

THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE

by NEIL GAIMAN  The Reading Guide

Reading Group Questions

'I went away in my head, into a book. That was where I went whenever real life was too hard or too inflexible.' The narrator places a great deal of importance on reading. Can books really teach us everything?

Discuss the portrayal of families in *Ocean*. How did you feel about the relationship between the narrator and his father in particular? Is the child powerless?

'Adults follow paths. Children explore.' How does reading from the perspective of a child affect your experience of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*?

The narrator is plagued by nightmares even before Ursula Monkton makes her appearance. What power, if any, does the thought of your childhood fears wield over you as an adult?

Does the narrator grow up in this novel? How does he come across as an adult? Do you think that the Hempstocks influenced the life he has lived?

Can you sympathise with Ursula Monkton, or is she truly monstrous?

Discuss the role of memory in the novel – how important is it to remember events as they actually happened? Is it ever easier *not* to remember?

'I liked myths. They weren't adult stories and they weren't children's stories. They were better than that. They just were.' Do myths and the stories we know shape the way we approach our own lives?

Discuss the portrayal of sacrifice in the novel. Is Lettie right to intervene at the end?

'Everything whispered inside me. Everything spoke to everything, and I knew it all.' How can we understand the narrator's experience of being underwater? Do you agree that something fantastical can help us understand the 'truth'?

Carried away by the ocean, is this the end for Lettie Hempstock? In what way could you imagine her returning?



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About the book

The Ocean at the End of the Lane is a fable that reshapes modern fantasy: moving, terrifying and elegiac – as pure as a dream, as delicate as a butterfly's wing, as dangerous as a knife in the dark.

It begins for our narrator forty years ago when the family lodger steals their car and commits suicide in it, stirring up ancient powers best left undisturbed. Dark creatures from beyond this world are on the loose, and it will take everything our narrator has just to stay alive: there is primal horror here, and menace unleashed – within his family and from the forces that have gathered to destroy it.

His only defence is three women, on a farm at the end of the lane. The youngest of them claims that her duckpond is an ocean. The oldest can remember the Big Bang.

'*The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is a novel of childhood and memory. It's a story of magic, about the power of stories and how we face the darkness inside each of us. It's about fear, and love, and death, and families. But, fundamentally, I hope, at its heart, it's a novel about survival' Neil Gaiman

About the author

NEIL GAIMAN is the *Sunday Times* bestselling author of more than twenty books for readers of all ages. He has spent his adult life making things up and writing them down, including novels *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, *American Gods*, *Stardust*, *Anansi Boys*, *Neverwhere*, *Coraline*, and *The Graveyard Book*. Winner of two National Book Awards and the Hugo, Nebula and Bram Stoker Awards, his work has been adapted for film, television and radio, including *Stardust* (2007) and the BAFTA-winning and Oscar-nominated animated feature film *Coraline* (2009). He has written scripts for *Doctor Who*, collaborated with Terry Pratchett, and written *The Sandman*, which is already established as one of *the* classic graphic novels. As George R. R. Martin says, 'There's no one quite like Neil Gaiman'.

Neil was born in England but now lives more in America than he does anywhere else, in a big house of uncertain location, where he accumulates computers and cats. He blogs over at www.neilgaiman.com.

To find out more about Neil Gaiman follow him on Twitter @neilhimsel.



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The genesis of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

The Ocean at the End of the Lane is my first adult novel since 2005 and *Anansi Boys*. I got a bit side-tracked by writing things like *The Graveyard Book* along the way and *Ocean* really has been a glorious surprise to me. I've been hugely touched and gratified by the fact that readers of *Ocean* have told me that it has moved them and that they think it is the most personal thing that I have written. And I suppose it is. Although the narrator isn't really me, and his family isn't really my family, it's true that the world that he inhabits is very much my world.

The funny thing is, I didn't start out to write a novel. About two years ago I started writing a short story. I was about five thousand words into the short story before I realised that it really wasn't a short story after all – but I wasn't quite sure *exactly* what it was going to be.

What I did know was that it was about a narrator who was kind of a lot like me when I was seven, and that there were these old women who lived at the end of his lane. I say 'old women', but one of them was apparently an eleven-year-old girl called Lettie Hempstock. And then there was her mother, and also her grandmother, Old Mrs Hempstock. Lettie has an ocean in her garden (it's actually a duckpond but she says it's the ocean) and she says they came across the ocean to live in the farm a long time ago, from the old country. Her mother says that's nonsense because the *really* old country sank beneath the waves. And her grandmother, Old Mrs Hempstock, is convinced that's absolute nonsense because, as she tells them, she can remember the *really, really* old country before the Big Bang.

I knew our narrator was going to get himself into a great deal of trouble and that even the three very, very old ladies at the end of the lane were going to have their work cut out trying to get him through this story alive. And I knew it would be very scary... and very weird.

So I'd started the story, but stopped it when I realised it wasn't a short story. I went off to write a novel instead, a completely different story but it was a novel that everybody was waiting for. I was in Florida, staying at a friend's house. On my first or second day, I went for a run and while I was out on my run I realised what happened next in my short-story-that-wasn't-a-short-story. So, instead of writing the novel that I was meant to be writing, I wrote that. I did the same the next day, and the next day, and then I thought, 'Well, it's obviously a very *big* short story.' I kept writing, then I thought, 'Oh, it's a novelette.' Then it got too long to be a novelette. And so I thought, 'Well, it's a novella then.' Somewhere in between I sent my editors a little note saying, 'I think I'm writing a very long novella.' But it just kept going. And when finally I sent them the finished book, it was a novel – a novel called *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* that I hadn't planned to write at all.

Neil Gaiman

