

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Amanda Palmer The Ocean and the Marriage

Amanda Palmer · Thursday, June 20th, 2013

*Cultural Weekly readers will know we're fairly infatuated with [Amanda Palmer](#). We've shared her landmark [TED Talk](#) and her stunning music not *once*, but *twice*.*

We are also devoted fans of Neil Gaiman, whose [commencement address](#) is one of our most-watched videos.

Neil and Amanda are married, and Amanda recently posted this piece on her blog about the intimacies between creative people. "Mind if we share this with our readers?" we asked Amanda. "Totally," she tweeted back.



people often ask me which neil gaiman book they should read first.

i'm not a neil gaiman expert. well, that's not true. i wouldn't call myself an expert. i'm maybe...a professional? an advanced amateur? i know the MAN. really well.

the BOOKS, the COLLECTED WORKS...not as well.

i've met neil's fans.

i cannot compete.

i don't even want to try.

i haven't read the complete "sandman". i've said it before.

to be totally honest, if you're counting EVERYTHING (and mr. dude has published a shit-ton) i haven't read a pretty good percentage of his work.

so: usually when people ask me what to read, i size them up and, depending on their age bracket and demeanor, i usually recommend "the graveyard book" or "smoke and mirrors" (my more favorite of his two short stories collections). i even find myself recommending "american gods" if they look like the correct strain of brainiac, even though the book didn't totally do it for me (sue me). i owe it a re-read. neil keeps telling me he'll give me the secret glossary so the whole thing doesn't fly right past my soul the way i am now convinced it did on first reading (or maybe i just don't like it. that's allowed, i guess).

my friend casey long was once walking with me in the south end and she made that laughing/snorting sound she makes (she sort of sounds like a goose, and i can say this, because she's hot and she knows it. but it sort of sounds like: snortHAHAHAHAHA)

and i said

what?

and she said

you know it's really funny that you married neil gaiman.

and i said

why?
 and she said
 because he writes all this stuff that is about not-real things and science fiction and all that
 and you're like the QUEEN OF FEELINGS.
 snortHAHAHAHAHA.
 hahahahaha.



this is the first time, since the wedding blog, i suppose, i've written a long blog just about neil (or about me and neil, as the case may be).

theoretically, this is a blog about his new book. but actually it's impossible to write a blog about his new book without talking about us.

it's not something i do a lot, talking about our relationship.

we may show each other a disgusting amount of affection on twitter, or do shows together, or plug each others' projects, but our *actual* relationship...the feelings and fevers and discussions and layers of attachment and complication underneath...that's....for us. our close friends follow the intimacies of this strange journey we're on with each other. but it's not for the blog, it's not really for the public. sharing too much about our actual relationship wouldn't be at all fun or wise....we have enough trouble as it is keeping people out of our faces (and i'm doing a terrible job of that lately...people are so up in my face lately that they're practically blocking my vision in every direction).

but that being said, sometimes it's impossible to talk about the art without the story behind it, and then, things get messy.

if i'm going to tell you about neil's book, in the way that only i can, i need to tell you more about us and things.

it'll be fine. as a matter of gracefulness, i'm going to send this to him before i post it.

i don't want any of this making him upset. so...rest assured, by the time this is posted, anything in this has been neil-approved.

the first thing i need to tell you is that neil's new book is absolutely fucking amazing. he's really proud of it, and so am i.

but not just because it's good. it is good.

it's unlike anything i've ever read...it's an explosive combination of dark and light, and it's incredibly intimate.

and the most important thing i can tell you (that maybe neil can't) is that it was hard for him to write, and while he's insanely excited for its release and is showing the rah-rah enthusiasm of a book release....it's also scary for him to put out into the world.

he doesn't usually write things that are so personal.

we're different, him and me.

i write super-personal shit all the time...in this blog, in my songs. and as i've gotten older, i've become less and less veiled and poetic and more and more direct in my writing, allowing my aches and pains and difficulties with the world, the public, my heartaches, and my own history to flow freely off my tongue.

granted: it's not a style that's for everyone.

but those who appreciate it seem to appreciate it deeply. and i come to appreciate those who appreciate it more and more, if you know what i mean.

i've spent a long time facing the consequences for sharing myself the way i do. i've never written fiction...not really. i mine the depths of my own experience and lay them on the page. i am, i suppose, a "non-fiction" songwriter...for the most part. except when i'm not.

neil writes fiction. i interviewed him for my webcast (the AFP Salon) a few weeks ago and we discussed our differences in writing, and a truly bizarre metaphor (but an apt one, i believe), came tumbling out of my mouth.

we are the ingredients of our own art (much like i said in the writers' conference speech: "we can only connect the dots that we can collect"), but the amount of distance from the "reality of our experience" to the "art we create" spans a scale of one to ten on the blender of art-making.

we start off with all these fresh ingredients, recognizable (a heart, a finger, an eyeball, a glass of wine) and we throw them in the art-blender. i only let things mix very slightly. i keep my blender on 2 or 3. you can recognize the component parts: in the final art-soup, the finger might be severed and mangled, but you can peer into your bowl and see that it's a finger, floating there, all human and bloody and finger-y. neil puts his art-blender on 10. you wind up with a fantastic purée, but often you have no fucking idea where the experiences of his life wound up in the mix of his final product. if you see a finger, it's not recognizable as a human one. and that's part of what makes Neil Gaiman (capital N and G) work. and, i'd argue, my choice to dial my art-blender down from a 5 to a 2 or 3 over the past few years, as i write more and more "direct" songs...i don't know, it may be part of what i've needed to do to survive as an artist (or more likely, as a human).

we do these things instinctively, i think.



EXHIBIT A

-art blender on 1-

woody guthrie:

"My mommy told me an' the teacher told me, too,

There's all kinds of work that I can do:

Dry my dishes, sweep my floor,

But if we all work together it won't take very long."

or william mcgonagall, writing about the tay bridge disaster in his famous "worst poem ever"...

"Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silvery Tay!

With your numerous arches and pillars in so grand array,

And your central girders, which seem to the eye

To be almost towering to the sky"

or me:

"When I was six years old my sister Alyson

Asked for a stove for her birthday

A miniature one you could actually cook with

And my mom was nice and she bought one

Alyson needed a reason to bake something

Barged in my room and she grabbed me

She said:

'I made a cake and we're going next door

To sam weinstein's and you're getting married'"

(from "do you swear to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help your black ass")

(and actually, i fictionalized sam weinstein's name. it was actually eric brockett).



EXHIBIT B

-blender on...9?-

impossible to understand things i.e. i don't know...the cocteau twins?

(and mind you, this is just an interpretation of the lyrics on the internet, because ACTUALLY WHO KNOWS):

"You and that land which one dresh are leaving

Hold me onto a mess a plenty

Me and that land should grow, end to a hard part

Meant a Christmas that's me and a friend"

or neutral milk hotel....

"Oh comely, All of your friends are all letting you blow,

Bristling and ugly, bursting with fruits falling out from the holes

Of some pretty, bright, and bubbly friend

You could need to say comforting things in your ear"

and...

-blender on a complete 10-

i searched the internet for a good twenty minutes and all i could come up with was william s. burroughs:

"their photos weather-worn points of polluted water under the trees in the mist shadow of boys by the daybreak in the peony fields cold lost marbles in the room carnations three ampoules of morphine little blue-eyes-twilight grins between his legs yellow fingers blue stars erect boys of sleep have frozen dreams for I am a teenager pass it on"

...but actually, too much of that makes sense.

maybe a perfect ten is just this....jackson pollock's "the pulse of ism":



anyway.

for this new book, neil dialed his blender down a bit, and it was harder for him to do than i think either of us ever would have thought.

and poetically enough, neil wound up in the blender-ingredients of my record, which was inevitable. "trout heart replica" was a song birthed from a strange experience we had together, watching fish getting slaughtered by a frozen lake. (neil also wrote a poem about it, and zoë keating, the cellist, who was there too, still owes us her perspective – all three of us were so stunned by the thing that happened there that we agreed: this moment would wind up in all of our blenders, for sure). and another was birthed straight from an anecdote that neil once told me, a strange visual that was too good not to turn into a component piece that would ultimately become "the bed song". we slither into each others landscapes.

a few years ago, we were in australia – in surrey hills outside of melbourne – and we sweatily slowed down from taking a long jog in the park. we'd been walking in silence for a while. it was nice. i was coming up with something, a tune and words in my head. we were having a rough time....or i was, at least. i was writing a song in my head about the very rough time i was having at the exact moment neil tapped my on the arm and told me he wanted to tell me something. something personal, he said, that he wanted to share with me.

yes. i want. but can it wait a second?, i asked him, i have this song stuck in my head and i want to get it onto the piano at home before it escapes.

we were about 4 blocks from the house. he nodded – but he went black after that.

once i was accessible again, an hour later or more, he'd gone back into his head, and wasn't coming back.

i wasn't going to get the story, i realized.

i pleaded.
 no, he said – the moment's passed.
 i felt selfish and stupid and guilty.
 you can't fix those moments, you can't take them back.
 even if you apologize, you're that asshole.
 i'd put my work before my husband.
 but wait.
 i was also pissed off.
 i felt like i was being punished.
 wasn't this our deal with each other?
 can't things fucking wait while i capture my fleeting ideas?
 I'M AN ARTIST.
 i've sat in restaurants quite happily while you jotted down lines and thoughts that you didn't want to forget.
 goddammit.
 why was this different?
 WHY DON'T YOU LOVE ME?
 here's the thing:
 we're both used to having control over our minds, our time, our creative domains. we've both been solo (in our ways) for so long.
 mixing? it sounds wonderful in theory....but it doesn't always work, and it doesn't always feel kind, and we don't always do it right.
 most of it is context. on that walk, we were already in a rocky place. he took my gesture as a flat-out rejection. i hadn't meant it that way. (weirdly, looking back, i can't say i regret it. it maybe got a whole book out of him.)
 so....shortly after that, with the landscape still rocky, neil went back to the states and i stayed in australia to make "theatre is evil", the infamous kickstarter record.
 it was a hard time for our relationship, but i didn't understand quite how hard it was on neil.
 well, i take that back. i understood, but didn't really want to accept it.
 i was too thoroughly focused on making my record, which i'd been preparing to make for four years.
 it was game time.
 i wanted to do what i always do when making a long studio album.
 this one was technically my fourth massive attempt, after the first two dresden dolls' records (the self-titled and "yes, virginia..." and my first big solo record "who killed amanda palmer").
 for those first three i'd been pretty much single, un-relationshipped and unfettered, and able to pull the blinds down and focus on nothing but tracking, recording, and making...obsessively.
 i had habits and rituals. i'd deliberately chosen australia for our record-making destination because i knew there would be almost no distractions.
 we'd be in a different time zone, i thought giddily, far away from any responsibilities to our normal lives.
 i turned my email off (mostly).
 i told my team and all my friends i was going to be AWOL.
 i focused on the people in my orbit, and the task at hand.
 any friends i had, or any social calls i made, were within blocks instead of thousands of miles.
 i localized my brain.
 this is a great strategy for making a record.
 not great, i found, for a marriage.

neil had a hard time with it.

as i turned into a zombie of a wife, he started working on a short story, something he'd had in the works but wasn't quite certain of. it wasn't a memoir, per se, but a purée on a lower blender speed. some part of what pushed him to work on this (instead of the other four projects he had deadlines for) was to give the story to me, like some kind of olive branch, maybe....the story that never got shared that day in surrey hills.

so there we were: i went into australian-album-making mode, and he took to his writing desk somewhere in america, wherever he happened to plant himself. while i was slaving away in the rehearsal space and the recording studio in melbourne – with the band (and john congleton, our saint-like producer) – all with barely a day off for a month straight, neil started crafting a string of words that was like a long hand reaching out of his heart and across the void that i'd put between us. i didn't understand that, then. i only see it now.

after the smoke cleared a month or so later, we met in texas, where i needed to spend a week to mix the record with john in his dallas studio.

neil came to spend the week with me.

"i accidentally wrote a whole book", he said. "can i read it to you?"

yes. i want, i said. and this time, i heard the whole story....all 50,000 or so words of it, one long night at a time.

i went off to work my days in the studio with john, listening to mixes, fixing vocal parts, adding and subtracting the levels of swirling synthesizer and snipping back-up vocals onto the cutting room floor.

neil would go off to a café or sit on the couch in the room next to the mixing studio, typing the book into his computer (he'd written it longhand, in a journal), chapter by chapter.

at night, he would read me what he'd written. he would stop and start, and his fingers would clickity-clack out the typos and repeated words as he caught them.

if i didn't understand something, or i thought a sentence sounded clunky, i'd speak up...but mostly i just laid there and listened to the story.

it was a long, terrifying story.

it was a beautiful story.

it was a strange story, mixing up reality and non-reality in a way that felt totally mundane.

he read and read, and i usually fell asleep.

in the morning, neil would ask me:

what was the last thing you remember?

the toothbrush, i'd say, they just got the idea about the toothbrush.

or

lettie just showed up with the bucket, i'd say....and a little bit after that.

and he'd start a few pages back, and he'd read me up to the end of a chapter.

and he did this, night after night, until i'd heard the whole book.

i loved it, but i have to admit, i didn't fully understand it – it took some sinking in.

i don't know. maybe i *have* become too literal. that idea terrifies me.

i grew up in an atmosphere with no metaphor, and i can now, as an adult, cast my whole life in a perspective where i see my craving to escape that literalness as if it were the plague.

(it hurts me when i can't connect the dots.)

when he finally got the galleys of the paperback, i could finally read the book in a few sittings, with my own eyes. read it, not hear it.

it all started to make sense. i cried a lot.

and even THEN, i didn't get it.

it wasn't until we were at TED, taking a walk up a little hill in long beach a day or two before my

talk, that i finally understood.

we were chatting about the book, i asked him a question about some of the symbolism in the story....and he stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and looked at me.

you twit,

he said.

and he filled in the blanks, and connected the dots for me.

i'd missed it completely.

i loved him so much in that moment.

and for a second, a split second, i was a neil gaiman fan.

and i was a fan because he'd tricked me, and he'd tricked me without me knowing, and i'd heard rumors that he does that, but i thought i was immune.

and for a second i felt like what it must feel like when i'm on stage playing "the bed song" and someone snaps a picture of neil a few feet away, looking at me.

and for a second i felt what it must feel like to wait in a line for five hours and have him sign a book that changed your life.

to stand not in admiration of the husband writer, the writer who wants his tea but not with the milk hot because then it's just wrong, the writer who won't remember what time he said he'd meet you, the writer who has to sign 12,000 copies of his new book that's a bestseller before it hits the shelves and actually that's really annoying because i'm slightly jealous of his instant success no matter what he does, the writer who gets irritated when i leave too many clothes on the floor and he can't get to the bathroom, the writer who is awkward and has a hard time in party situations when he feels he doesn't understand the social hierarchy, the writer who is not really a writer are you kidding me he's just some snoring heap of flesh beside me, sweating and breathing and grinding his teeth and probably dreaming the kinds of dreams that neil gaimans dream, full of dreams and wishes and magic and wonder and all the shit that can drive me crazy if i'm not in the right mood for it....no...the WRITER. the man who actually takes a pen to a paper and writes things and creates a believable world that sucks you in and spits you out, its logic embedded in your mind forevermore. that. i saw THAT. and i love THAT so much, the fact that he can DO that...and i don't get to see that most of the time. i'm too busy looking at the man. as it should be, i think.

one thing i have learned, being an artist married to another artist:

you cannot separate the self from the relationship and you cannot separate the relationship from the work.

call it poison, or call it the muse.

whatever it is, we've infected each other, and the only cure is more cowbell.

that's the end of my book and marriage review.

i think i'll always look back at this book (the ocean at the end of the lane) and the album (theatre is evil) as a weird matching set.

the first two big, complete projects we undertook within our marriage...and neither could escape their contexts.

i'm not going to tell you any more about the book, the plot, or whatever. just this: you should read it.

from now on, whenever anyone asks me "which book"...it'll likely be this one. it's just that good.

and being that i'm not a fanatically fanatic neil gaiman fanatic, that should mean something....hopefully.

i think it's the best thing i think he's ever written. that i've read, at least.

and i already told you, i'm not a completionist.

the only thing i want to know completely is the man underneath the books....

and that is a life-long journey that i never hope to finish.

if i ever finish knowing neil gaiman (and i don't mean in the biblical sense), stick a dessert fork in me and turn me over, i'm done.

if i ever finish knowing neil gaiman, i get an A+ from god and a diploma from alain de botton's philosophical school of life and every honorary doctorate in america plus a spiritual certification from the buddha himself that i can stop my life's work and just drink mai tais in a jungle mountain hut while the ghosts of john lennon and elliot smith sit beside me, strumming ukuleles.

it's just never going to happen.

and i don't want to know him...not totally.

i want to be surprised.

i want to be in awe.

i want to give him my heart.

and i want to take it away sometimes and give it back again....to see what he'll do.

if it keeps being like this, it's worth it.

i love him so much...and in such a strange way that's always so hard to explain.

and because i do, i hope that you can read what i read, and see what i see...

this:

the twilight place where the man and the writer smash into each other and for a second there's a wrinkle, a schism, where you can jam a stick into the works of the blender and see the whole, floating components of a soul so fragile, so human, and so vulnerable that you must love whatever's in there, unconditionally, because you have no other option.

the ingredients are just too beautiful.

Top image of Neil Gaiman and Amanda Palmer from [tumblr](#).

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