

THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE

BY NEIL GAIMAN / WILLIAM MORROW JUNE 2013 /
REVIEW BY AISA VALENZUELA

Am I the only one who didn't initially know what to make of Neil Gaiman's new book *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*? The back cover blurb is vague. The front cover is somber and adult-looking, but the story is about a seven-year-old boy. I couldn't tell if it was an adult or children's book, fantasy or general fiction.

The answer, it seems, is that it is all of the above. A review by William Alexander for the *Star Tribune* says, "It is narrated by an adult, and it is addressed to adult readers, but the book is actually for the children those adults used to be." I have to wholeheartedly agree.

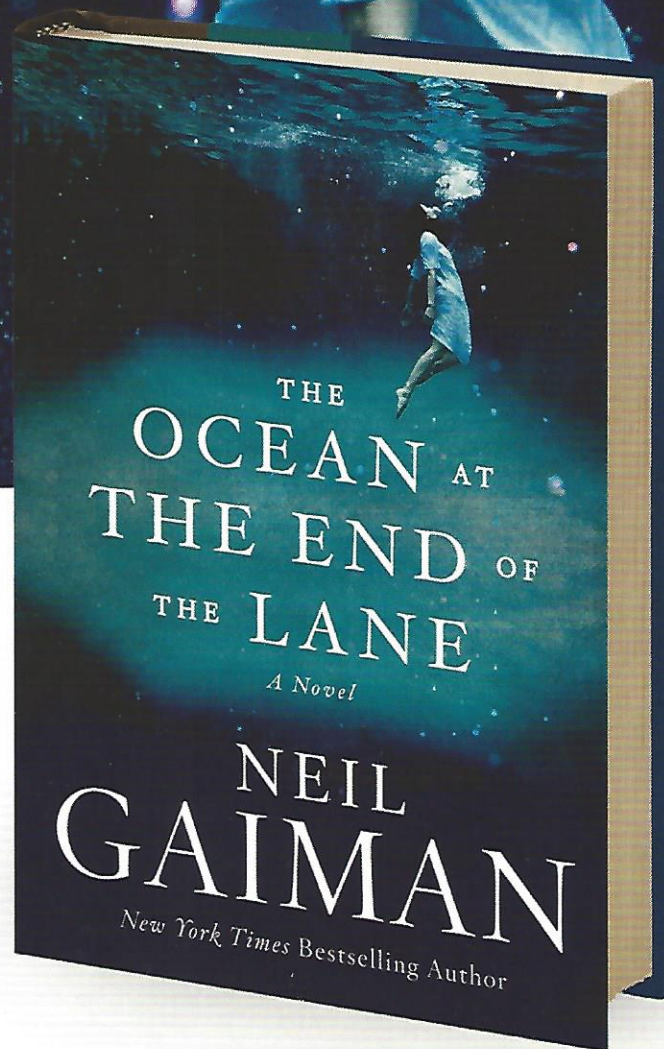
That said, this is still a tale of the fantastical and the mystical, but stated in such a matter-of-fact, blasé way that you have no choice but to believe that monsters walk among us as we go about our boring, day-to-day lives.

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The story begins with the middle-aged narrator going back to his childhood home after the death of one of his parents. (This is never stated explicitly, but is implied.) Only, he ends up not just visiting his home, but also a house at the end of the lane which has figured largely in his childhood memories.

As he tries to sift through his memories to separate fact from fiction, we are treated to a tale from his childhood about three supernatural women and the monsters they protected him from. Although I assume Gaiman never grew up with three supernatural women as neighbors, the book still feels oddly autobiographical. We do know that Gaiman's father died in 2009, and that he had to go home to Sussex, England—the setting for this novel—for the funeral. I also found out that an incident that happened in the book—about a boarder stealing a car to commit suicide—actually happened to Gaiman's family.

Yet even without knowing all those details, the book comes across as a very personal work, and something that anyone can relate to. It captures the vulnerability and fear of childhood, but also the wisdom that children are more perceptive and fully made than we think.



Lettie Hempstock, one of the main characters in the novel, informs the boy, "Grown-ups don't look like grown-ups on the inside either. Outside, they're big and thoughtless and they always know what they're doing. Inside, they look just like they always have. Like they did when they were your age. The truth is, there aren't any grown-ups. Not one, in the whole wide world."

There is a melancholy and tenderness in this book that isn't present in Gaiman's other works. The book starts with the death of a parent, which often signals the end of childhood, the loss of innocence. Yet the surreal sojourn into the protagonist's memories makes us feel like we can recapture the wonder and magic of childhood—if we could only get back to it somehow.