

American Gods Review

A coy, attractive woman waits for her date to arrive at a bar while she scrolls through his profile on a dating app. He arrives, is mesmerised, and together they depart for a bedroom that resembles the inner chambers of a holy shrine. She wants him to worship her—with his body and his words—while she consumes him in the act of consummation. Bilquis, the ancient goddess of love, devours him whole—as she has devoured countless others—into her vagina, to keep her powers intact, to stay *relevant*.

This relevance is central to *American Gods*, adapted from the Neil Gaiman novel by Brian Fuller and Michael Green, as gods from ancient mythologies—Norse, Slavic, Egyptian—struggle to survive in the age of rapid technological advancements. Shadow Moon, an ex-convict, is hired as a bodyguard by a loquacious one-eyed man, who presents himself as Mr Wednesday and makes his living by swindling and conning. Together they embark on a road trip across the continental US to recruit several old gods whose existence is no longer significant to humans. This pantheon of old deities must fight the New Gods of technology, media, and capitalism, for in this realm, a forgotten god is as good as dead.

Shadow and Wednesday's journey is interwoven with centuries-old tales of 'Coming to America' which, as we are shown, are recorded by Mr Ibis, an incarnation of Thoth, the Egyptian god of writing and judgement of the dead. Often presented as a prologue, 'Coming to America' sets the tone for each episode. These are chronicles of slaves, immigrants, conquerors, and outcasts who brought with them their myths, folklore, and deities, but could find no use for them in a land of their own creation—America—and three of them are particularly outstanding.

The first six minutes of the pilot take us back to 14,000 BC, when the Vikings first set foot on American soil. The hostility of the Native Americans is made clear, but their physical presence is substituted by—and consolidated in—their weaponry; hundreds of arrows pierce the body of one Viking, warning them to leave for good, that outsiders are not welcome. Treacherous winds refuse to comply with their sails, and the Vikings are left with no alternative besides sacrificing to their god—the one-eyed god of war—Odin. At last summoned, Odin remains in America to bless the next generation of Vikings when they arrive. The bloodlust of this brutal prologue casts a long shadow when, in the sixth episode, Shadow and Wednesday arrive in the town of Vulcan, Virginia to enlist the help of another god of war, the Roman Vulcan. The town gives the impression of Trump's American Dream—a twenty-first-century quasi-Confederacy wherein guns of all shapes and sizes adorn the arms of men, women, and children, but what unites them in their gun-toting is the whiteness of their skin, a fact not lost on our black protagonist. The racial undertones are palpable throughout the season, but are singularly reinforced with the appearance of Mr Nancy/Anansi.

The story-teller and knowledge-bearer of West African folklore, Anansi makes his first appearance on a Dutch slave ship whose flummoxed and scared passengers beseech him in their prayers, for they know not why they are chained and crammed together. As Anansi points out, they are not even aware yet that they are black, and in what appears to be a cruel joke of the gods, he proceeds to tell them of centuries of oppression that awaits them in America. He instigates rage, but is not *quite* there to help them out, for where are the gods when you need them? In the final episode, he sheds light on Bilquis, whose fate is closely tied to society's changing attitudes to love and sex. The Queen of Sheba's collusion with technology aids her in adapting to ways of 'modern love'—a phrase Fuller and Green cheekily reference when one

of the New Gods, Media, takes on the garb of David Bowie—while she longingly admires relics of her glorious past in museums.

Set by the US–Mexican border, the third prologue is more contemporary than others. A hapless group of Mexicans is caught infiltrating the border, and Jesus Christ takes the bullet for them. He is shot at mercilessly, for he is not the Christ of American imagination. The finale clarifies that there are as many Jesuses as there are cultures, and thus, as many conflicts. He is not a participant in the war to come; he is not a god, he is the god's child. A common thread stitches these seemingly disjunctive prologues together, that of faith and identity: faith in the divine when its miracles risk being explained away by science and technology; and racial, political, national, and physical identities in a land that—constituted as it is of variegated cultures of outsiders—continues to refashion itself. And Gaiman sums it up neatly in the novel when Wednesday says, 'America is the only country in the world that worries about what it is.'