

EN 3553.01 Major Authors  
Spring 2018  
MWF 10:00-10:50  
Mr. Price

## American Gods and American Roadside Attractions

In the popular novel *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman offers the premise that we “create the gods.” He takes the notion from psychologist Carl Gustav Jung that by imagining gods, by bringing them into our culture, we fully create them. They take on an existence beyond that of our imagination. They become real. As a writer of fantasy, Gaiman can make that “becoming real” quite literal, as in the novel his gods wander through the American landscape. For us – and therefore as a literary metaphor – they become “real” in another sense. There are the gods we worship, such as the Odin brought to American shores by Leif Erickson and his contemporaries. There are things we worship, such as the television set that has been the altar and shrine of American households. There is the automobile and the highway.



For this class I want to begin with Gaiman’s depiction of “the gods,” looking a bit at the novel’s central plot, but particularly at his incorporation of “forgotten gods,” figures of folklore, and such elements as flavor American culture. I plan to also look at a couple example American myths, big ones. I am including a couple pieces on the “frontier” and “melting pot” myths: Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* and a John Ford film, “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.” For America’s favorite twentieth century myth, “the business of America is business” (quote attributed to Calvin Coolidge), we will look at Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*. We will also look at America’s mythic “road,” reading some bits of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* along with some poetry and music lyrics which elevate the highway to its kind of divinity.

Mostly, however, **I want to give us the opportunity to explore our own Roadside Attractions. Working with Gaiman’s book is required; beyond that, I want to explore some of the gods and myths of our mutual choosing, so student suggestions and input are more than welcome.**

### Texts:

Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*. ISBN-13: 978-0062080233

Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*. ISBN-13: 978-0486282404

Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. ISBN-13: 978-0553214864

Additional material (poems, songs, and the like) will be posted to myCourses.

### Requirements:

A number of short response papers (about four 1-2 page papers).

One sizable paper (6-10 pages) working with Gaiman’s novel and added primary material of your choosing.

Attendance and class participation is required.

Final exam: a short paper summarizing your response to the class or some particular element of it (2-4 pages).

**[Important: this class is about the book, *not* the TV series.]**