

## Anise STRONG A Dream of Augustus: Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* and Comic Mythology

In the *Sandman* comic book series, Neil Gaiman used the medium of comic books to tell introspective myths and reinterpretations of history rather than superhero stories. The 1988-1996 DC Comics series, written by Gaiman and illustrated by a variety of talented artists, received extensive critical acclaim; it paved the way for many other historically-based comic series like *1602* and *Promethea*. In his focus on the past, Gaiman frequently drew upon the classical world for inspiration. One episode tells the story of Orpheus, while another imagines the muse Calliope trapped in a modern dungeon by an author desperate for inspiration. Gaiman's most intriguing vision of antiquity is *Sandman* #30, "August," in which an elderly Emperor Augustus explores Rome for a day, faces personal nightmares, and explains his foreign policy to a dwarf actor.

Unlike many comic interpretations of the ancient world, "August" is obviously carefully researched both in its visual depiction of Rome and its plot. The artists Bryan Talbot and Stan Woch visualize the Forum of Augustus as an elegant plaza dominated by "the temple of Avenging Mars." The Forum itself is a lively market featuring authentically Roman products and animals like squash and geese. While the inked portraits of various characters like Augustus and Livia owe as much to the actors who portrayed them in the BBC series *I Claudius* as to the Prima Porta Augustus, their costumes are plausible and vivid. "August" mainly focuses on the life and dreams of the Emperor, but it also makes passing references to the emancipation of slaves, ancient theater, the nature of religion, and different types of Roman food. These vivid glimpses of Roman culture, often lasting no more than a panel, allow the audience to compare ancient and modern society.

Although the story is told through the "low-culture" medium of a comic book, "August" presents a sophisticated meditation on the nature of government and empire. It suggests answers to the fundamental questions of the Augustan Age: how did Octavian succeed? How did the emperor cult evolve? Why did Augustus command Tiberius to cease Imperial expansion? While some of Gaiman's explanations may seem implausible or overly simplistic, his story piques the curiosity of readers who have little familiarity with the complex problems of Roman history. Like all compelling myths, "August" is dangerous in that it presents its narrative as a secret truth unknown to conventional scholarship. Gaiman's reinterpretation of the Augustan Age, however, suggests an engagement with Roman history that both reaches out to a new audience and perhaps even offers some lessons for more traditional modes of thought about the ancient world.