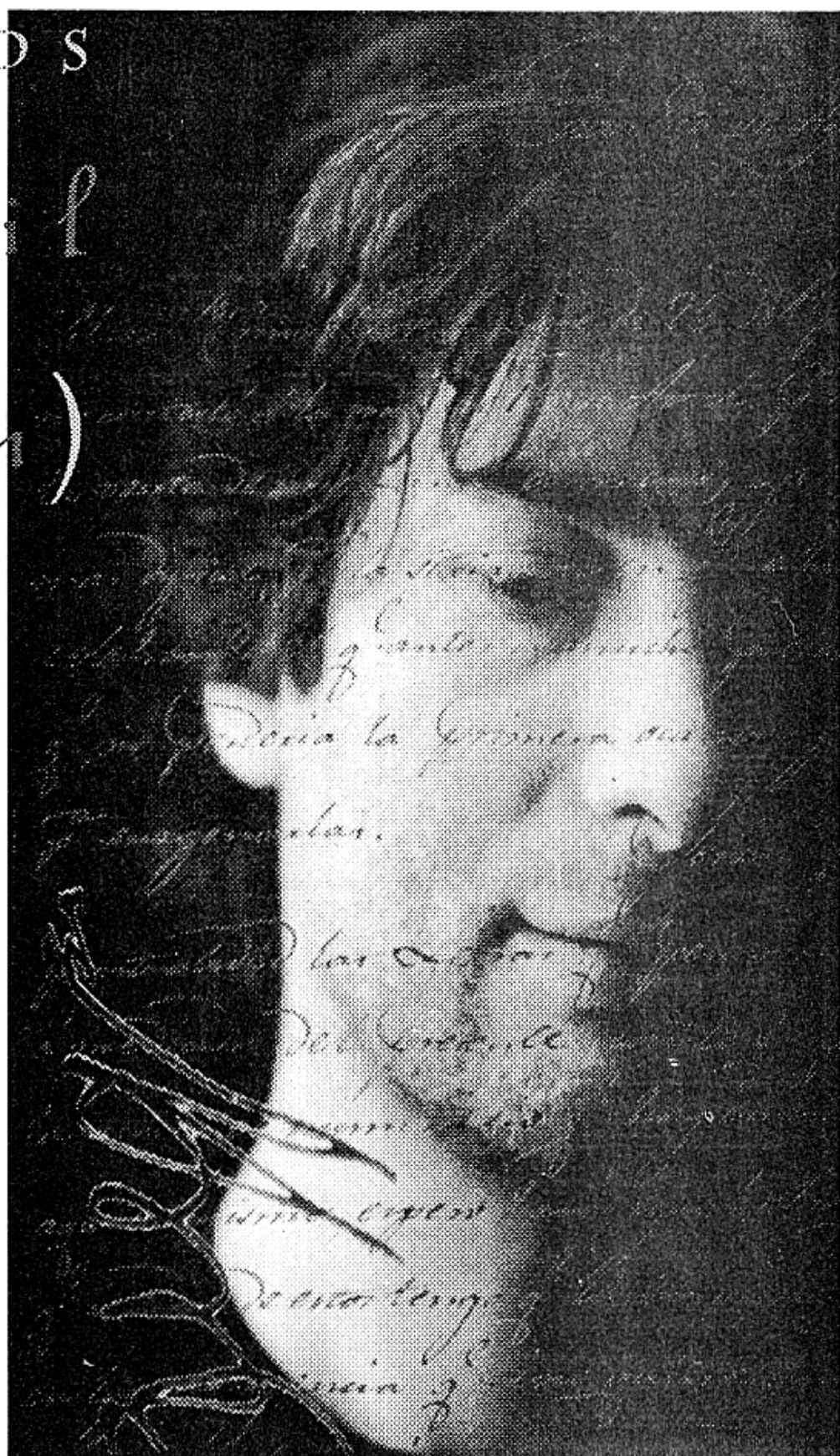
Alan Moore may have started it all (i.e., the mass-market comics revival) with *Swamp Thing* and *Watchmen* in the mid-80s, but it was Neil who followed through. Beginning with his ambitious, ground-breaking, and rather overlooked mini-series *Black Orchid* in 1989, done with frequent collaborator Dave McKean, Neil set out to create comics that challenged the reader, sparked their imagination, and, most importantly, changed the way they thought about comics. Neil's *Sandman* title, begun in 1987, was the work that reached

a mass audience and made Neil a near-household name.

The success of *Sandman* led Gaiman's publisher DC to create a new line of comics, *VERTIGO*, to appeal to the sort of people who spurned your average men-in-tights escapades. *VERTIGO* has unfortunately been rather tame in the past, but releases in the near future and recent past include Peter Kuper's *The System*, *Stardust*, a Gaiman collaboration with longtime *Sandman* artist Charles Vess, as well as David Wozniak's rage-filled and incredibly moving *Seven Miles A Second*, a work by the late artist about coming to terms with living with AIDS. Spring will also see the unveiling of *The Dreaming*, an ongoing *Sandman* spin-off overseen by Neil.

We interviewed Neil close to the conclusion of *Sandman*. Deciding to end one of the most critically and popularly acclaimed comics titles of all time was not an easy decision for him, I'm sure, but Neil seemed content that he is stopping at a creative height rather than a desperate low. Also, not doing *Sandman* frees Gaiman to pursue the numerous other projects fermenting in his fevered brain.

The interview took place right before a reading Neil did in Northampton to benefit the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, which in turn gave us the idea to do this issue as a benefit for the CBLDF as



well. We were joined for part of the interview by Michael Zulli, the artist who collaborated with Neil on *Sweeney Todd* for *Takoo* and who illustrated the last major story arc of *Sandman*, "The Wake."

It's unfortunate that we couldn't release this interview on cassette because Neil has a wonderful way of phrasing, delivering each line with impeccable timing. And his impression of Robbie Coltrane is the best I've heard (admittedly, I haven't heard many). He spoke to us about upcoming projects, his past unsavory dealings with Hollywood, and that all-consuming desire to wear black.

-A.F.

All art is by Dave McKean unless otherwise noted. Courtesy of DC Comics.

Warped Reality: We're interviewing you at an interesting point because *Sandman* is basically over.

Neil Gaiman: Almost, yeah.

WR: So, how do you feel?!

NG: Really, really weird. Partly, I suppose, because it's not yet over. It doesn't feel anything like the end right now. What is strange is getting some kind of closure on things I did five years ago. Balls that I threw up in the air four, five, six years ago... I always knew they'd come down somewhere, and finally I've caught them and put them down.

In some ways, it's going to be like living life without a safety net anymore. And in other ways, it's tremendously satisfying. I started a story... October 1987, it started for me. That's when I started making it up. And by the end of this year, it will be done. For good or for bad, whether it worked or whether it didn't, it will be done.

WR: Do you think you're stopping it at a good point? Have you ever just felt sick of doing it?

NG: No, but I'm sure that if I carried on for another couple of years, I would. But it's also because the story's getting finished.

WR: So, it's a natural point.

NG: It's not that I told every story of the *Sandman* that could ever have been told. But by the time we get to issue 75, I will have finished the story that began in *Sandman* 1. And what is interesting is that for the last year, people have started to realize that there was one very big story going on there.

WR: So what kind of projects do you have lined up after that? Now that you're "free" as it were?

NG: Things that I'm currently working on, that are ongoing projects right now, are a TV series for the BBC that I've written 3 episodes of and have 3 left to write. When I was there, I got to meet Robbie Coltrane. He was wonderful. He has this incredible lightness on his feet. The

guy, when you meet him, is huge. He is very tall. He is very fat and he's always got a cigarette and stuff like that and he's wonderful. (imitation) "Y'know, Steven Spielberg's turned out to be the world's biggest *Cracker* fan, so he just rung me up recently. Steve, as I call him... actually, I don't even call him Steve anymore. I call him Ste, 'cause I know him that well."

I said, "I'm a huge fan of yours, I think you're wonderful," and (Robbie) said, "Oh, don't, you'll turn me head."

WR: So is this thing you're doing for the BBC going to make it over here?

NG: I suppose, eventually, but it'll probably crop up on the Sci-Fi Network or A&E or maybe PBS. Then I'll be doing a radio adaptation of *Signal-to-Noise* for the BBC. DC will be bringing out *Stardust*, which is a short novel that I'm writing that Charlie Vess is going to be illustrating. They won't be comics, they'll be text, and there'll be lots and lots of pictures.

I'm working on negotiating a film that I may be scripting through Miramax. Every few weeks somebody from Hollywood rings. I'm not exaggerating. Pretty much, every few weeks. And normally, the first thing I say to them when they say, "Come here. make movies," is "Well, can you write into the contract that I will at no point have to sit at a large table while a bunch of studio accountants try and explain the story to me?" And up until now, when actually confronted with that as a contractual obligation, everybody said, "No, don't be silly. That's part of the game." And these are the first people who said, "Well, OK." And I said, "And I never have to go to Hollywood at any time during the writing of this film?" And they said no. And I said, "And I never have to take meetings on the script?" And they said "Nope."

These are cool people. Also, I'm constructing the contract so it has lots of places where it can break off, which is to say, if I get through a first draft of the script and we're not happy with each other, then it can just sort of snap apart at that point, and I can wander off and go and do other

things. Most contracts get built to make sure that you can't get out of the loop. My suspicion is that, if everything goes properly, the BBC TV series will go into production in the autumn. I will go to England and hang around the set and get in the way a lot. And that's probably when I'll work on the film because it'll be a nice side thing to work on. I'm also working on *Death: The Time of Your Life*, which is the next *Death* book.

WR: Great title!

NG: The trouble with the *Death* books is that it's always the title that sucks me in. I remember the point when I thought, "I'll do a book called *Death: The High Cost of Living*," and it was like, "Yes, I'm sold. I have to do it."

WR: ...and then you had to actually come up with a book that could live up to that title. How do you feel about the whole *Vertigo* thing, since you're ostensibly the reason why it started? It's sort of been an experiment in a way. Do you feel that it's working?

NG: It's definitely been an experiment. I don't know. I like *Books of Magic* a lot. I think John van Rieber's doing a lovely job. I like *Shade* intermittently. He'll write one that will make me go, "Yes! yes! Everything's happening. Hoorah hoorah," ...and then I'll pick up the next one and go, "Oh. What was that about?" It seems sort of patchy. I think *The Invisibles* is really interesting. It's the inside of Grant's head, which is a very interesting place. *Swamp Thing*? I wish they'd let it die a natural death a while ago. It's like a zombie that just doesn't know it's dead.

WR: ...and it's gone through so many writers, and so many artists. It doesn't have an identity.

NG: No. It's kind of a joke, and it's kind of sad.

WR: When I made that transition when I was a kid from reading crappy superhero comics to comics that were actually trying to say something, *Swamp Thing* was the one that

I read.

NG: *Swamp Thing* hooked me back into reading comics. "The Burial" (issue 28) was the first comic I'd bought in 8 years. I think it was an incredibly important comic and I do wish they'd let it die.

It's interesting—for all of the people who will be angry, upset and personally hurt that *Sandman* will stop when I finish it, I think they're the same people who would really, really hate *Sandman* in 3 years time, with another 2 writers and a change of direction here, and another change of direction there, and none of the characters quite reading like the characters they ought to be.

There's a comic they're going to be doing called *The Dreaming*, which is basically all of the characters I stole from the DC universe and dragged into *Sandman*, who I really didn't create and have no say in: the Cains and the Abels and so on and so forth, and a few of my minor characters, that I don't really mind going out and about. Mad Hettie, stuff like that. What is odd about that is reading people getting Cain wrong, people getting Abel wrong. I read an appalling Merv Pumpkinhead the other day. These scripts are just sent to me for reading, and I thought, "Merv does not sound like that."

WR: You still feel like the parent. They're not allowed to do certain things.

NG: It's not even that. It's just like they *wouldn't* do that. I know these people. I've spent seven years living with them. I'm explaining things to Alisa (Kwitney, the book's editor), saying things like "Abel isn't lovable." Abel is a little bit lovable, but he's kind of creepy and kind of sweaty, and he smells a bit of cabbage and you wouldn't want to hang around with him too long. He picks his nose when he doesn't think you're looking.

WR: So, *The Dreaming* is going to be all different writers and artists?

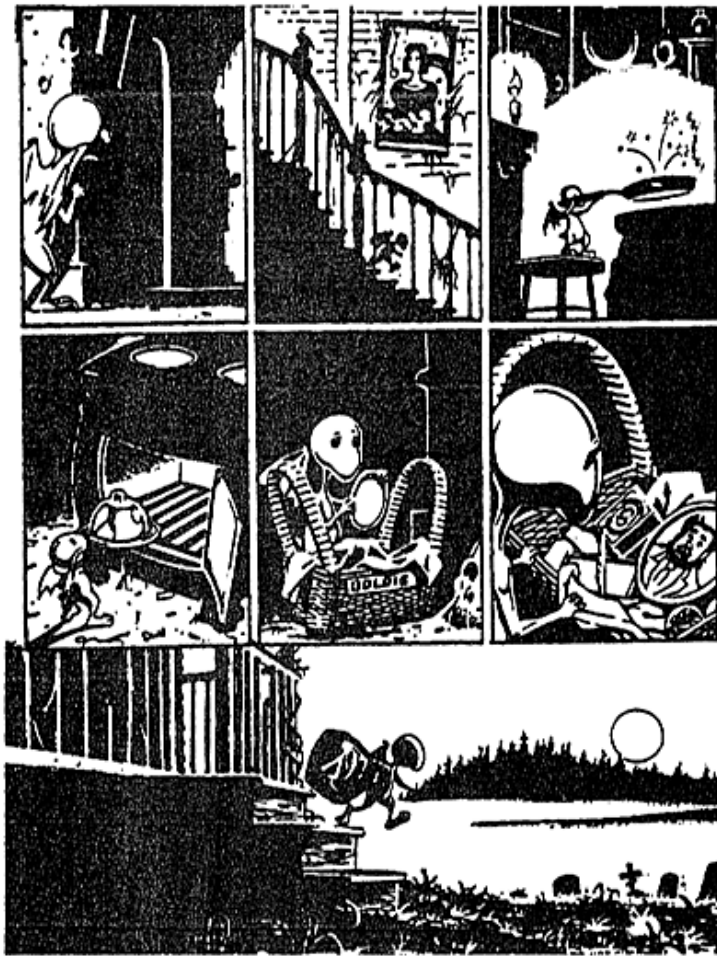
NG: Yeah, with the minor characters...a Cain and Abel story, a Mad Hettie story.

WR: Will it have continuity?

NG: Here and there. The idea is that the Dreaming is a big place—and you're never going to see into the palace anymore. Things that happen in the palace are going to be off limits. Everything else is fair game.

WR: What's been your strangest encounter with a fan? Bad poetry? You must have some stories.

NG: Mostly, my fans are very, very,



Above: a glimpse into *The Dreaming*—Goldie the Gargoyle runs away. Art by Peter Snejbjerg.

very sweet.

WR: That's very diplomatic of you.

NG: It's true. You guys have been at signings, haven't you? Those were nice people in the line. I was talking about this yesterday to Robert Lee Morris, who's a jewelry designer. He's a friend of Clive Barker's, and he was saying that Clive's fans scare him. I said, "What about my fans?" and he said, "Oh, your fans are lovely." They don't do the things that Clive's fans do, where someone will give him a severed head of a cat or whatever as a present. My fans will

give me gemstones, or paintings or photographs. Yes, they'll give me weird poems, and some quite good poems. Mostly, they're very, very nice. I can remember two, maybe three crazies in seven years of signing. Like the guy who handed me the complete works of Aleister Crowley to sign on the basis that, as he said in a whisper, "It's the nearest I'll ever get to the real thing. Listen to it." and I said, "Well, no, not really, but here you go." And the one who came up to me and said, (*in vampire voice*) "Has it ever occurred to you that what you are writing, some of us live, for real?" and I said, "Well, yeah, it has, actually." "Ve must meet. Ve must find her." But those ones are so rare. Mostly it's people who want to get in line to say thank you. I think the majority of *Sandman* readers are willing to put up with the horror stuff, but they don't come for the horror stuff. Clive's fans tend to come for the visceral, vaginal squirty bits and will put up with the theology and the intelligence.

WR: *Sandman* has garnered a bit of a goth following, though...

NG: It's definitely garnered a gothic following. What is nice about my gothic following is they tend to start reading before they're goths and stay with me after they're goths. When they go out and buy something red for their wardrobe, they still keep reading *Sandman*, which is very sweet of them. This is my one non-black piece of something to wear. Well, actually it is black, but it's black with white stripes. I thought it's a special occasion.

AF: My closet is very black, but basically because I don't really know how to match colors well.

NG: Me too. What is interesting... I was at the World Horror Convention a few weeks ago and there was a new kind of people dressed in black there. I know why people dress in black. Those people who dress all in black, who are thought by other people to be strange, cool people, standing in the corner, are people who have gradually discovered they have no taste.



The Sandman himself. Art by Marc Hempel & Richard Case.

As the years went by, they discovered either they had no taste or no color sense or failing that, they couldn't be bothered. And so they gradually accumulate an all-black wardrobe, because anything you wear black goes with anything else you wear black, and, fuck it.

WR: And, if you have the occasional colored garment, it will probably go with something black.

NG: Whereas, what I was seeing at the World Horror Convention for the first time were people dressed in black, who looked really miserable dressed in black. They looked like they were dressing in black 'cause that was what they were meant to be wearing. They looked like what they really wanted in their life was a hawaiian shirt.

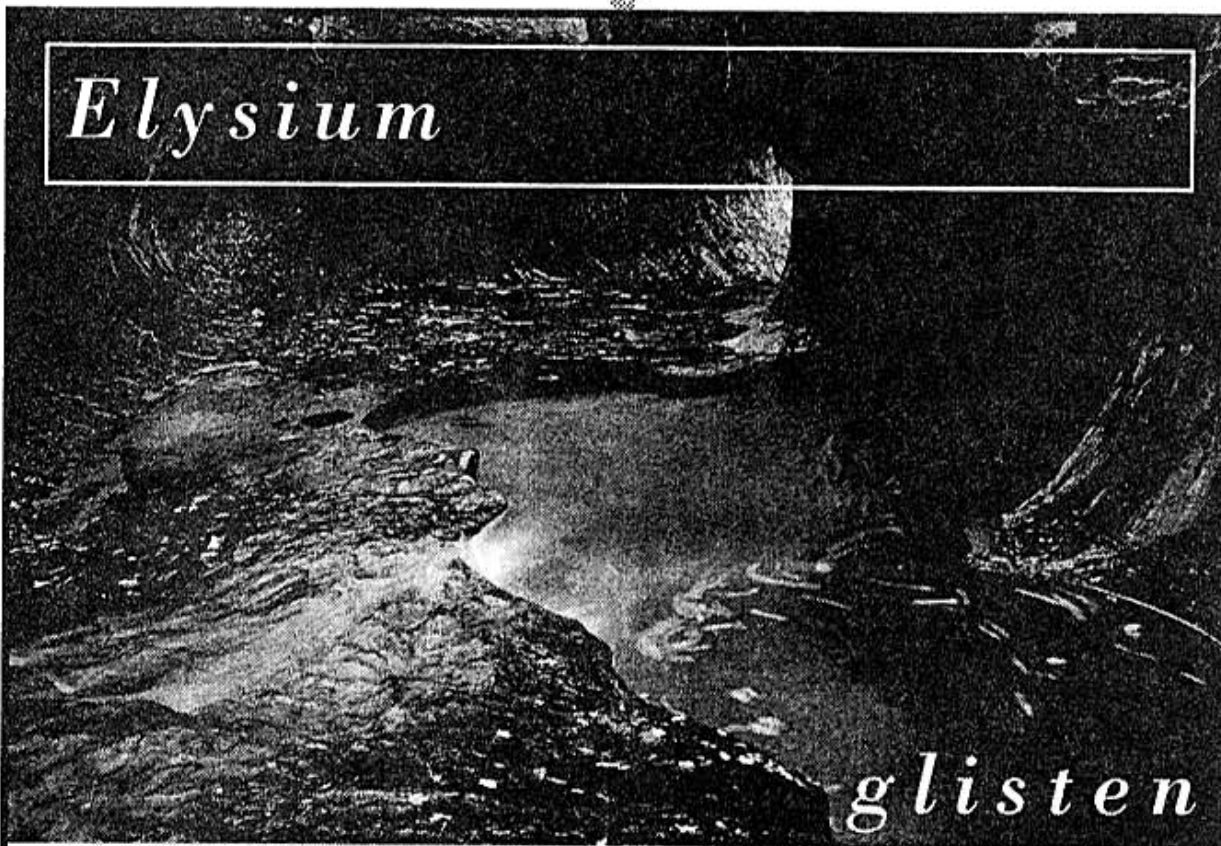
WR: *How is it working with Dave McKean?*

NG: Working with Dave is the very best because it's always more than I expect and different from what I

expect. And I don't get that with anybody else. With Dave, I don't know what I'm going to get. It's like a giant game of table tennis where you don't know where the ball's going to come back from. Dave's do not come along very often. He's also a fine composer and a remarkable keyboard player. It's not fair. He's got one CD out which he did with J Muth and he'll have lots of background music and stuff on my CD, as well.

WR: Now we'll ask the inevitable Tori Amos question. I ran into a friend the other day who asked, "Shouldn't Neil pay her royalties or something, for using her personality?"

NG: I suppose, yes. And she should probably pay me royalties for "Me and Neil hanging out with the dream king," and "Neil says hi, by the way," and whatever she's doing in the next one. But we don't. Also, Delirium, I would point out, existed before Tori. Well, Tori obviously existed at the time, but we'd neither met nor encountered each other. I



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didn't meet Tori until I was in the middle of *Game of You* and *Delirium* was in *Sandman* 21 and *Sandman* 31. And I haven't really used Tori's personality. What occasionally happens is that Tori will say something and I will go, "I think *Delirium* will say that one day." I remember once I ran into Tori. I surprised her, and she was so incredibly happy, she grabbed me and said, "Now we must jump up and down and up and down, and dance around and around." What a lovely line. And a few months later, *Delirium* said in the context of something else: "Now we must jump up and down and up and down, and dance around and around."

WR: When we interviewed her, she wouldn't say which lines were hers!

NG: But she admitted to knowing me then. Actually, I spent three weeks in her house the other month, which was lovely. Unfortunately, she was only there for the first two days. I was house-sitting for her in England, in this wonderful house overlooking a canal.

AF: I loved living in England. There's so much going on, yet it's such a sane sort of place.

NG: It's not dangerous, which is actually the thing that I like about London. I miss London appallingly. That was why I wanted to go over and just stay for a few weeks while I was working on the TV script. I just wanted to be around London so I phoned Tori, and said, "Hello, have you got a spare room?" and she said, "Yes, and I'm not going to be here."

WR: Who are some of your influences & inspirations?

NG: It's something that's always moving, favorite artists and writers. I have my little band of favorite writers, people like James Branch Cabell and G.K. Chesterton and Saki and Jonathan Carroll and John Wilmot of Rochester and e.e. cummings. An enormous slew of them. Musically, it tends to be more fluid.

There are the ones about which I always revolve: Lou Reed, Tori obviously. Right now, I'm incredibly into John Cale. So that's what I'm listening to right now, lots and lots of Cale. Also lots and lots of Conlan Nancaro who is a very, very strange composer who lives in Mexico City and writes music for player pianos, which he punches directly onto the player piano rolls. He writes music that a human pianist could not play because you'd need 24 fingers on each of your seven hands in order to be able to play Conlan Nancaro

"If any writer in America had been found guilty of obscenity, had been told by a judge that they were not to write anything anybody could ever consider obscene, that the police were empowered to make random searches...to ensure that the writer in question, was not writing, can you imagine what the outcry would be? That's what happened to Mike Diana, only it's comics and nobody gives a fuck."

music. And that's something I discovered from Dave McKean. Dave was playing this stuff in the car and I was like, "What the fuck is that?" and then I was in a record shop looking for John Cale and started buying Conlan Nancaro music. It's really odd and weird. I'm still writing occasional songs, which is kind of fun, and Michael (Zulli) just did an album cover for the Flash Girls which is the band that did a couple of my songs on their first album. They've done a couple of my songs on the next album and one of Alan Moore's, which is amazing. I think it's the best thing on that album. It's called "Me & Dorothy Parker." It's like Bonnie & Clyde done as a sort of patter song.

Michael Zulli: It's the sort of song I think Oscar Wilde might have written...

NG: "When my thumbs first started aching, I just sat down by the road to read the newspapers I got stuffed in my shoes. I had a double-barrel shotgun and a long black leather coat and a phone number in Cleveland but I wasn't certain whose." He goes on about how this girl pulls up in this long black car and she says "'My name is Dorothy Parker' and she told me to get in." They go out and hold up a liquor store or a gas station or something beside the road and he pulls out his gun and she says, "'No, let me handle this' and then she slew him with an epigram and shot him with a word."

AF: *Critters* magazine did an Alan Moore flexi a few years ago (*Critters* #23—ed.)

NG: The Sinister Ducks? "...but there's a poison I'd like to administer. Some say they're cuddly and I say they're sinister. Ducks, ducks." Alan told me about that, he said, "Nobody else would do the quacking noises. Eventually, I wound up in the studio late at night going, 'Quack quack quack' with everyone on the other side of the glass laughing at me."

WR: Do you play guitar?

NG: No. Well...incredibly badly. I play lots of instruments incredibly badly. That is not false modesty. That is honesty. However, I can thump around in chords enough to figure out a song and then hand it over to somebody else.

WR: We haven't gotten to artists yet. Obviously Dave McKean.

NG: Artists whose work I love? Leaving aside the people with whom I work: Joel-Peter Witkin, Matt Mahurin, Barron Story, Richard Dadd. I'm a big fan of Richard Dadd's.

AF: I've seen some of his stuff, but not that much.

NG: Well, he didn't do very much. I mean, he was locked in a madhouse! There are about four major paintings still around, maybe five. I have a

fondness for most of the Pre-Raphaelites except for Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Looking at his stuff I always find is like biting down on tin foil. It *almost* does something but it falls short in some way.

WR: Any Surrealists?

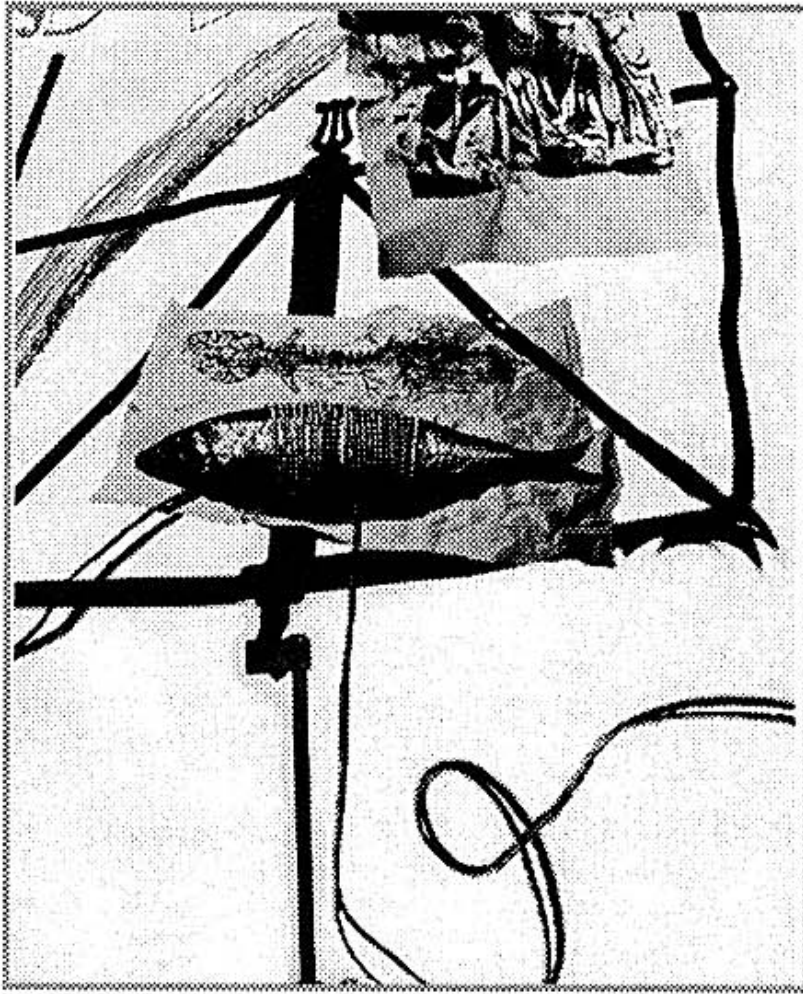
NG: I love Surrealist poetry. I am a big fan of Surrealist poets. I like the Apocalyptic even more, who were a very odd little short-lived bunch of critically-loathed, I mean, universally-loathed writers, mainly in England between the wars. Dylan Thomas was one of the Apocalyptic and so was Henry Treece. There's a Henry Treece poem in the back of *Brief Lives*. But the painters... I loved Dali when I was a kid. I remember when I was 14, wandering around the Louvre, and just staring at Dali paintings. These days, he doesn't do it for me.

WR: How did you get involved with the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund?

NG: I became slowly aware of the CBLDF. If I did a signing, I would remember to put a jar up front and people would throw in a few bucks. But I think it was really a combination of 2 things, one of which is Greg Ketter, who is the publisher of *Angels & Visitations* and *Snow-glass Apples* (a collaboration between Neil and artist Charles Vess. Greg has also issued Neil's spoken-word CD *Warning: Contains Language — ed.*). Greg is one of the directors of the CBLDF, so whenever I talked to Greg, I would always find out what was happening with the defense fund, and I started to get an idea of what the cases were and how much they needed money. The CBLDF currently has about \$30,000 worth of unpaid legal bills sitting on their desk.

So the money is important and I don't want to downplay the money, but for me, what is more important is the media. And the newspaper articles. Mike Diana is a comic artist.

You may or may not like *Boiled Angel*, his little 'zine, but if any writer in America had been found guilty of obscenity, had been told by a judge that they were not to write anything more that anybody could ever consider obscene, and that the police were empowered to make random searches at any time of the day or night to ensure that the writer in question was not writing, can you imagine what the outcry would be? Can you imagine the news programs? That's what happened to Mike Diana, only it's comics and nobody gives a fuck. That's the main reason for doing these [readings]. Yes, they raise money. Yes, they're lots of fun for everybody concerned, except for me



during the last half hour before I go on when I start thinking, "Oh god, why am I doing this? Why don't I burrow out?" I wonder if there are any loose bricks in the dressing room. But, this is an education process. It's a matter of letting people who have never heard of the Defense Fund, letting people who have never heard of the Diana case or the Mavrides case know about that kind of stuff.

WR: ...and it's been going on for so long. The Friendly Frank's case happened years ago.

NG: Well, the Friendly Frank's case

is what started it. That got won. But the Friendly Frank's case is what began the Legal Defense Fund.

WR: It's disturbing that comics like *Omaha* and *Love & Rockets* are still being...

NG: ...busted. The problem that comics have, that most other media do not have, is it is very, very easy to take a panel out of context. Even if you're talking about a book as dull as *American Psycho*, you have to print a great big swatch of text to show people. If you want to say, "This is nasty. This is obscene. Here is a great big swatch of text", then somebody has to read it. They're going to have to sit there and read while he nails her to a parquet floor or whatever. Films, you actually have to show a clip. You have to show a clip of *The Last Temptation* or whatever and then say, "this is obscene and this is why!" With comics, you can just take a panel out of context. Any panel. And I'm sure you can take a panel from *Sandman* and say, "Obviously, this cycle is obscene. The rest of it's like this too." You can take a panel from *Love & Rockets* showing somebody coming or whatever, and say, "All the rest of it's like this. Obviously, the whole thing's obscene."

WR: That reminds me...recently, I saw *Peeping Tom*. The controversy around that movie basically ended Michael Powell's career.

NG: Yup. Michael Powell never really worked again after that. What is interesting, though, is that Hitchcock's *Psycho*, at about the same time, got exactly the same reviews. And when *Psycho* got the same reviews, Hitchcock had the clout to use it for publicity, to say, "Come and see *Psycho*. These are the reviews. Now judge for yourself!" *Peeping Tom* was being distributed by a tiny little British independent, and when the first bad reviews came in, they dumped it, instead of doing what they should have done, which is what they did with *Psycho*.

**And on that note, we
were forced to
part....**