It's quite a resonant image, those distant, only partially visible solidities, now and again drowned in dreams —temporarily lost in them. Neil Gaiman plays with it elegantly in the writing; and Shawn McManus (as do Colleen Doran, Bryan Talbot, and Stan Woch) plays with it equally elegantly in the drawings.

THE SANDMAN is one of the most popular comics of our day—and popular with the oddest lot of people. We're all used to the idea of comic books resonating with elemental mythic patterns: the late lamented Superman, the currently thriving Batman, and Wonder Woman. But, when all is said and done, as such myths go, they're pretty brutal things. THE SANDMAN, under the writerly direction of Gaiman, does its work delicately, probing in areas where, often, we might not even have suspected anything mythical lay. It explores always with an ironic cast to the lips. The eyes are narrowed. The approach is always skewed.

Again and again, what it discovers shocks, chills, catches at the heart. It sends us to strange places, to the most distant shores of the imaginative, the mystical, to explore the stuff that can only be figured in dreams...

To talk about these tales in too much more detail, let me warn you, I will have to talk about the plot—what happens in them. Those of you who haven't read them before might better go on and read them now. The analysis that follows will be more fun for a reader already familiar with them. And some of that fun might be, for some of you, spoiled by the odd, upcoming revelation.

Gaiman's **A Game of You**—this particular Sandman series—begins in the snow: need we note that for the comics colorist, depicting snow requires the minimum amount of ink? Take a look: Color there is all but restricted to the shading over the caption boxes. (And that color says: look at the *language* in this tale...)

What we have in the opening three pages is two streams of information, all but unconnected, one verbal, one visual. The visual one, by the bottom of the first page, has become shocking: a desiccated corpse!

At the same time the words provide a strangely distanced, even elegant, colloquy between speakers named Prinado and Luz, about the Cuckoo, the Princess, and the Tantoblin—carrying us right past that shock, into the second page, toward a spot of black: a hole in the snow—a hole, a blackness, that grows larger and larger, till, by the bottom of page three, it engulfs the reader, filling its panel.

Need we note that an all-black panel requires the *most* ink possible from the comics inker? (The only color there is restricted to the shading over the caption boxes: look at the language.). But here two eyes blink in that darkness, to look, indeed, in the direction of the words...

What's happening in this three-page prologue is that we are given two simultaneous worlds, as it were, both highly subjective, one represented by words, one represented by pictures. Both are highly formalized—the one represented by words through the deeply conventionalized diction associated with high fantasy, the one represented by pictures through the formal progression from white to black. Both contain violences.

The shocks in one information stream—the starkly drawn ribs of the corpse at the bottom of page one, the verbal shock of "The Tantoblin will not come. I felt him die. The Black Guard found him in the night," even as they fall within the same panel—jar one another; as we move our attention back and forth between one stream and the other, there is impingement, distortion, and interaction that all but obliterates the distinctions the formalities set in place. And that—in case you're wondering—in spite of the abstract language, is a description of what is going to go on through the rest of **A Game of You.**

It's our opening example of how the game will be played:

Two worlds—and elements from each will constantly impinge, cross over, to shock and distort what goes on in the other.

Also, we're going to get, just incidentally, a tale that covers just about the range of what comics can do—from panels almost pure white to panels almost pure black.

The way to become really frustrated with **A Game of You** is, however, to read one world as reality, the world of Barbie, Wanda, Hazel and Foxglove, and one world as fantasy: the world of Prinado, Luz, Wilkinson, and the Cuckoo. If you try to read one as a simple allegory for the other—if you look in one for a extensional explanation of the other—you will not be a happy camper. Clive Barker, in his introduction to **The Doll's House**, noted that Gaiman's tales tend to take place not in a world where fantasy invades the real, but rather in what Barker called a "far more delirious" form: "In these narratives, the whole world is haunted and mysterious. There is no solid status quo, only a series of relative realities, personal to each of the characters, any and all of which are frail, and subject to eruptions from other states and conditions." The visual shock that comes as the reader leaves page three of **A Game of You** to turn to page four—the transition from the snow-and-shadow world of the Land, where death is an ugly splatter of ink at the bottom of the page in the progression from white to black, to the sheer *messiness* of Barbie's room (a chaos of clothing and wall photos and rumpled bedding wholly organized around the sexuality of Barbie's buns, incidentally) immediately suggests this *is* going to be a two-tiered fantasy, of the real and the imagined.

But hold on to Barker's point. He's been there before...

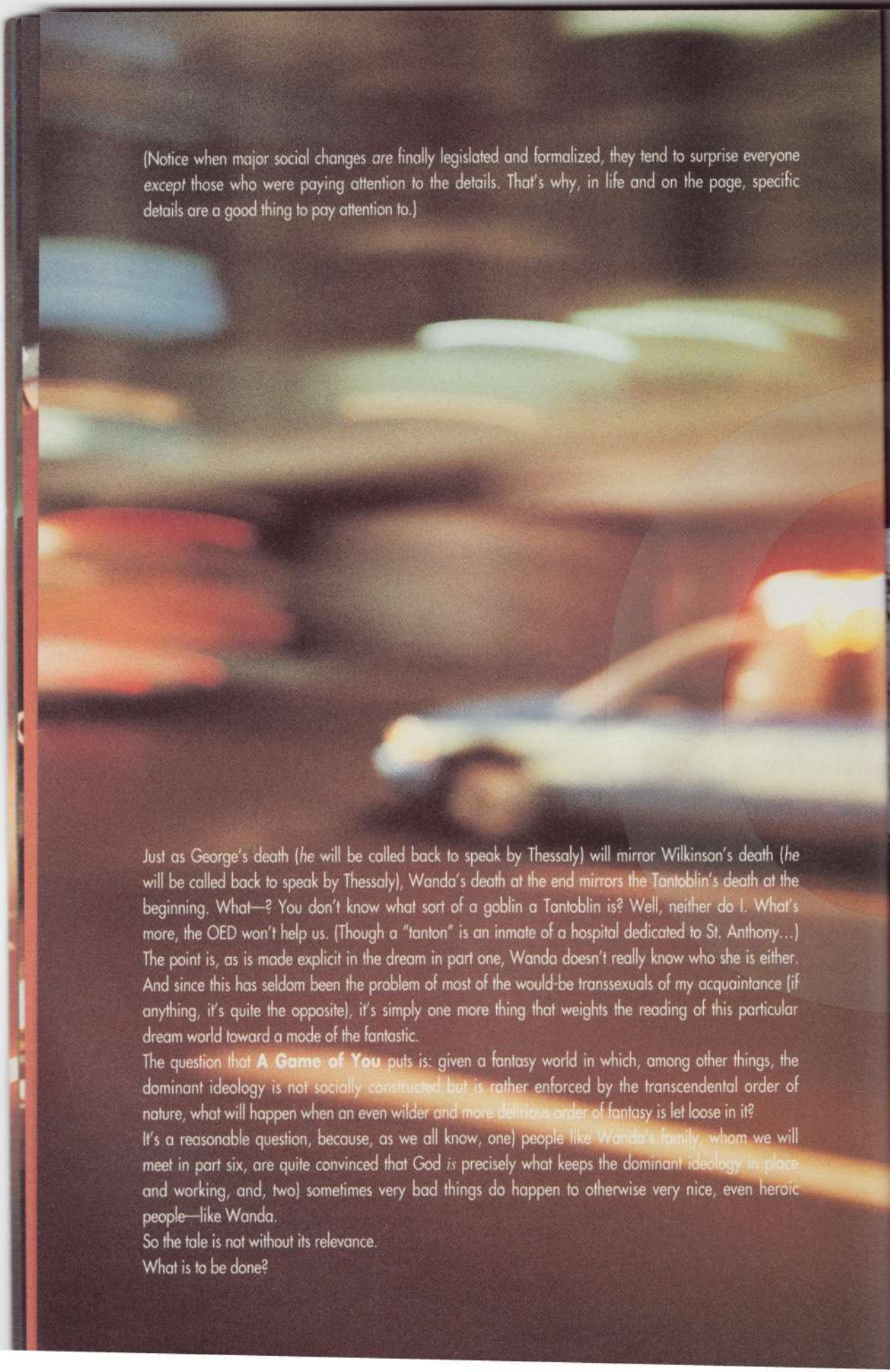
Consider: in the world that we—certainly—*start* to read as real, the sullen top-floor neighbor harbors a horde of malignant crows inside his rib cage; the quiet girl upstairs with the oversized glasses who drinks soy milk is hundreds of years old; here, it turns out, the moon *cares* whether or not you have a "y" chromosome, and punishes you accordingly. No, *this* is a fantasy world, too.

The world of THE SANDMAN finally takes its power from its intense saturation of irony. Here, the Lord of all Dream has a smart-alec crow for a sidekick called Matthew who calls his boss "boss." It's a world where a stuffed toy animal can scare an old homeless woman into a near heart attack—or betray you to the point of death. In THE SANDMAN a mourner draws the threads of a veil on her face in a restroom with an eyebrow pencil—and, because it's a comic book, we, the readers, can't tell the difference between it and a "real" veil—but all the characters can and comment on it constantly. ("What's that on your face?") It's a world where a "Wundabud" commercial (that's a brand of cotton swab) plays through a storm that all but destroys a neighborhood—in short, it's a world almost as heavily laced with ironies as our own.

The key to this fantasy is Wanda's troubling death (alongside the death of the single black character in the tale)-which drew a whole host of very concerned ideological criticism, when readers first encountered it in issue #36, part five. (And, I confess, Hazel's ignorance of the mechanics of female reproduction seemed to me something one would be more likely to find in the suburban heartland, even at the center on Barbie's Florida childhood—rather than on the third floor of a Lower East Side tenement. But the same reading applies...) Wanda's initial biological sex is of the same visual status as the aforementioned ironic black mourner's veil at the final Kansas funeral: the biologically naive (Hazel), as well as the forces of religion (Thessaly) and the family (Alvin's) now and again speak about it. But we, the readers, just can't *see* it. (The veil is simply *erased* at the end...) And because the comics are a fundamentally visual medium, that palpable invisibility may finally be the strongest statement the story has to make about the topic to the common (comics) reader. It seems to me, as I was saying, that the key to this particular fantasy world is precisely that it *is* a fantasy world where the natural forces, stated and unstated, whether of myth or of chance, *enforce* the dominant ideology we've got around us today, no matter what. (The dominant ideology is the collection of rules and regulations that includes, among many other things, the one that says that in popular narratives, like the *Dirty Harry* films, say, all the members of oppressed groups, blacks, women, Asians, gays, or what have you, have to be killed off at the end, no matter how good and noble they are—so that we can feel sorry for them, then forget about them. The dominant ideology is what's challenged by, among many other things, something like the ACT-UP slogan: "We're here. We're queer. We *won't* go way! Get used to us!") Making the supernatural forces in the tale the enforcers of the dominant ideology is what makes it a fantasy—and a rather nasty one at that.

And it remains just a nasty fantasy unless, in our reading of it, we can find some irony, something that subverts it, something that resists that fantasy, an array of details that turns the simple acceptance of that ideology into a problem—problematizes it, in Lit. Crit.-ese. But, as we said, almost everything in THE SANDMAN has its richness, its ironic spin. I'll mention a couple. But look for more. They're there. Taking the time to tease such subtleties out (and the problem with political readings is precisely that the large and general tend to overwhelm the subtle and specific) makes us stronger readers in the end, not because it makes us *excuse* such political patterns, but because we have to become even *more* sensitive to them, if we are to see how they are affected *by* the subtleties (which are, themselves, just as political).

In life, it will be the subtleties that start to wear away at the major social patterns of oppression, after all. It's the range of subtle subversions that set them up for the big changes that come by as better legislation, economic freedoms, and their material like.

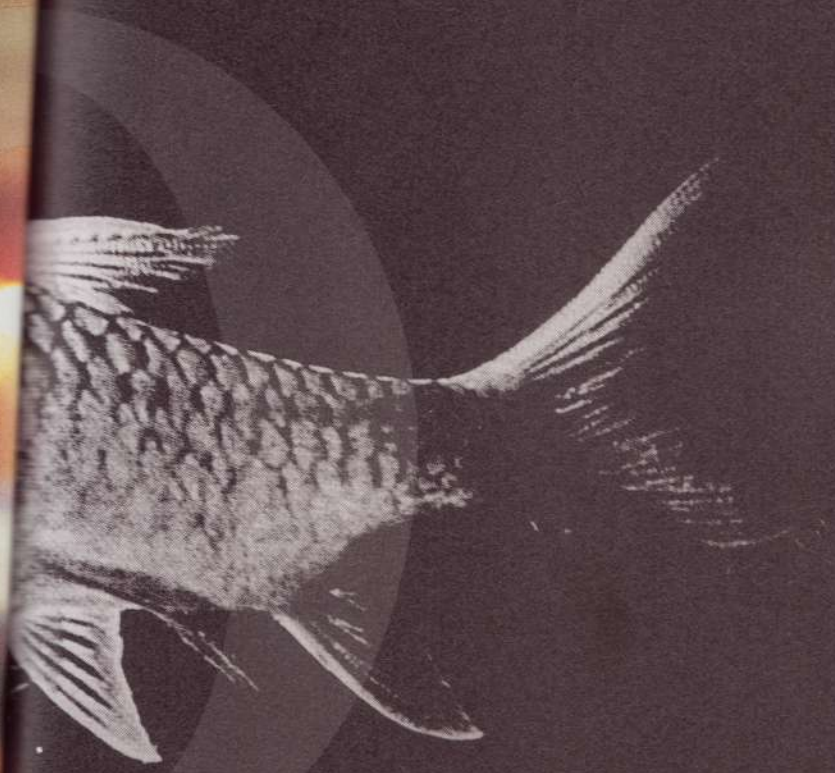


(Notice when major social changes *are* finally legislated and formalized, they tend to surprise everyone *except* those who were paying attention to the details. That's why, in life and on the page, specific details are a good thing to pay attention to.)

Just as George's death (*he* will be called back to speak by Thessaly) will mirror Wilkinson's death (*he* will be called back to speak by Thessaly), Wanda's death at the end mirrors the Tantoblin's death at the beginning. What—? You don't know what sort of a goblin a Tantoblin is? Well, neither do I. What's more, the OED won't help us. (Though a "tanton" is an inmate of a hospital dedicated to St. Anthony…)
The point is, as is made explicit in the dream in part one, Wanda doesn't really know who she is either. And since this has seldom been the problem of most of the would-be transsexuals of my acquaintance (if anything, it's quite the opposite), it's simply one more thing that weights the reading of this particular dream world toward a mode of the fantastic.
The question that **A Game of You** puts is: given a fantasy world in which, among other things, the dominant ideology is not socially constructed but is rather enforced by the transcendental order of nature, what will happen when an even wilder and more delirious order of fantasy is let loose in it?
It's a reasonable question, because, as we all know, one) people like Wanda's family, whom we will meet in part six, are quite convinced that God *is* precisely what keeps the dominant ideology in place and working, and, two) sometimes very bad things do happen to otherwise very nice, even heroic people—like Wanda.
So the tale is not without its relevance.
What is to be done?

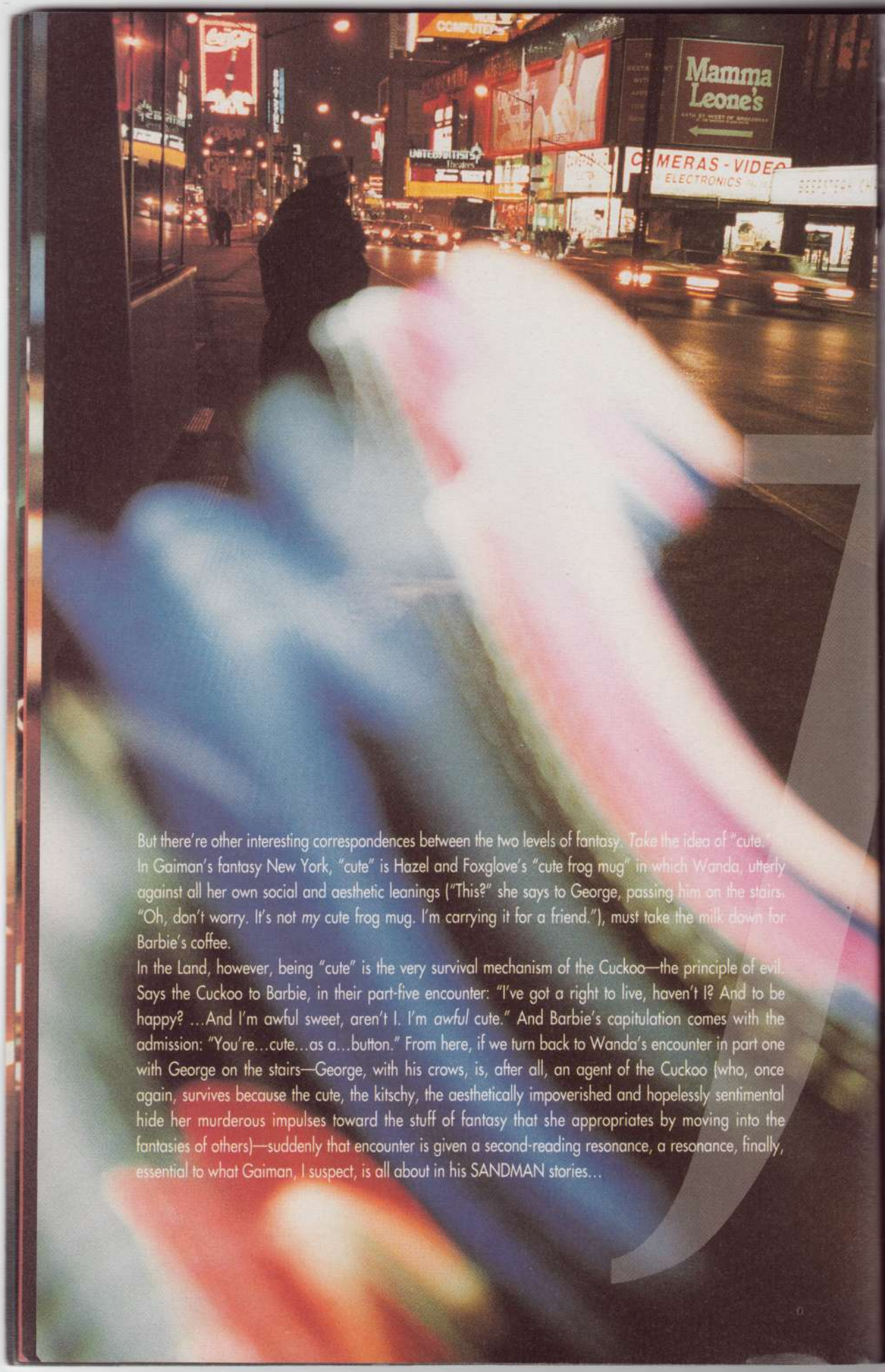
For one, Barbie will be restricted to a nominal rebellion—which, perhaps, doesn't seem like much. The first rain will obliterate it, and likely no one in Kansas will ever know. But the idea of the nominal (in name only, having to do with names) is a big factor in **A Game of You.** While a name is always something *you* can choose, it only functions socially as long as I call you by it. (And try calling people names that they *don't* choose to be called by, if you want to see some real social unrest.) The power to choose one's own name is finally the major playing piece in the power game with which the story closes.

But let's look for a moment at another instance of parental naming in the story. Here's Wilkinson on *his* family's naming practices, during the journey through the Land, in part four:



I loved bein' a kid. I was one of seventeen children. We were all named Wilkinson—I suppose it was roughest on the girls, but we all got used to it in the end. I blame the parents, really... I would have liked to've bin an only child. That way when someone shouts Wilkinson, you know if it's you or not. Mustn't grumble. Our parents were the salt of the earth. Lovely people. It was just when they found a name they liked, they stuck with it.

In short, the Land is a fantasy world where there *is* no necessary distinction between male and female names for children—but, apparently, parents are just as sticky about preserving the name they pick as Wanda's parents turn out to be in part six. What we have here is an interesting satirical commentary, given in advance, on the closing moves of the game. (We won't even speculate on what prompted Barbie's parents to name *her*... And when she got together with her disastrous ex-boyfriend Ken, wasn't that just *too* cute...) This is not to say that life in the Land is all skittles and Courvoisier. The god the Land is sacred to is "Murphy," which, before we find out *his* real name, suggests nothing so much as the Murphy of Murphy's Law—that most pessimistic of observations on the Human Condition: "Anything that possibly *can* go wrong, will."



But there're other interesting correspondences between the two levels of fantasy. Take the idea of "cute." In Gaiman's fantasy New York, "cute" is Hazel and Foxglove's "cute frog mug" in which Wanda, utterly against all her own social and aesthetic leanings ("This?" she says to George, passing him on the stairs. "Oh, don't worry. It's not *my* cute frog mug. I'm carrying it for a friend."), must take the milk down for Barbie's coffee.

In the Land, however, being "cute" is the very survival mechanism of the Cuckoo—the principle of evil. Says the Cuckoo to Barbie, in their part-five encounter: "I've got a right to live, haven't I? And to be happy? ...And I'm awful sweet, aren't I. I'm *awful* cute." And Barbie's capitulation comes with the admission: "You're...cute...as a...button." From here, if we turn back to Wanda's encounter in part one with George on the stairs—George, with his crows, is, after all, an agent of the Cuckoo (who, once again, survives because the cute, the kitschy, the aesthetically impoverished and hopelessly sentimental hide her murderous impulses toward the stuff of fantasy that she appropriates by moving into the fantasies of others)—suddenly that encounter is given a second-reading resonance, a resonance, finally, essential to what Gaiman, I suspect, is all about in his SANDMAN stories...

For all we can get out of a careful rereading of Gaiman, the immediate pleasures of these stories to the first-time reader are many. It's the rare reader who does not respond to Gaiman's imaginative breadth, coupled with his simple accuracy of observation. The guarded caring with which his characters live with one another ("Don't take too much," Hazel warns Wanda, giving her the milk for Barbie's coffee) is comic and winning—and, of course, wholly recognizable. But this is a largely linear, melodic pleasure. There is also, however, a harmonic pleasure that accrues as detail resonates with detail. It is a pleasure that increases with careful, multiple readings. It is what makes these stories, in a word, art.

Gaiman's delirious world is held together always by relationships. Nor is his a world of relationships between fixed, solid egos, sure of them-"selves" and clear in their "identity." Each of those relationships, no matter how positive, always has its moment of real anxiety—what relationship doesn't? And all of Gaiman's selves are split, if not deliriously shattered. What he has to say about those relationships is what makes him an artist particularly interesting to our time. The Game of You is, after all, not the Game of I. (That's the "me-first" game—most of us know it only too well—where what I want is wholly above all other considerations and has to be pursued at any cost to anyone else.) It seems to me what Gaiman is saying, with the help of the artists who draw the pictures, is that, in the rich, complex, and socially constructed world around us, you cannot ultimately be what—or who—you want to be without some support from me. Wanda supports Barbie at the beginning of the story. At the end of the story, even though posthumously, Barbie supports Wanda. The element of death, however, makes it a much darker tale than that simple and rather Pollyanna reduction presupposes.

We're not talking simple altruism, here. We're talking about something much deeper, that allows individuals to exist; we're talking about the hidden, shifting, undersea reefs on which every individual stands—rocks that so rarely show clear above the tides of illusion and desire. That's the support we mean, and it always begins in something outside the self.

Gaiman is also saying that, because of death—even a fantasy death that allows articulation and information to come from beyond its borders, when magicked up by a centuries-old moon witch—no one can win the Game of I. Wanda cannot win it. Barbie cannot win it. (Morpheus tells Thessaly that, for all her longevity, she cannot win it either: take a look at the various "immortals'" deaths in Gaiman's more recent SANDMAN series, "Brief Lives...") Nor will I. Nor will you. (Also take a look at Gaiman's moving meditation on the last days of an artist, in his powerful work with Dave McKean, **Signal to Noise.**) Thus, for Gaiman, **A Game of You** is the only game worth playing—because it is the only game where, in the end, there's any chance of coming out ahead.

Even if one wins only by a name written on a stone that will wash away with the next shower, at least that allows something to persist in memory—and thus may lead to something else. But without even the name preserved momentarily in the real world by real action (and here, as I hope we can see, "real" is not the catch-all antonym for fantasy but rather a specific synonym for the political—as it is whenever it's used intelligently), there's no hope at all. Gaiman shows us the most marginal win possible in **A Game of You.**

But it's still won by moments, however small, of real social bravery. And that's what, at the end of **A Game of You,** Gaiman portrays. Thus, in a fantasy world whose tragedies are not real (i.e., not political) but are, nevertheless through that fantasy, deeply recognizable (and readable in any number of real ways), he has given us a triumph.

Amherst
January 17th, 1993