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Jake La Jeunesse

University of Minnesota Duluth

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Locating Lakeside, Wisconsin: Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* and the American Small-town Utopia

Abstract

Looks at a particular aspect of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*: its evocation of the quintessential American small town of Lakeside, Wisconsin. Lakeside is compared to similar small towns, with their more or less ambiguous undertones of insularity and something not quite right, in Jerome Bixby's "It's a Good Life," Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*, and Garrison Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Additional Keywords

Bixby, Jerome. "It's a Good Life"; Bradbury, Ray. *Dandelion Wine*.; Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*; Keillor, Garrison



LOCATING LAKESIDE, WISCONSIN:
NEIL GAIMAN'S *AMERICAN GODS* AND
THE AMERICAN SMALL-TOWN UTOPIA

JAKE LA JEUNESSE

While traveling through the town of Menomonie, Wisconsin, my mother-in-law asks, "Is that ice out on the lake?" That the response, "Yes, but the klunker has already fallen through," elicits laughter from the rest of the car requires three things. First, that everyone present must have read Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* and recognize the allusion to Hinzelmann's annual sacrifice. Second, that a popular culture following has decided Gaiman developed the town of Lakeside using the details of Menomonie and posted their hypothesis communally. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, that readers have enough curiosity to comb the Internet in search of this piece of information. Playing by the rules of the Internet, enough information exists to confirm this; more than one person has suggested it, and no one has compared them to Hitler. Others however, have suggested such locations as Pelican Lake, Pine Lake, or Parrish (Gray), while others satisfy themselves with the discovery of a real town named Lakeside. All of them assume that, even though the town uses a pseudonym, that Gaiman based it on a town from Wisconsin, and not any other state.

Yet readers of this fantasy novel want Lakeside to exist. Running an online search for "American Gods Lakeside" turns up several pages in which people post ideas arguing for the real-world location, while commenters can counter with their own arguments. One such website includes such arguments as, "My own theory about location is Rice Lake, WI, which doesn't make any sense at all based on details from the book, but there's just something about Rice Lake which feels right," and, "Hate to break it to you, but despite all the following of clues you've done, you are being taken in the wrong direction. 'Lakeside' is actually Menomonie. I know because I grew up there, and clearly recognized many of the locations mentioned, and also of note, it's where Gaiman lives" (Gray). Most people suggest evidence like this, citing either a feeling or recognition of a description from a beloved hometown. Nearly everyone ignores any evidence that directly contradicts their personal hypotheses. These discussions hint at the type of fascination people have with

the town, which seemingly holds a personal or emotional connection with the readers. Since most of these websites display a “road trip” theme, and since some commenters have stated a desire to travel to Lakeside, it seems that Gaiman’s novel sets off readers’ desire to quest so they may literally find the town.

The true location of Lakeside, of course, requires more scholarship than the Internet can offer. Of the few details Gaiman includes about the town in the book, readers find probably the clearest description of how to find it in the opening caveat, where he states that he has obscured its location. More so than obscuring it, he provides several details that suggest mutually exclusive locations—very few of which, if any, suggest Menomonie. Considering these paradoxes, the town’s location means nothing without also addressing the question of *why* readers care enough to expend the energy they do in finding it. In a novel where everything feels symbolic and otherworldly, yet firmly rooted to real geography—a characteristic uncommon in Fantasy—why would Gaiman choose to hide this one location? Of course, he also obscured the location of the world tree, but as members of the online community have noted, this doesn’t interest people as much as Lakeside. Perhaps as the location of Shadow’s apotheosis, readers satisfy themselves associating it with the non-local nature of the divine. Lakeside, on the other hand, embodies the mundane. The nature of the novel to manifest people’s beliefs into the physical realm, though, suggests that the paradoxical geography of the town itself holds meaning. This contradictory evidence, when closely examined, produces a geography suggestive of the idea of the small-town-America utopia, a technique used to explain Lakeside’s existence via its non-existence. Gaiman does this to demonstrate the power of the town’s fictional residents to strive for and create an ideal which pointedly does not exist. The novel’s readers mirror this behavior in their desire to find, and travel to, a real-world location with the qualities of American utopia.

These non-fictional travelers express a very similar desire as the fictional residents of Lakeside, and much like the residents they are loathe to accept that this idealized America may be fictional; for the travelers, this is quite literal, but the fascination and affection for the small-town make this as metaphorical for them as it is for the characters in the book. Furthermore, these beliefs and their inaccuracies are present both in other works of fiction and their intersection with the non-fictional world. Jerome Bixby’s “It’s a *Good* Life,” Ray Bradbury’s *Dandelion Wine* and Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon stories all depict characters (and in Keillor’s case, readers and listeners) entranced and mystified by small-town idealism, oblivious to the darker sides of this life. But the cognitive dissonance employed to protect their facade ensures their utopias’ fictional nature.

Despite the subject's popularity online, the scholars who have written about *American Gods* have generally focused on broader topics than the geography of the town. However, many of them tackle the issue of belief, myth, and the personified fantasy elements in the novel. Rut Blomqvist defines a god in the novel as "consecrated ideas which *either* stem from pre-colonial Native American and immigrant myth, *or* materialize from new phenomena such as capitalism" (Blomqvist 10). This explanation accounts for both the old gods and the new gods, but Blomqvist sets this up as a binary system, while she spends much of her article detailing how Shadow awakens to the complexity and flaws of a binary system. To work toward this complexity, she describes the process of "mythification," in which phenomena not part of any tradition or religion can take on symbolic aspects (Blomqvist 6). The mythification process is important, as it allows for the complexity of binaries within Blomqvist's own definition. Things can become mythified, even if they are neither old gods nor new, and Lakeside can represent the mystified worship of an idea, even without conscious knowledge of its worshippers.

Richard Rosenbaum attempts to simplify these metaphysics, though, and provides an explanation for the existence of the novel's manifestations and personifications regardless of their source. Wednesday, Anansi, Czernobog, Media, and all the other divine characters represent ideas—forms, under a Platonic model of philosophy. Gaiman sets up that the gods must have human belief to survive, but Rosenbaum notes that certain concepts, such as battle, would still exist in the human world, even without belief in it (Rosenbaum 51). This poses a philosophical problem in explaining exactly what these gods represent, or what makes them. He solves this by proposing Gottfried Leibniz's philosophy of monadology, in which immaterial components called monads will combine into physical matter, and that monads serve as the basic building blocks of all matter in the universe. This theory of monism, in opposition to Descartes's dualism, explains that as more and more monads cluster together, they gain the potential for consciousness, and if assembled correctly, can become a soul (Rosenbaum 53-54). Rosenbaum offers an explanation that, while rooted in theoretical philosophy, can account for the interrelationship between Gaiman's gods, the world they live in, and the beliefs of people both in the novel and reading the novel. As monads form everything on the most fundamental level, Rosenbaum sees no conflict in the ideas that one can influence another on a spiritual level, which would in turn provide the possibility to manifest as a change in the physical world, such as the creation of a god or a town.

Rosenbaum offers an idea which may support an intuitive assumption about the book; that beliefs and faith can alter the world, which allows us to draw connections between ideas and physical constructs—such as the gods or the locales—and more abstract ideas held by a mundane population rarely seen

in the novel. While a search for the literal in a fantasy novel may prove vain, he does open the door to understanding how the town can endure in spite of the many discrepancies in its characteristics. Sam, one of the novel's most significant, non-supernatural human characters who has roots in Lakeside, offers a monologue rife with paradox about the things she believes (Gaiman 394-395). The human mind, whether through lack of education, misinformation, or even willful cognitive dissonance, does not have to resolve contradictions in its own view of the world. The incongruities of Lakeside's description almost require us to think of it entirely in the abstract, as a manifestation of beliefs, and the fact that Sam has roots in the town further emphasizes this link. Since Lakeside provides us with the only glimpse of an American community shown in the book, its residents show us the vast, yet contradictory, beliefs that Americans hold. This manifestation of cognitive dissonance can also explain how Gaiman's clues describing the town's location can mutually exclude each other. Rosenbaum's monad philosophy supports a credible leap into the fantastical to indicate that those beliefs power the world around them.

Roy Bossert illustrates, to a small extent, the value of belief to the characters of *American Gods*. By comparing it to the state of American philosophy, he describes the need for Gaiman's gods to stay alive through "just enough" belief of their followers, which leads to a more pragmatic personality than the idealistic and philosophical gods worshiped in Europe (Bossert 41). Bossert states that, "Religion is an operating system for dealing with the world, and, like other operating systems, religions need updates to stay compatible with new software and hardware" (Bossert 45). By hardware, he refers to tools of worship that themselves may become obsolete. "Czernobog's hammer gives way to Media's television set. Now, an individual's survival in a first-world economy depends far more on one's ability to communicate electronically than it does on the ability to produce and manipulate fire or kill food" (Bossert 44). Media doesn't need to worry about her own survival, as Americans flock to television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet, seeing them as rewarding in and of themselves, freeing the god behind them to exert a philosophical influence over her followers. Czernobog, on the other hand, faces a challenge in a society where few ever see agriculture, and therefore must concern himself with the importance of his own symbolism in the lives of humans. This makes him much less of an influence, much less powerful, than Media. Using the example of gods' tools of worship, we can see clearly how gods evolve—or become extinct—along with the needs of a culture.

The theme of contradiction of beliefs appears elsewhere in the novel, and Roy Bossert draws attention to the Buffalo Man, who tells Shadow to believe everything, which poses a difficult task for anyone trying to reconcile incongruous ideas (Bossert 43), but faith, even non-religious faith, motivates

much of what Shadow does and assists his survival. Certainly the power of belief to affect characters' lives can also alter the physical world itself. Lakeside takes shape from the belief in Small-Town USA, and that shape reflects the contradictions and inconsistencies of believers, manifesting as a mythic geography

Gregg Littman's article "*American Gods* Is All Lies!" attempts to validate the novel's value as literature in spite of the conflicts between fantasy and reality by addressing it vicariously through an argument supporting the entire Fantasy genre. Mostly through criticism of Plato, Littman relates many of the derogatory opinions people have held toward Fantasy literature in the last few millennia; that, like the story of Cronus and Zeus overthrowing their fathers, it demonstrates less-than-exemplary behavior for the readers to supposedly emulate (Littman 27). Littman correctly observes the importance of learning myth to understanding a culture (Littman 21), but does not elaborate on the extent of what we can learn from these legends. He states that, "[...] the novel contains nothing *but* falsehoods about the gods. Even if the gods exist, Neil Gaiman, like Homer before him, is in no position to be an expert about them" (Littman 22), and adds the disclaimer within his article that "nobody thinks that *American Gods* represents the world as it really is" (Littman 27). While much of Littman's support for the Fantasy genre stems from Tolkien's philosophy, a passage from Tolkien's lecture "On Fairy-Stories" can support the importance of *American Gods* beyond what Littman states.

There are other things more grim and terrible to fly from than the noise, stench, ruthlessness and extravagance of the internal-combustion engine. There are hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice and death. And even when men are not facing hard things such as these, there are ancient limitations from which fairy-stories offer a sort of escape. [...] Some are pardonable weaknesses or curiosities: such as the desire to visit, free as a fish, the deep sea; or the longing for the noiseless, gracious, economical flight of a bird [...]. There are profounder wishes: such as the desire to converse with other living things. [...] Other creatures are like other realms with which Man has broken off relations, and sees now only from the outside at a distance, being at war with them, or on the terms of an uneasy armistice. (Tolkien 83-84)

To Tolkien, the elements of Fantasy represent relationships between humans and abstract concepts, the "other realms" with which we don't have a clear method of communication. Fantasy allows us to reforge those links. Littman claims, "The premise—that the ancient gods are real and survive in the modern USA, where they compete with the new gods for human worship—is absurd. Anyone who believed such a thing would be insane" (Littman 33-34). This may

hold true under a literal interpretation of the novel—in fact, Tolkien argues that the very purpose of the faerie story would require such absurdity (Tolkien 85). However, when considering the symbolic nature of fantasy, this premise holds an insightful, profound truth central to understanding the nature of 21st century America, and that truth becomes apparent by studying Gaiman’s mythology; for example, when Media asks Shadow, “You ever wanted to see Lucy’s tits?” (Gaiman 176), she displays a promiscuous, seductive personality, which represents the fascination with and lust for celebrities that Americans develop when they devote their energy toward entertainment. While Littman criticizes viewpoints that condemn fantastic literature for its intentional lack of realism (Littman 36), he seems to overlook the possibility of an abstract portrayal of truth.

Gaiman’s *Lakeside* depends on its fantastical elements to diagnose an abstract cultural truth: namely, Americans’ relationships with the idea of small towns and small-town life. Through the fictional residents’ beliefs, we see how the town takes its shape. Furthermore, when analyzing the ideas held sacred by the residents, the novel’s abstraction reflects a true-to-life faith in small towns held by a great number of Americans. In a literary form, these beliefs lie at the heart of other American novels such as Ray Bradbury’s *Dandelion Wine*, or non-fictional commercial endeavors, such as Disney placing Main Street U.S.A. at the entrance to his theme parks and the successful draw of visitors. One strong example shows the appeal of small-town idealism both fictionally and non-fictionally, through Garrison Keillor’s “Lake Wobegon” stories, as well as his audience’s desire to find the town and disappointment in learning it doesn’t exist. The fact that *Lakeside*, like *Wobegon*, doesn’t exist, comments on illusory nature of this idealism, in spite of the fact that many Americans both believe in it and seek it out, and that *Lakeside* elicited the same reaction testifies to the effectiveness of Gaiman’s metaphor.

Even if *Lakeside*’s geography is fictional, Siobhan Carroll has found cultural truths in it. Her article, “Imagined Nation: Place and National Identity in *American Gods*” looks at the relationship between people and place, and the significance of place in Fantasy literature. The novel, she says, “tackles the imaginary nature of American identity head on, using the tropes of epic and urban fantasies to interrogate the stresses and contradictions of the imagined community” (Carroll 308). America has an identity crisis, as Wednesday points out:

"This is the only country in the world," said Wednesday, into the stillness, "that worries about what it is. [...] The rest of them know what they are. No one ever needs to go searching for the heart of Norway. Or looks for the soul of Mozambique. They know what they are." (Gaiman 116)

And he later reinforces this idea of a national identity crisis:

"San Francisco isn't in the same country as Lakeside anymore than New Orleans is in the same country as New York or Miami is in the same country as Minneapolis. [...] They may share certain cultural signifiers—money, a federal government, entertainment—it's the same *land* obviously—but the only things that give it the illusion of being one country are the greenback, *The Tonight Show*, and McDonalds." (Gaiman 306)

However, America has a belief in identity—or rather, each American has their own belief—in spite of these contradictions, as Carroll indicates anecdotally, quoting from a 2008 political gaffe in which Sarah Palin said to a North Carolina crowd:

We believe that the best of America is not all in Washington, D.C. [...] We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit, and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hard working very patriotic, um, very, um, pro-America areas of this great nation. This is where we find the kindness and the goodness and the courage of everyday Americans. (qtd. in Stein)

Despite potentially offending urban citizens by questioning the legitimacy of their homes and affection for their country, Palin's statement should not come as surprising. Cultural icons such as Norman Rockwell paintings, *The Wizard of Oz*, and even more modern examples such as the *Smallville* television series have enforced the utopian ideals of America as belonging to rural citizens.

Still, these ideals remain mythical, despite assertions of characters both fictional and otherwise. Other members of the McCain campaign recognized Palin's statement as a gaffe because of a reality in which the overwhelming majority of Americans live in urban settings, as they have since 1920 (Hummon 66). However, her message likely inspired many who choose to believe in this geographically-based identity for their nation. Carroll even suggests a reason why Americans may place *more* emphasis on a geographical identity than other nations: "In Wednesday's inverted version of American exceptionalism, the United States stands alone as a nation uniquely plagued by a lack of cohesive identity. A nation of immigrants, its people do not share a common ancestry or

site of origin" (Carroll 317). Because of this lack of common ancestry, those seeking identity as members of a nation can only rally around geography and cultural icons. This specific paradox lies at the core of the novel; Wednesday attempts to form a bond between the old gods, but that unity can never exist beyond their perceptions due to the deceptive nature of his real plan.

An examination of this scholarship leads to a set of conclusions that point toward the importance of Lakeside, Wisconsin. Bossert's studies on the potency of belief illustrates how people can construct fictional realities, and Rosenbaum's ideas on monadology shows how those empirical and ontological worlds can relate to and influence each other. If we imagine Lakeside as a mythical identity the residents have chosen for themselves, we can, according to Littman, discover valuable cultural insight about Americans, based on their interaction with a fantasy environment. However, this reading depends not just on Lakeside having mythical geography, but that like the god characters, the town is established within the context of the book to be a physically manifested myth, and there exist more than enough details to establish its mythic nature through its location on the map.

Gaiman gives us the name of a real town. A Lakeside exists in Wisconsin, far to the north-west in Douglass County. The town rests on the southern shore of Lake Superior, which definitely does not match any of the details given about the lake in the novel, which humans created, whereas glaciers carved out Lake Superior, Chad Mulligan states "You can't drive through this town without seeing that goddamned lake. It's at the center of everything" (Gaiman 569), an impossible detail considering Superior's size, and of course any references in the novel to geography north of the town clearly refer to land, not open water.

Other clues place it in the northeastern area of central Wisconsin:

"Hinzelmann," asked Shadow. "Have you ever heard of eagle stones?"

"Up north of Rhinelander? Nope, that's Eagle River. Can't say I have." (Gaiman 295)

As people colloquially use the term "up" synonymously with "north," Hinzelmann's statement places Lakeside south of Rhinelander, a city roughly 40 miles south of the Michigan border. This agrees with the information Mabel gives us:

"[Pasties are] a Yoopie thing," she told him. "Mostly you need to be at least up Ironwood way to get one." [...]

"Yoopie?"

"Upper Peninsula. U.P. Yoopie. It's the little chunk of Michigan to the northeast." (Gaiman 267)

And the region further narrows down as Shadow listens to Chad Mulligan talk about Darren, Sandy, and Marguerite Olsen:

"Darren Olsen met Marge at U.W. Stevens Point and he brought her back north to Lakeside. [...] I reckon he was driving up to Ironwood, maybe down to Green Bay." (Gaiman 299)

This limits Lakeside to locations south of Rhineland, yet north of Steven's Point, a town situated almost in the exact center of the state, and Green Bay which lies at a similar latitude on the bay of Lake Michigan.

While it doesn't necessarily contradict the details outlined above, Gaiman makes a curious statement about Shadow's free time: "He walked, alone, until he reached the national forest to the north and west, or the cornfields and cow pastures to the south" (Gaiman 363). Shadow would need to cover roughly 75 miles (150 round trip) at the shortest distance between the national forests and the cornfields, between Eau Claire and Winter at the western part of the state. The distance only increases toward the east, where the previous evidence places the town. Perhaps, though, this hints at Shadow's burgeoning demi-god powers, and cannot by itself rule out any location for the town.

Lakeside grows even more abstract when factoring in names of places that don't exist. Chad Mulligan mentions a town twenty miles to the west called Camden. No town in the state exists by that name, but a similarly named Crandon exists about 26 miles east of Rhineland—but this contradicts Hinzemann's earlier statement. Furthermore, the White Pine River (Gaiman 363) doesn't exist, but a Pine River flows west from Iron Mountain, Michigan into Wisconsin. If this suggests a more eastern location than the previous evidence does, while searching for Alison McGovern, Shadow gets dropped off on County W (Gaiman 316), and Mabel mentions County Q later (Gaiman 366), both of which run near Wisconsin Rapids, and Shadow walks the Lumber County Wilderness trail (Gaiman 363). While Wisconsin doesn't have a Lumber County, the name may refer to Wood County, seated in Wisconsin Rapids. However, that would place Lakeside just south and west of Steven's point, not north of it. Mulligan also comments, "I just hope she turns up in the Twin Cities with some dopey boyfriend" (Gaiman 316). If small-town runaways tend to gravitate toward more urban settings, the theoretical Alison McGovern would probably find it easier to reach Madison or Milwaukee, given the location of the

county roads, or Green Bay when considering the more northeastern possibilities. However, the Twin Cities swings potential candidate towns back toward the direction of Menomonie. Yet the initial geography given to the readers precludes this possibility: "They spent the night in a Super 8 motel south of La Crosse. Christmas Day was spent on the road, driving north and east" (Gaiman 234). Followed by Wednesday telling Shadow: "Now, let me walk you down to the Greyhound. I shall wave to you as you ride the gray dog north" (Gaiman 243).

For details that Gaiman supposedly wants to obscure, he certainly dangles plenty of clues. The final apparent contradiction in this logic comes as a chapter introduction:

One describes a tale best by telling the tale. You see? The way one describes a story, to oneself or to the world, is by telling the story. It is a balancing act and it is a dream. The more accurate the map, the more it resembles the territory. The most accurate map possible would be the territory, and thus would be perfectly accurate and perfectly useless.

The tale is the map that is the territory.

You must remember this. (Gaiman 545)

Unlike the other chapter headings, this came directly from Gaiman himself, via the character of Ibis. As a god character, seemingly capable of focalization outside the novel (Blomqvist 8), Ibis is free to comment upon the story with an awareness not available to many other characters. His cryptic urge for the reader to remember maps, territories, and their accuracy and uses, seems strikingly meaningful in the context of a narrative that relies heavily on place. When he says that telling a story helps describing "oneself" to the world, he makes a subtle connection between this chapter heading and Shadow's hideaway in Wisconsin; the alias Wednesday gives him, "Mike Ainsel" alludes to the fairy tale—and title of Part Two of *American Gods*—"My Ainsel," which means "My own self" in the Northumbrian dialect. The novel places Shadow in Lakeside to lay low, to be his own self, but that connects Lakeside with identity, which the residents of Lakeside build from the town itself.

If we cannot create a map to accurately portray the town, then the territory cannot resemble anything, yet it still exists, somehow, within the context of the story. The details Gaiman provides illustrates an impossibly accurate map, and if the tale is the map, then the town must possess some quality of equal impossibility. The readers who blog about Lakeside all look for a candidate that fits *most* of the details provided in the book. However, the mutually exclusive nature of these details allows a counterexample to disprove each one. *All* of these details describe Lakeside. If any single location cannot fit all the characteristics, then in order to reconcile all the discrepancies, Lakeside

must exist nowhere because nowhere can fit the characteristics. Since the Greek term *utopia* translates to “no place,” the town can be associated with the concept of utopia. Lakeside presents an American utopia, imbued with the qualities its residents believe a small-town should possess, and manifested physically by their belief.

However, the extensive reasoning required to arrive at such a conclusion also implies a secondary meaning. Since Lakeside cannot exist on a map while the majority of the rest of *American Gods*'s settings can, it remains fictional, even with a suspended disbelief to allow the reader to understand the other features of the novel. This utopian geography represents both an American ideal and an ideal that cannot exist. It only creates the illusion of utopia, its qualities created by the faith of its inhabitants who enjoy a quiet, idyllic life there, and enjoy economic prosperity that the surrounding areas do not. However, while they outwardly praise Lakeside's virtues, unspoken evidence given to us by the author contradicts the validity of these wonders, and the residents seem either unaware or in denial over the fact that their prosperity comes at the price of their children's lives.

This belief in a virtuous, peaceful utopia echoes a number of beliefs that people, both fictional and otherwise, hold about Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon. At first glance, Lakeside and Wobegon share a number of striking similarities. Both towns take their name from their lakes. They've both grown in the American Midwest. Keillor populated his town with an equal number of Germans and Norwegians in constant competition with each other (Keillor, *In Search* 13), while Gaiman appears to have comprised his town in a similar fashion: “Hinzelmann pointed out the town's two restaurants as they passed them (a German restaurant and what he described as ‘Part Greek, part Norwegian, and a popover at every plate’)” (Gaiman 252). Keillor's stories always start with the line “It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon” (Keillor 15), while Marguerite Olson “works for the *Lakeside News*. Not the most exciting newspaper in the world, but truth to tell Missy Gunther thought that was probably the way most folk around here liked it” (Gaiman 272). Both towns, despite being fictionally utopian, exude a sense of goodness and peacefulness that many people find attractive ideas.

Even before Shadow's arrival in Lakeside, the bus driver emphasizes, “Heck, that's a *good* town” (Gaiman 248). While a literal reading stresses the wholesome, utopian nature of the town, the emphasis the driver places on the word *good* alludes to Jerome Bixby's “It's a *Good* Life,” in which residents of Peakesville, another idyllic American town isolated from the rest of the world (which may not exist), must force themselves to think good thoughts to avoid incurring the wrath of Anthony, an omniscient and omnipotent toddler holding the residents in a stasis of fear (Bixby). Like Bixby's Peakesville, Lakeside

residents mentally contradict reality. They must create the illusion of goodness out of dystopia in order to maintain their quaint way of life. In the case of Peakesville, any acknowledgement of their troubles casts blame onto Anthony, who will retaliate aggressively with a three-year-old's sense of morality and justice. For those in Lakeside, acknowledging reality would shatter their illusion of prosperity, bringing them down to the level of other economically depressed towns in the region, and it would force them to come face to face with the terrible loss of their children's lives, rather than entertain the hope that the winter runaways will return some day, as Chad Mulligan expresses when he wishes that Allison McGovern will turn up in the Twin Cities with some dopey boyfriend.

While Lakeside's and Peakesville's denials of their darker realities may sound difficult to accept as plausible, Garrison Keillor relates a story on how Lake Wobegon also owes its existence to a darker truth of small-town life. When moving to a less urban setting himself, Keillor describes his first impressions of Freeport, Minnesota, and his disappointment in the passionate xenophobia and lack of welcome he received from his new neighbors. "My German neighbors were a closed group and I wasn't in it. Proximity does not equal membership. I accepted that, because I come from similar people" (Keillor 20). Keillor expected a friendly, inclusive rural community, but found out about its mythical nature firsthand. He developed Lake Wobegon out of this same disappointment that his audience feels when they find out the town doesn't exist.

All those omniscient-narrator stories about small-town people came from a guy sitting alone at the end of a bar, drinking a beer, who didn't know anything about anything going on around him. Stories about prodigals welcomed home, outcasts brought into the circle, rebels forgiven: all from the guy at the end of the bar nursing a beer in silence. (Keillor 20)

In creating his own ideal geography out of a need for acceptance (Keillor 21), Keillor essentially did the same thing the residents of Lakeside do. His desire to make this town a reality for himself places him in a similar position as Hinzemann, as the architects behind their respective towns' success, relating local myth and chronicling the lives of inhabitants.

Gaiman also weaves Lakeside with a common thread as Ray Bradbury's Green Town, Illinois from *Dandelion Wine*. Bradbury describes yet another idyllic town with dark undertones in the American Midwest, first introducing it with a sense of community closeness; the young Douglass Spaulding points to all the houses as the residents wake simultaneously as he calls to them, ready to begin the summer as a single unit (Bradbury 2). The story begins in the summer of 1928, conspicuously just before the onset of the Great

Depression (Mengeling 878), which likens it to the prosperous Lakeside, threatened by encroaching economic depression. John Rosenman notes the religious connotations of Green Town, with its gaping ravine, likened to a vast ocean threatening to swallow the lifeboat of survivors that is Green Town (Bradbury 13). The wildness and death symbolized by the ravine evoke images of Hades's ascent to abduct Persephone, or Satan rising from the caverns of Chaos to corrupt flower-like Eve (Rosenman 12). Both towns provide utopia for its residents, the *good*, American small-town in the case of Lakeside, and the endless joys of summer vacation in the case of Douglass Spaulding and Green Town, and the darker, crueller aspects of the world threaten the characters' images of each one. Curiously enough, the inhabitants of Green Town consciously acknowledge the terror in their midst. Lavinia Nebbs spends an evening with her friends, acutely aware of the serial killer stalking young women in the area. She makes the decision not to accept the companionship of a police officer as long as the identity of "The Lonely One" remains secret, a decision the trusting residents of Lakeside would not likely make. The following day, Spaulding, who has spent much of the novel coming to grips with his own mortality, and his friends discuss the killer openly, as though an exciting piece of gossip.

However, in spite of this awareness, Lavinia expects to find danger in the ravine, but instead finds the killer has already invaded her home, her sanctuary. Spaulding and his friends, although in awe of a real murderer, convince themselves that the man Lavinia stabbed to death looked human, and therefore the real Lonely One, presumably a hideous monster, must have escaped (Bradbury 133-136). Bradbury presents awareness of evil as an illusion to aid his characters preconceived ideas of both the joys of life and the dangers of evil. The citizens of Lakeside, likewise, repress any information that challenges their comfort, even subconsciously offsetting the annual disappearance of a child to something that happens every now and then. As in *Dandelion Wine*, Lakeside's "ravine," the threat of outsiders, economic disparity, and challenge to their way of life, serves as a psychological comfort, convincing them that they only have to fear external evils. In all these examples, both fictional characters and non-fictional people employ a cognitive dissonance to either mask or compensate for the deficiencies of their homes.

David Hummon reveals common, non-fictional perceptions of the idealized American Small Town in his book, *Commonplaces: Community Ideology and Identity in American Culture*, many of which reinforce ideas seen in *American Gods*, or even in Garrison Keillor's experience in Freeport. During his research, he spoke to people in four locations, two urban and two rural, about their perception of small-town atmosphere and values and how they compared to their vision of the city. He discovered that on average, only 1 in 5 Americans

prefers the idea of living in a small community rather than the city, a statistic that only raises to 2 in 5 among those who actually live in urban areas (Hummon 70). When asked to describe what they believe the town can offer that the city can't, most people mention some variation on one of two ideas; either that towns provide a peaceful, quiet life, or that they form closer bonds with neighbors. Only one introduced a variance to these themes, mentioning pollution levels in urban areas (Hummon 60). Many use the term "quiet" literally, while others refer to a slower-pace for daily activities, and others still mean that they don't fear crimes or vices as much as they would in a densely urban environment. Among those who talk about a neighborly atmosphere, many cited the idea that "everyone knows everyone," which Hummon immediately calls out as impossible. Quite a few talk about children, preferring to raise children away from the city. Many believe cities can't offer as many activities for kids as rural environments. Others believe that the presence of drunks, rapists and sadists ruin the safety of urban activities, while others simply believe they can exert more control over their children—always under the guise of safety—in towns, which they believe reduces exposure to drugs, alcohol, and gang behavior (Hummon 51-58). Gaiman echoes these thoughts, as Hinzelmann, in charge of the Chamber of Commerce, uses his klunker raffle to raise money for the children's ward of Lakeside Hospital (Gaiman 274). This charity gives an outward impression that Lakeside harbors children, ensuring they grow up safe and healthy, in line with most peoples' beliefs on raising kids in a small town. Furthermore, Hinzelmann's and Lakeside's existence literally depends on belief in Hinzelmann, a child god. Without his presence, it would have no lake, it couldn't keep out undesired elements, and the economy would dry up. In essence, if Hinzelmann lost power, if no one thought of the children, the town would cease to exist. This further emphasizes the cognitive dissonance between belief and reality; since Hinzelmann struggles for power, he must ultimately resort to worshipping himself. While people believe that small towns give their energies toward children, not enough residents do so to keep Hinzelmann, and therefore children, alive, both in a literal and figurative sense.

Hummon notes that all those who participated in his interviews described their perception of towns by relating them to their perception of the city. Both the urban and rural group believed in a tighter sense of community existed in rural areas, while Hummon found residents of both areas had similarly sized networks of friends and relations (Hummon 8). Perceptions of crime and safety, while somewhat accurate within the scope of the modern United States, does not hold true universally, and therefore has no real connection to the size of the population (Hummon 209). This point parallels Gaiman's work in that despite losing a child on an annual basis, the citizens of Lakeside don't seem to entertain the possibility of criminal activity, except

possibly by outsiders. These citizens, like those interviewed by Hummon, commit themselves to a belief in their utopian reality. Their perceptions all spring from comparisons with a world unfamiliar to them. Hummon furthers the fantastical nature of the small town by referencing "Main Street USA," the focal point and entry way for Disney World since 1955. While the theme park creates a fantasy world for its visitors, Disney stated that, "Main Street is everyone's home town—the heartline of America" (Hummon 66-67). Disney's creation does in a literal fashion what the characters in *American Gods* do figuratively—it constructs a fantasy facade of an American town and passes it, and the values it represents, off as a reality, which many people willingly accept in spite of its falseness; as many people can claim Lakeside as can claim Disney's Main Street USA for their hometowns. Yet like the theme park, Lakeside works because of the people who go to great lengths to believe in utopian small-town values, who content themselves with the constructed scene and have no desire to look past the facade.

Shadow's arrival in town coincides with a cascade of stereotypical small-town American values. Children become the focal point for both the construction and destruction of the utopia, and Shadow meets the town's children before any of the other residents. The girls on the bus as he journeys to Lakeside stress the innocence that Hummon's interview subjects believe for their own children:

The two girls—he doubted that either of them was much more than fourteen years old—who had got on in Pinewood were now in the seat in front of him. They were friends, Shadow decided, eavesdropping without meaning to, not sisters. One of them knew almost nothing about sex, but knew a lot about animals, helped out or spent a lot of time at some kind of animal shelter, while the other was not interested in animals, but, armed with a hundred tidbits gleaned from the Internet and from daytime television, thought she knew a great deal about human sexuality. (Gaiman 248-49)

Curiously, Gaiman emphasizes the innocence of the girls—and by extension, the town that bred them—by showing a lack of knowledge and interest in sex, an impolite, and almost taboo subject according to many American's view of traditional values (by way of Puritan settlers). Similar to Hummon's research, Gaiman gives us a set of values in terms of an assumed and unknown opposite. The other girl prattles on about animals, which connects her with the idealistic agrarian community in the utopian small-town.

After the girls exit the scene, Hinzemann closes his store and offers Shadow a welcoming ride home. He refers to the local taxi company as "Tom," and he calls his own car "Tessie," personalizing the nature of not only the town's

residents, but the objects they keep. His stories about the history of the town and the personalities that live there start to flow immediately, describing both the origin of the Library and a far-fetched story about a deer losing its skin and the ladies of the town knitting it a full-body sweater (Gaiman 250-254). The next day, Chad Mulligan instantly spots Shadow as an outsider. Mulligan takes him to breakfast, welcomes him to town, takes him shopping for supplies, and points him in the direction of a car for sale (Gaiman 263-267). Afterward, Hinzelmann shows up at Shadow's door with a gift basket from the town, along with a passport naming him an official member of the town (Gaiman 273). The town exudes inclusion and closeness; everyone knows everyone else, their histories, and all the details of their lives.

The quaintness of the town soon overtakes Shadow, as he feels Lakeside's goodness, with Gaiman still adding emphasis: "It *was* a good town" (Gaiman 256). Shadow has memories of his mother twice (Gaiman 263, 268), a character rarely mentioned otherwise in the novel. He recalls Laura in life, and runs briefly through her history the way Mulligan and Hinzelmann describe Lakeside residents:

She was in Eagle Point, in the backyard outside her mother's big house.

She stood in the cold, which she did not feel anymore or which she felt all the time, she stood outside the house that her mother had bought in 1989 with the insurance money after Laura's father, Harvey McCabe, had passed on, a heart attack while straining on the can, and she was staring in, her cold hands pressed against the glass, her breath not fogging it, not at all, watching her mother, and her sister and her sister's children and husband in from Texas, home for Christmas. (Gaiman 256-7)

It seems that the collective character of Lakeside values community, inclusion, friendliness, as well as history, nostalgia and memory, which like the utopian place embodied by the small town, express longing for a simpler life by recalling a utopian—and often fictionalized—time.

Gaiman satirizes American culture throughout the novel, using myth to voice his social critique (Blomqvist 11). Here, that critique comes through the residents of Lakeside, who have created a fiction within a fiction. But in doing this, the novel also implies a larger cultural truth about Americans creating a fiction within reality. The Internet community mentioned earlier doesn't merely possess an intellectual curiosity about the novel's geography, they want to travel to these locations. Similarly, Keillor's audience want to know where Lake Wobegon is so they can visit the fictional Minnesota town. Both Lakeside and Wobegon illustrate a desire for a fictional life. Keillor has recorded his readers' reactions to Wobegon stories for years, which have shown a longing for the way

of life depicted in his fiction. Both Gaiman and Keillor regularly answer questions about the locations of their towns. While Gaiman rarely, if ever, answers with more than "Sorry, keep looking," Keillor has attempted to satisfy his audience to some extent:

I used to tell them that it's fiction. "Oh," they said. "Sure." But they were disappointed. People want stories to be true. [...] They say, "That story of yours reminded me of people I knew when I was growing up in Iowa." They want you to tell them, "The character of Darlene is based about 95 percent on my cousin Charlotte. I only changed the hair from auburn to blond and made her more chesty." So I started telling people that the town is in central Minnesota, near Stearns County, up around Holdingford, not far from St. Rosa and Albany and Freeport, northwest of St. Cloud, which is sort of the truth, I guess. (Keillor 12)

This reveals more about the reading public than the works themselves. Not only does Lake Wobegon represent a set of values, but the disappointment people express upon learning that Wobegon doesn't exist reveals a non-fictional pursuit of these values. Unlike the clues in *American Gods*, Keillor's description attempts to make that real for his readers; all the real-world geographical approximates he lists could very easily coincide with a single location on a map.

Keillor offers some insight on how he, whom *National Geographic* described as having "a [voice] that seems precision-engineered to narrate a documentary about glaciers" (Johns 4), could captivate the imaginations of so many people. He states that while many people hold urban areas in contempt, they still find motivation, usually financial, to live there (Keillor 16). His biographer quotes communications professor Jack Bibee:

Even among those of us who were raised in urban environments, we can recall rural roots through perhaps our visits to Grandma's farm in Wisconsin. These fantasies strike a chord with people, even with those who've never been in a truly rural small town. In a way, I'd compare these people with upper-middle-class kids in the sixties who wore blue work shirts and sang work and labor-union songs, but who knew little or nothing of that life-style. The dress and those songs represented a fantasy for them in the same way many of his followers fantasize and romanticize small town life. They really don't know what it's about, but in their minds Keillor made it seem like the life he described in Lake Wobegon. (qtd. in Fedo 137-38)

While Keillor discusses the fantasy, the American people developed it on their own. Fedo writes about perceptions of the past, a nostalgic lens that show America as formerly a decent and respectful place, building these perceptions

off Santa Claus Coca-cola ads in *Life* magazine and the covers of *The Saturday Evening Post* (Fedo 73). These icons and images help Americans construct a past that never existed. Keillor and Fedo offer a handful of explanations for this need to fantasize about small-town America. Keillor suggests, "I'm sure a lot of people think that if they lived in a small town then they would be what they imagine a small-town person is like. A person whose life is somehow simpler than their own" (qtd. in Fedo 195). Fedo believes this desire gives people hope for peace and quiet and a less overwhelming world: Still, we hold out hope. And what we hope for is a future that might somehow be like the past we think we remember. And if we remember well enough, our hoped-for past becomes real to us, and lives on in stories (Fedo 73). The language he uses even evokes the rules of Gaiman's *American Gods* universe, in which beliefs manifest themselves as changes in the physical world.

But *American Gods* also illustrates the limits of the power of faith. Blomqvist describes Gaiman's social critique of the novel as one that mocks the self-referentiality of American culture, the use of self-referencing to prove veracity (Blomqvist 7). In other words, Lakeside's residents, and non-fictional America by extension, never refer outside of the fiction they've created, accepting the scope of what they see as inherently true. Yet Gaiman reveals more and more of the town's dark side until the reader no longer can believe in the ideal American life. Chad Mulligan lends Shadow his time and assistance, but perhaps only to investigate a stranger. Shadow immediately adopts a defensive mindset, but caves in to friendliness due to the cold (Gaiman 263). While Mulligan outwardly offers his good will, he also comments, "Long as you don't need me to drive a getaway car for your bank robbery I'll happily take you wherever you need to go" (Gaiman 265). The town succeeded in calling forth pleasant memories in Shadow's past, but it also dredges up unpleasant ones as well, as Mulligan—probably through Hinzemann's influence—offhandedly and unknowingly accuses Shadow of the crime that sent him to prison. His suspicions continue, even after getting to know Shadow as a friend. When Allison McGovern disappears, Mulligan asks him outright, "You can honestly say you didn't kidnap her, rape her, murder her, anything like that?" (Gaiman 316) This echoes Keillor's sentiments about small-town xenophobia. While any resident of Lakeside could have committed similar crimes—and in fact most kidnappers and rapists know their victims—Lakeside suspects the outsider.

Gaiman completely shatters the idea of closeness of community by the end of the novel. He reveals that the town had no knowledge of the annual sacrifices, and Mulligan seemingly had no knowledge about the circumstances of his father's death, or that his father had also discovered Hinzemann's secret (Gaiman 566). As further evidence that Shadow has destroyed the utopian

illusion, Hinzelmänn calls upon Mulligan's help, relying on the xenophobic suspicion of outsiders:

"You got to arrest him. He said he was going to kill me," said Hinzelmänn, a scared old man in a dusty den. "Chad, I'm pleased you're here."

"No," said Chad Mulligan. "You're not." (Gaiman 569)

When Hinzelmänn attempts to prey on a real-world xenophobia, he shatters the perceptions of the town that he maintained for so long. Ironically, this allows Mulligan to abandon that suspicion of outsiders and turn on Hinzelmänn, the real culprit, rather than Shadow. Shadow's inclusion into the Lakeside community comes at the price of belief in that inclusion, which further emphasizes the dissonance between perception and reality.

The fantastical elements of *American Gods* paint a picture of America that we can't usually see. Most people don't present anything so abstract as their beliefs for transparent examination, yet they often define their identities religiously; they'll attend not only religious rituals, but also social events with others of their religion. Creating a fantasy America where these abstractions become physical helps reduce beliefs to symbols and metaphors, easier to understand and examine, and Gaiman drew Lakeside artfully enough that it reflects the abstract beliefs of readers as well as characters. While at heart, *American Gods* depicts a literal quest to protect the existence of the divine spirits brought to America, they face opponents not commonly thought of as religions. The New Gods, such as Media and Technology, offer modern people new methods of identity, new communities to join, and ideas of communities; whether they exist at a church social, online, or even as an abstract "fandom," they present people with a geographical conceptualization of these group identities. Likewise, Lakeside, Wisconsin uses an abstract geography to turn a belief into a sense of identity; an identity linked to others who share the dream of the utopian small American town and the values it supposedly embodies. It cannot exist anywhere on a realistic map, because it exists as a god in itself, separate from the kobold child-god Hinzelmänn. The town requires belief and worship, and it fights for its own existence the same way Wednesday's clan and the New Gods fight for theirs.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JAKE LA JEUNESSE is an enthusiastic writer of science-fiction and fantasy, but has had more success writing about the works of other authors. He has taught English language and literature in the U.S. and Korea, most recently at the University of Minnesota Duluth, where he takes every opportunity he can to foist his favorite genres on his students. He considers this a personal success after being told in high school that neither fantasy nor science-fiction were worth reading. Living in a house in Duluth with a wife, two cats, and a large yard with stubbornly slow-growing pumpkins, he feels his pursuits must have paid off somehow.