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## ARTS: Neil Gaiman shares stories with Tulsa crowd

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Author Neil Gaiman speaks Tuesday at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center. MICHAEL WYKE/Tulsa World



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By JAMES D. WATTS JR. World Scene Writer |  
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Like the person she had come to see, Kai Barclay made her first visit to Tulsa on Tuesday night.

Barclay drove up from Norman, where she is a student at the University of Oklahoma, to attend "An Evening With Neil Gaiman."

"He's my absolute favorite writer," Barclay said, clutching a battered paperback copy of Gaiman's novel "American Gods," whose greenish cover echoed some of the highlights in her hair. "When I heard he was going to be in Tulsa, I knew I had to be here."

And, given the fact that Gaiman's novels and stories often deal with some of the things we find scary, Barclay's trip to Tulsa involved dealing with a little fear of her own.

"I'm from Pennsylvania, in the Allegheny Mountains, and I'm just not used to Oklahoma roads," she said, laughing. "Back home roads are all twisty and narrow. Being on this wide, open road that just goes on forever is, well, it's kinda scary."

But then, everyone has odd little things that he or she finds scary. Gaiman himself addressed that topic, saying that some of the things he finds scary are the possibility of something awful happening to his children or to his wife.

Then there's the fear of "my eyes liquefying and rolling like huge tears down my cheeks," he said.

Gaiman was in Tulsa as the guest of the Oklahoma Center for Poets and Writers at Oklahoma State University-Tulsa.

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And the ardor of his fans was evidenced by the fact that more than 2,000 of them braved the terrors of Oklahoma roads to fill the Tulsa PAC's Chapman Music Hall to capacity.

Gaiman himself seemed a bit surprised by the size of the crowd. He had just begun speaking when he looked up and realized that the hall's mezzanine and balcony levels were filled.

"It just dawned on me, you guys are up there," he said to those in the upper level. "The things that happen when you look up ..."

Gaiman opened by reading a piece from his most recent book, the short story collection "Trigger Warning" — the "April Tale" from "A Calendar of Tales."

"So I finally made it to Tulsa, Oklahoma," he said. "My representatives, my agents, were amazed at my enthusiasm when I was invited to come to Tulsa. But I've been a fan of Tulsa for more than 30 years."

Gaiman's awareness of Tulsa was sparked by his discovery of R.A. Lafferty, whose unique, quirky tales of fantasy and science fiction Gaiman discovered on the shelves of his local library in England.

"I discovered that Tulsa was a mysterious, magical and very peculiar place in the work of R.A. Lafferty," Gaiman said. "I was just shown his very peculiar door, which is on display (at the Henry Zarrow Center for Art and Education in the Brady Arts District)."

Gaiman read one of Lafferty's stories, a lighthearted humorous fantasy about things disappearing called "Seven Day Terror."

At the conclusion, Gaiman said, "If you wonder why I make such a fuss about R.A. Lafferty, now you know."

He added that he was greatly pleased to announce that Lafferty had just been inducted into the Oklahoma Writers Hall of Fame.

Gaiman responded to questions that people had written in advance, which covered topics such as things that scare him, whether he likes bananas (the one question, oddly enough, that Gaiman never directly answered) and the events he's done with his wife, musician Amanda Palmer.

He said he writes books because "I really can't do anything else," but more importantly, "because I wanted to read these books and they didn't exist."

But Gaiman also stressed the importance of telling and reading and listening to stories.

Writing the sort of fantastic tales he does, Gaiman said, "doesn't undermine a naturalistic world view, it reinforces it. Fiction is a wonderful, tough thing, and people who don't realize the big, important things we can learn from stories are missing the point of fiction. With stories, we understand something can be absolutely true, even though it has never happened. We can bring back from fiction things that make our lives so much better."

Gaiman was presented with the Oklahoma Center for Poets and Writers' Ambassador Award in recognition of his writing that "crosses boundaries with heart and grace."

He was also given, by Tulsa Library's adult programming services coordinator Cindy Hulsey, an honorary membership to the Tulsa City-County Library, complete with a library card that, Hulsey told Gaiman, "won't expire until you do."

"Brilliant," Gaiman said. "Normally I don't have this much fun when I come out on stage — to get an award and a library card."

The evening began with the presentation of the OSU-Tulsa creative writing award winners. In the poetry category, the winners were Ambra King, first; Hanna Al-Jibouri, second; and Daniel Dunlap, third.

Short-story fiction winners were Matthew Pascucci, first; John Gabriel, second; and Cynthia

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