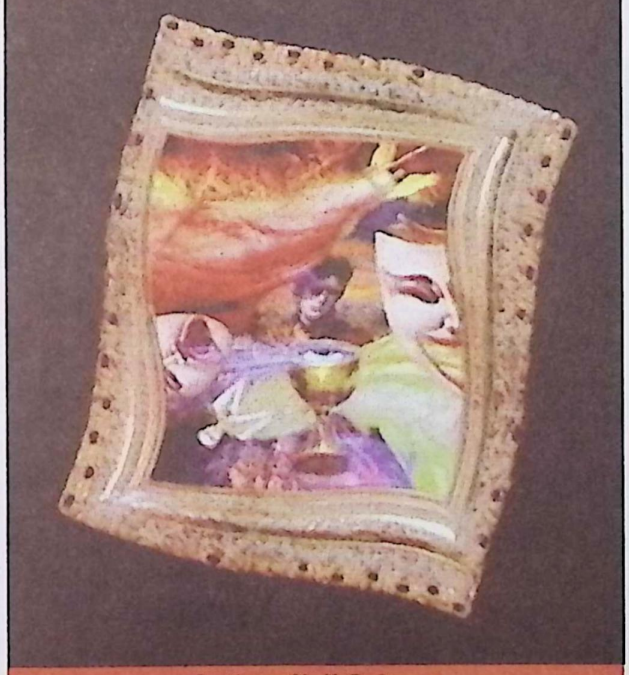
# Smoke And Mirrors: Short Fictions And Illusions



**Author: Neil Gaiman**

**Reviewer: Sameeha Suraiya**

WHETHER it is read to seek a form of escapism, or for the fact that it is a crucial survival tool, fantasies will always be here to delight the imagination. This time around, Neil Gaiman, the British bestselling author and the 'rock star of the literary world' as his fans put it, decides to present a compilation of eye-popping potpourri of tales that will stir you, make you think of the times that have gone by and of times that you would long to set your foot into. This stunning collection binds twenty-two short stories and poems, each as delicious as the other, and each not without the usual Gaiman darkness.

Neil Gaiman surely has made a niche for himself in the fantasy craving minds of millions around the world. He is known for taking his readers out on fantastical realms, and jolting them into an awareness of how it all bears an eerie resemblance to their own realties. *Smoke and Mirrors* do exactly that. Just as magicians use mirrors to deceive and smoke to distort, Gaiman has some great tricks up his sleeve, conjuring and bewildering all the way. He can build a haunting landscape filled with beautiful, broken characters. Magic is inherent in each of the stories. With each turning of the page the reader is cast under a spell all over again. In the Introduction to the collection, Gaiman talks about the history of stage magicians, their use of mirrors to change perceptions. The Introduction will be essential to the reader as it also provides the underlying ideas for each story or poem. Filled with anecdotes it is written in a peer-to-peer style which makes it indispensable and entertaining.

The smoke and mirrors of fantasy, horror, and science fiction hide the reality and while we are watching Gaiman pull the rabbit out of the hat, he is also opening a window to our world. It may not be obvious but sometime later something will click into place and you will realize that odd story about the troll under the bridge and the little boy bartering out his soul was about much more than you had thought at first. In some others, Gaiman shifts the angle of his mirror to retell stories that we are all familiar with. One of these stories that takes the cake is 'Chivalry' which starts thus, "Mrs. Whitaker found the Holy Grail; it was under a fur coat". Pathos and humour are both evident in the stories. After Mrs. Whitaker has bought the chalice from the charity shop, a tall blonde man riding a horse and dressed in shining armour appears on her doorstep. When he says he is on a Grail quest, old Mrs. Whitaker asks, "Have you got any identification?"

Gaiman's work is more about the setting and characters than carefully constructed plot. To him, the humans are more interesting than the monsters. 'Snow, Glass, Apples' is another incredible retelling of the popular fairytale, none other than *The Sleeping Beauty*. Some stunning role reversals and a few chilling characters, the readers are in for a surprise! 'Cold Colours' is a long free verse that depicts a world where we have sold our souls to the devil for technology. Where the London Underground used to be is the pits of hell. 'The Price', another close contender to being the best in the collection is about the black stray cat that wards off evil spirits so the family could sleep safe.

The early stories in Smoke and Mirrors have a hopeful, almost old fashioned quality, a tone that changes as the book progresses. A touch of cynicism sneaks in with 'The Troll Bridge' and grows with each new story. He revels in plot twists and cool characters. Whether they are werewolves or other denizens of our darker world, the characters are all too human. At times, the microscope that Gaiman holds up to human frailty can be a little hard to bear. Also, considering some of the explicit themes tackled, a PG version of this book would be quite handy!

In *Smoke And Mirrors: Short Fictions And Illusions* Neil Gaiman shows us just what can be done by a master illusionist who knows how to use the tools of his trade to perfection. If you haven't yet taken a bite out of Gaiman's works, wait no more. You are surely missing out!