

Neil Gaiman's Likely Stories: strange, wonderful, unmissable TV

We take a spoiler-free look at Sky Arts' terrific quartet of Neil Gaiman short stories, starting on Thursday the 26th at 9pm...



Neil Gaiman's success gives me faith in the world. He's a great writer, and he's well known because of that fact. I think it springs from the particular way he has of looking at humanity, and passing along his insights to us - with wit, warmth, and not a small bath of uncomfortable self-realisation topped with the occasional cold shower of fear. If that sounds like a lot for a writer to accomplish, well, that's why he's so good, and why he should be able to make a living with his words. The fact that he does makes me feel better about us all.

The big challenge of *Likely Stories*, therefore, is to capture Gaiman's appeal and put it across without losing any one of those elements. I think

the first two episodes do exactly that, which is no small feat. Adapted from Gaiman's short stories, *Foreign Parts* and *Feeders And Eaters* have a cohesive quality, aiming for a layered, building feeling, applying elements of humour, empathy, and horror in turn.

Foreign Parts is the story of Simon Powers (George MacKay), a young man who hasn't been in a relationship for years and is pretty happy with that as long as he gets to stay at home and masturbate every night. That's his lifestyle and he's comfortable with it. But when he starts to suffer from agonising genital pain... that's all I'm going to say about the plot, because that should be enough to let you know that this isn't safe ground we're on in terms of television viewing. Also, why spoil it? One of the delights of Gaiman's work is in not knowing what's going to happen next.



Simon Powers isn't very likeable but he is very relatable. He's in a slump. But the more we watch him, the more we start to see how strange people can be, with their slumps and their aches and pains, and in the way the body and mind can either work together or separately. The bizarre yet mundane nature of appointments with doctors comes through, as does the weirdness of being seen as a lump of flesh that needs to be fixed. Are you the body, or are you in the body somewhere? Are you a separate mind, or is

the illness separate? Or is the illness you?

Feeders And Eaters starts off in the company of Joyce (Montserrat Lombard), a warm, straight-to-camera kind of character who is heavily pregnant and works at an all-night cafe. One night her brother's old school friend, the once gorgeous Eddie (Tom Hughes) turns up and starts to tell her a story about his life, and his affection for an old lady who has taught him where to find all sorts of interesting things to eat. Again, we're heading into unpleasant territory, and the less you know in advance, the better - because then you can come with an open mind to the big questions that the story brings to you. Beyond the scary aspects, beyond the strange, there's a point about human relationships to do with how we sustain and nurture each other, and sometimes take the best of each other without giving in return.

What I really like about the approach to adapting Gaiman's work is that a unified vision is very much in evidence from the directors, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard. The camera has a slow, gentle crawl around the rooms that the characters inhabit, giving an delicately grimy picture of their lives. There are small details everywhere, from the used tissues on Simon's bed to the bulging shelves in the kitchen where Joyce works. Everything feels real and also revealing. There are few moments that would make the viewer jump, but that's not really what these stories are about anyway. The horror comes from the slow drip-feed of information to an unpleasant, yet strangely satisfying, conclusion.



The music also really helps to establish and keep that Gaiman tone in place. Written by Jarvis Cocker, it's a creeping lullaby in the background most of the time that sometimes comes to the forefront for a few moments, and fits the mood perfectly. The same can be said of the choice to make Gaiman himself part of the action. He appears in both of these first episodes as himself, briefly, talking on TV screens or into headphones to an imaginary interviewer. I liked his appearances; they added to the textured, slightly self-knowing feeling. Nobody's trying to pretend these aren't his stories, or that his authorship isn't a huge part of the draw here.

There's also a strong sense of the importance of narrative. The first episode starts with a voiceover and the second episode allows the main character to break the fourth wall and address us directly, but beyond that there's also a hint of something that's always intrigued me with Gaiman's writing, and that's how stories are all connected. They weave in and out of each other, and whether we're experiencing a comedy or a tragedy depends entirely on whose point of view you tell it from. So other characters take over the narrative thread at times - we see a doctor's unhappy marriage as a reflection of Simon's illness, and Eddie's desire to talk at the all-night cafe takes over Joyce's life for a few minutes. The way these all fit together is wonderful.

Two comparisons came to mind as I was watching *Likely Stories*. The opening credits, and the slow unveiling of the strangeness lurking within brought to mind *Roald Dahl's Tales Of The Unexpected*, which did a great job in the late 1970s/early 1980s of putting across the appeal of Dahl's adult twisty tales to a television audience. After that, I thought of *Black Mirror* in the use of music and setup. But where *Black Mirror* makes us reflect upon politics and society, *Likely Stories* makes us take a closer look at the self. These stories are about what it's like to be a mind in a body, a person within a personality. You find yourself thinking about what a weird and messy business being alive is.

Although it has to be said that being alive, with its terrors and strangeness, isn't a bad lot. For a start, you get to watch television this good every once in a while.

The first two episodes of Neil Gaiman's Likely Stories will be shown on Sky Arts on Thursday 26th May at 9pm.