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Fables and reflections

The Sandman (Vol. 6): Fables and Reflections by Neil Gaiman Sandman: Fables and Reflections is a collection of nine separate stories that originally appeared in two separate groups plus an introductory short story and a lengthy Sandman Special about Orpheus and Eurydice. Basically, this collection is one of the most far-ranging and eclectic volumes available in the SANDMAN trade editions. The first grouping of stories about various emperors across time includes "Thermidor," "August," "Three Septembers and a January," and "Ramadan" (Issues 29-31& 50). The second group of stories — originally issues 38-40 — includes "The Hunt," "Soft Places," and "The Parliament of Rooks." Though volume six is a bit uneven in quality compared to other SANDMAN collections, it's a trade edition not to be missed if only because of issue 50, "Ramadan," the story many fans of THE SANDMAN consider the single best story written and drawn in the entire series. I agree with this assessment of the story and have read it countless times. I've even assigned it in various English classes I've taught as a stand-alone story about the importance of storytelling. Though the other stories in Fables and Reflections are not as high quality as "Ramadan," they are still better than 90% of comics written today. So, the stories are uneven in quality only in comparison with Gaiman's best writing. The volume starts with "Fear of Falling," a short story that Gaiman wrote for inclusion in Vertigo Preview, "the comic that launched DC's Vertigo publishing imprint in January 1993." This story is about a writer putting on a play; he's decided that his fear of failure is too overwhelming to continue rehearsals. Therefore, he plans to cancel the show, telling the actors the next day that he's quitting. Before he makes his decision, however, he has an encounter with the Sandman, with Dream, when he falls asleep while watching on TV Hitchcock's movie Vertigo. In his conversation with Dream, the young man recounts his childhood nightmares about falling. In other words, we experience the storytelling of a dream within a dream TO Dream. Sandman offers some insightful advice about possible futures that are available to one who is falling endlessly. The young man's resulting epiphany from this conversation will lead him to make a more determined decision about his play the following day. One of the repeated actions throughout this collection of disparate stories is the act of storytelling. In "Fear of Falling" it's the young man telling the story of his youthful nightmares to Sandman. In "Three Septembers and a January," we watch the main character of the story, an historical figure who declared himself the Emperor of United States, assist Mark Twain in some stories he's writing. In other words, we witness Twain telling some stories of his own before deciding to publish. Overall, though, "Three Septembers and a January" is about the power of stories we tell ourselves (and to others) about our identity, about who we think we are. The premise of the story is that Sandman's sibling Despair watches the main character, a failed businessman, contemplate suicide and decides to challenge Dream to save the man, to keep him in the world of dream, instead of letting him succumb to either Despair or another sibling's realm, Delirium. Sandman gives the businessman a dream of being emperor of the United States, and Gaiman, in effect, asks this question: Can one be delusional without falling into Delirium? Or, in other words, can a person who appears mad to us actually be saner than we are? In the end, Death must claim this imaginary Emperor, but we read the story to see if Dream, Despair, or Delirium will win the wager of the Emperor's fate in life. This story is my favorite one in the collection after "Ramadan." Surprisingly, though Gaiman now likes this story, he originally tried to keep it from being published after he saw the finished results. "Thermidor" marks the first appearance in this collection of Orpheus, whose head is being protected by Johanna Constantine in France 1794 during the Revolution. In this historically-based story, Lady Constantine encounters Robespierre who is searching for the head of Orpheus. In the end, Lady Constantine finds an interesting hiding place for Orpheus, and we witness Orpheus's great power of song, which isn't surprising given that he's the son of the Sandman and a muse. This story is perhaps the weakest of them all, with Gaiman's historical research seeming to slow the story down rather than thematically enriching the story. Gaiman's focus is on false and true, good and bad rulers, and Robespierre is offered in contrast to the Emperor of the United States in the previous story. My third favorite story in the collection is "The Hunt," a fairy story about a werewolf, who is the hero, instead of the villain, of the story. The storyteller in "The Hunt" is a grandfather in our present-day trying to get his granddaughter to stop watching TV in order to listen to a story told by her elder. The dialogue between the grandfather and granddaughter is some of the best in this collection, reminding me much of the scenes from The Princess Bride, in which a young grandson tries to resist the power of storytelling of his grandfather. Without giving too much away, I can say only that the grandfather tells a compelling story of the old people and of what we do and do not do when we have dreams. In this story, the young male werewolf has a dream, his "Hunt," and he will not be swayed from it, but what he decides to do upon finding his dreamed-of-prey is a surprise. Gaiman gets us to think about our desires that are fed by our dreams, whether we should pursue them, and what to do when our dreams come true if we do pursue them. And the ending to the story will hit you as powerfully as it hits the granddaughter. Though slightly better than "Thermidor," "August" also is of lesser quality than one expects from Gaiman, though many fans of The Sandman may disagree with me. I think that when Gaiman tries to worry too much about historical details, his storytelling suffers. In August, Gaiman tells the story Emperor Augustus, nephew to Julius Caesar. One day a year, because of advice given to him in a dream, Emperor Augustus dresses like a beggar and goes into the streets to think, ostensibly because he will be beneath the Gods' notice when dressed like a beggar and his thoughts will not be an open book to them. On this single day, we accompany the Emperor as he tells his story to the dwarf Lycius while they sit outside in the city with their begging-bowls in front of them. Gaiman, in his interviews, seems proud that Lycius is based on a real historical figure, but again, this faithfulness to history, while of interest, does not improve the quality of the storytelling. More impressive is the art by Bryan Talbot. Gaiman rightly points out Talbot's brilliant, subtle visual storytelling, particularly his use of shadows that move and shorten and lengthen again throughout the passing of the day. Other visual details shift with the passing of time — like the accumulation of trash on the steps and street — and Talbot's art, I must admit, is admirable. Still, in the end, it doesn't save for me a rather slow story. "Soft Places," however, is another one of the higher quality tales in this collection. In it, a young Marco Polo is lost in the blowing sands of a desert. Gaiman, inspired more by literature than by history, tells a much better story than he does in his history-based tales. His interest in telling a story about Marco Polo was inspired by the novel Invisible Cities, written by Italo Calvino (a novel I highly recommend). Calvino's imaginative novel leads Gaiman to base his story more on fantasy than on realism, and the result is much better than "Thermidor" and "August." "Soft Places" represents those places, what Dream calls "the shifting zones," where time is most in flux, where dream and reality mix and intermingle in unpredictable ways. Marco Polo as a young man is able to run into a stranger who he knows Marco Polo as an old man, and when Dream shows up, he reports that he is low on energy since he just escaped from being held prisoner, which we know takes place in the present. Gaiman tells Hy Bender that the idea of the "Soft Places" was a convenient idea he had if his intended ending to the series didn't work out. Gaiman knew that he could bend the rules of linear time based on having established the shifting zones in this issue. However, Gaiman said that he never ended up having to use this "escape hatch." I really like the art and atmosphere of this story, and Marco Polo's conversation with Dream is a fun one since Marco Polo seems more stable than the disoriented Sandman. "Orpheus" is the best of the three weaker stories of the collection, but Gaiman originally intended what he called a "series of jazz riffs" on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice; unfortunately, he found that in conversations when he brought up this story, a large percentage of educated adults were unfamiliar with it. As a result, he realized his "riffs" would not work since his intended audience would not be familiar enough with the original to understand the "riffs" he would provide on it. So, Gaiman decided to just tell a straight-ahead story of Orpheus and Eurydice, again relying primarily on research. The result, as with his research-heavy "Thermidor" and "August" is a slow-paced story, particularly unfortunate because "Orpheus" is a forty-eight page Sandman Special. As with my views on "August," I know others will disagree with me, but I find this story a slow one even though Talbot's art is again to be admired. My favorite parts are when we are first introduced to the Endless, including, for the first time, the missing brother of the Endless — Destruction. Destruction, we find out, likes to laugh and is full of life, and he is another great creation of Gaiman's. Also important to the story is our seeing that Dream, back then, was a cold-hearted rule-follower who had no sympathy for his son, Orpheus when Eurydice dies. The Dream we meet post-entrapment has been softened, so it's important to notice the character of Dream in the older stories Gaiman shares with us. I think the current Dream would have reacted with more empathy to his son's plight. The second-to-last issue, "The Parliament of Rooks," offers a fun story in which Cain, Abel, and Eve each take turns telling stories in the Dreaming. But before the story starts, we follow a toddler, Lyta's son Daniel, as he crawls out of his crib and climbs from our world into Dream, where Eve finds him and carries him to Abel's house. His brother, the world's first murderer, shows up unannounced, and they all have tea together and tell their stories. Eve's story is about the first two wives of Adam, Lilith and an unnamed woman whom Adam found repulsive. Cain tells a story about a parliament of rooks, and Abel steals the show with his story because Jill Thompson did the artwork based on her study of Hello Kitty's aesthetic appeal. She applied the face proportions of Hello Kitty to mini-figures of characters from the Endless and Cain and Abel. Her "11/1 Endless" characters have become well-known, and Thompson has even written a few other books featuring these characters. But their first appearance is in this issue. Gaiman said he wanted to set up a little domestic scene in the Dreaming, so this is a light story with dark edges: Cain, as always, will reenact his murder of Abel by the end of this issue, and each story told has a frightening part to it. The final story in the volume, "Ramadan," is the gem of this collection. The art by P. Craig Russell is phenomenal. Russell is known for adapting to comics the short stories of Oscar Wilde and Rudyard Kipling, as well as the operas of Wagner and Mozart, so Gaiman, after talking with Russell, decided to finish up his script as just a short story without any directions about images and panels, which normally would be typical of a comic script written by the direction-heavy Gaiman. But, as he did in only one other issue in the series, he gave Russell free reign with artistic decisions and the result is truly the single-best issue in the entire SANDMAN series and one of the best comics told visually of all time. The story, both verbally and visually, mimics the tales of the Arabian Nights in the best way possible. The ruler of Baghdad takes us all through the palace as we see all the pleasures and delights, as well as evidence of art and learning, that was evident in Baghdad at its greatest moment of all time. However, the king, even though he has all that he wants, lacks one thing, and he knows that Dream is the only one who can give him what he most desires. So, he seeks to summon Sandman, a dangerous summoning to undertake, as Dream tells him when he appears. But once the king proposes his deal, Sandman takes him up on his offer. I can't reveal what their agreement is, but it's an important one having to do with the vitality of place and the essential nature of dreams and storytelling in preserving our greatest human achievements. The story has several possible endings, but the final page of the story, the true ending, is my favorite ending in the entire series. It takes us in time from the past of Baghdad to the present day. I really can't do this story justice in describing it, but one of my favorite scenes is when the king shows Dream around his city by way of a flying carpet. The creative way that Russell guides our eyes through each panel and from one panel to the next is endlessly complex and varied. I imagine an artist new to comic books could learn more tricks of the trade by studying this one issue than he could by studying hundreds of pages drawn in a typical comic book. The lettering by the great Todd Klein is also exceptional - so much so that editor Karen Berger gave Klein a bonus for doing this particular issue. This series is a difficult one to rank with a single rating since the quality of the stories is so incredibly varied. Some of my least favorite stories are combined with some of my favorites plus the best story of them all, "Ramadan." I suppose I'll take off half a star for the uneven quality, but they could issue as a single volume "Ramadan" and I'd pay the price of a single volume for it. So, this book is worth buying for this final story alone — just consider the others extras to accompany the main attraction. I certainly think primarily of "Ramadan" when I think of The Sandman, Volume Six: Fables and Reflections. *All non-comic book quotations and background information comes from Hy Bender's fantastic The Sandman Companion (1999). ~Brad Hawley After Vol 5: A Game of You, my least favorite Sandman volume so far, I'm happy to report a resounding return to form in Vol 6: Fables and Reflections, a collection of stand-alone stories centered on various prominent figures in different periods of history, including the Emperor of the United States in 19th century San Francisco ("Three Septembers and a January"), Robespierre in early 18th century revolutionary Paris ("Thermidor"), a mysterious huntsman deep in the forest ("The Hunt"), Augustus Caesar in ancient Rome ("August"), Marco Polo roaming in the desert ("Soft Places"), Orpheus and Eurydice in the Underworld ("The Song of Orpheus"), Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden ("The Parliament of Rooks"), and finally Haroun Al Raschid, Caliph of Bagdad ("Ramadan"). As Brad has said in his excellent review, it's hard to easily summarize the disparate stories of this collection. I found the quality of the narratives and artwork to be very high, but the themes were so rich and varied that it would wrong to say what, as a whole, the collection is "about". As with all of Gaiman's SANDMAN series, the art of story-telling itself is a central feature, along with various mythologies, dreamers, powerful rulers, and of course dreams. The way these themes are interwoven is what gives the collection a unified "feel", even though each story is unique. Frequently there is a framing device, an overt narrating voice, that sets the stage for the stories, but some of my favorite stories keep the identity of the story-teller deliberately concealed in order to be revealed at the end and force us to rethink the story's overall message. My particular favorites in this collection were "The Hunt", which has a timeless appeal as a grandfather tells a story to his teenage granddaughter, who would rather watch MTV. The longest story is "The Song of Orpheus", which takes the traditional tale and incorporates The Endless into the story for a very different interpretation. It is quite a powerful story with a shocking ending. Morpheus has a major role to play here, as do his siblings. I agree with Brad that "Ramadan" is the centerpiece of the collection, an amazingly illustrated story that is so beautiful to look at that you simply have to read it more than once. The artist's name is P. Craig Russell, and his drawing of the towers, mosques, minarets, and markets of Bagdad are strongly reminiscent of the art of Moebius. It's story of the mighty King of fantastic Bagdad, who despite his limitless power and wealth is troubled deep in his soul. It is very much in the vein of The Arabian Nights, but once again Morpheus is seamlessly part of the tale, and the ending...ah, that is truly sublime. Interspersed within and between these stories, we continue to learn more about the nature of The Endless, including the missing sibling who makes his first appearance in "The Song of Orpheus". So in that sense it has more continuity with Vol 4: Season of Mists than Vol 5: A Game of You. One of the best things about SANDMAN is how Gaiman can explore traditional mythology in such fresh and unique ways by overlaying The Endless and their heretofore hidden roles in the stories that humankind has created throughout history. There are so many tantalizing hints dropped by Morpheus and his siblings about their various roles and duties, which again begs the question of "Who made these rules and why?" If The Endless came before the gods, then who created them? Clearly these questions point us to the Creator, who remains behind the scenes even in Vol 4: Season of Mists, when his Angels are they to represent his will. Will he ever make an appearance before this series ends? Only one way to find out... —Stuart Starosta SHARE: FOLLOW: If you plan to buy this book, you can support FanLit by clicking on the book cover above and buying it (and anything else) at Amazon. It costs you nothing extra, but Amazon pays us a small referral fee. Click any book cover or this link. We use this income to keep the site running. It pays for website hosting, postage for giveaways, and bookmarks and t-shirts. Thank you!

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