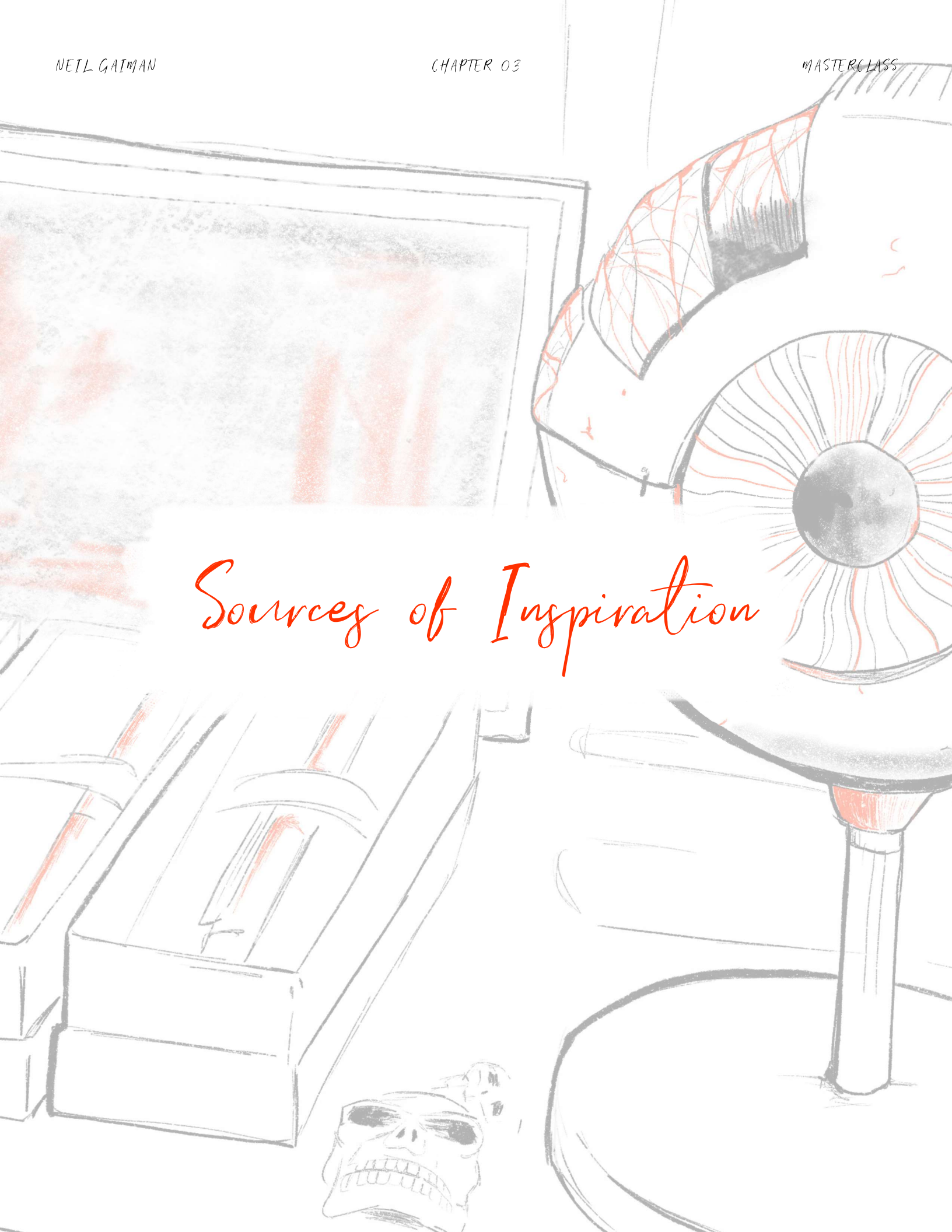


Sources of Inspiration



CHAPTER 03

Sources of Inspiration

“Remember that your influences are all sorts of things. And some of them are going to take you by surprise. But the most important thing that you can do is open yourself to everything.”

An **allusion** is a short reference to another story, usually through the use of well-known elements. For example, you can quickly reference *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by mentioning a white rabbit. Allusions generate interest because they set a context for the story you’re reading while hinting at the similarities or differences in the two works. Neil uses allusions often, and they are just as wide-ranging as his storytelling interests, referencing Egyptian and Greek mythology, Victorian fairy tales, Beowulf and Norse mythology, Shakespeare, Tolkien, and modern cinema, to name a few. In this chapter, Neil mentions his admiration for the following authors, and sometimes alludes to them in his own work:

James Branch Cabell: American author who wrote fantasy and comedy in the 1920s and ’30s. His most enduring work, *Jurgen: A Comedy of Justice* (1919), tells the story of pawnbroker-poet Jurgen who journeys through various fantasy worlds to find justice while becoming more and more disillusioned. It is a parody of romance tales and courtly love.

Edward Plunkett, Lord Dunsany: A prolific Anglo-Irish fantasy author. His novel, *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* (1924), established some of the most central themes of fantasy writing in the twentieth century: elves, witches, trolls, hidden worlds with different time streams, and a preoccupation with nature and powerful magic. In Neil’s *Stardust*, Tristan moves beyond “the fields we know”—a phrase that alludes to *Elfland’s Daughter*.

Ursula K. Le Guin: American author who wrote the Earthsea Cycle (1968–2001), which is comprised of six books and numerous short stories, and which tells tales of the fictional fantasy world of Earthsea. LeGuin’s work centers on themes of gender, power, responsibility, the natural world, and death. Her novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), was one of the first fantasy novels to influence Neil. In [an article](#) he wrote for the Library of America, he said that “the trilogy made me look at the world in a new way, imbued everything with a magic that was so much deeper than the magic I’d encountered before then. This was a magic of words, a magic of true speaking.”

P. L. Travers: British author who wrote *Mary Poppins* (1934) and a whole series of books inspired by it (even a cookbook). If you've only seen the Disney movie, it's worth checking out the novels, which are darker and more fantastical. Mary is constantly looking in mirrors to make sure she's real; she can talk to animals; and at one point even dances among the stars. For children, she is the guardian to a world of frightening magic.

Neil suggests many tools for approaching an old story from a new angle.

Change point of view: Choose an alternate character to retell a familiar story. In the novel *Foe* (1986), J.M. Coetzee narrates the tale of Robinson Crusoe from the point of view of Susan Barton, a castaway who washed up on the island in the middle of Crusoe's adventures.

Modernize themes: A lot of classic tales get a gender-based upgrade, where an author will delve into a female character's head from a more modern perspective. Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* (2005) revisits Homer's *Odyssey* through the eyes of Penelope and her chorus of twelve maids.

Switch a story element: This could mean taking a story to a new location—*Cinder* (2012) by Marissa Meyer re-imagines Cinderella as a cyborg in Beijing—or changing the type of story—In *The Snow Queen* (1980), Joan D. Vinge turns Hans Christian Andersen's classic tale into a space opera.

Make it yours: Take a familiar story and add in a bit of your own background or experience. Mario Puzo did this with panache in *The Godfather* (1969), bringing elements of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* to the world he knew well: Italian immigrants in post-war America.

For a re-envisioning of popular fairy tales, check out some of the following titles. (Titles with asterisks contain stories by Neil.)

- *Red as Blood* (1983) by Tanith Lee
- *Tales of Wonder* (1987) by Jane Yolen
- *Snow White, Blood Red* (1993) by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (ed.)*
- *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1999) by Emma Donoghue
- *The Wilful Eye* (2011) edited by Nan McNab (ed.)
- *Happily Ever After* (2011) by John Klima (ed.)*
- *Clockwork Fairy Tales: A Collection of Steampunk Fables* (2013) by Stephen L. Antczak (ed.)
- *Unnatural Creatures* (2013) by Neil Gaiman (ed.)*
- *Beyond the Woods* (2016) by Paula Guran (ed.)*
- *The Starlit Wood* (2016) by Dominik Parisien and Navah Wolfe (ed.)
- *The Djinn Falls in Love and Other Stories* (2017) by Mahvesh Murad and Jared Shurin (ed.)*

WRITING EXERCISE

Choose a folk tale or fairy tale that you know well. Select one of the characters from the story for the following exercise and write a few pages about them, using one of the following prompts:

- Pretend you're a therapist treating the character. Write a scene in which you discuss the character's life and problems, then arrive at a diagnosis.
- Write a newspaper article describing the events of the story. For example, *Snow White—Woman Hiding in Woods for Ten Years Found by Wealthy Hiker*. Then write a story for that headline using journalistic objectivity.
- Have your character explain their actions to a jury.

“I think it’s really important for a writer to have a compost heap. Everything you read, things that you write, things that you listen to, people you encounter, they can all go on the compost heap. And they will rot down. And out of them grow beautiful stories.”

In *Writing Down the Bones* (1986), author Natalie Goldberg argues that “it takes a while for our experience to sift through our consciousness” and that our senses “need the richness of sifting” in order that we can “see the rich garden we have inside us and use that for writing.” She coined the term “composting” to describe this process of allowing the unconscious and

conscious minds to process experience before sharing or re-inventing it in writing. Many writers practice composting in one form or another—usually by collecting various things that inspire them and assembling them in a journal, folder, or online file. Rereading your compost heap can not only give you time to process difficult subjects, it can trigger fresh inspiration and help you make creative leaps by linking up seemingly disparate elements.

WRITING EXERCISE

In your journal, begin creating a compost heap. Title a page “Compost Heap” and write down the things that have captured your attention in the past week or month. These may become the source motivators of your writing, maybe of your career. Any writing project is an undertaking, and novels in particular, because they take so long to write, will require a sustained interest, so be sure to fill this page with your truth: What interests you? This can be anything: a word, a movie, a person, an event, so long as it inspired you. It can be subjects (cactus species, muscle cars, a voyage to Mars) or people/types of people (therapists, spies, your Aunt Germaine). Try to include things from other arts—for example, foods, music, or movies. In the beginning, make a practice of sitting down at least once a day to note things that interest you.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Create a specialized *subset* of your compost heap, which is a lexicon devoted exclusively to your novel. For example, if you're writing about Greenland, gather all the words you can about snow, ice, flora and fauna, geologic formations, or weather occurrences. Research history and arts and science. Write down all of the words you love and that you think could go into your novel.

“You get ideas from two things coming together. You get ideas from things that you have seen and thought and known about and then something else that you’ve seen and thought and known about, and the realization that you can just collide those things.”

One of the big questions Neil raises in this chapter is the origin of ideas and inspiration. Neil posits that ideas come from **confluence**, or the peculiar combinations of thoughts and experiences that are unique to you. Many writers would agree. Others have found ideas in dreams (Stephen King and Stephanie Meyer), in sudden flashes of inspiration (J.K. Rowling), in a casual joke (Kazuo Ishiguro), while doing a mundane task like visiting a yard sale (Donna Tartt) or while grading papers (J.R.R. Tolkien). Still others find inspiration in the people they know (P.G. Wodehouse, Agatha Christie, and Ian McEwan). Roald Dahl kept an Ideas Book (his own compost heap) and found an idea for a novel from an old comment he’d written many years before. In her book *Big Magic* (2015), Elizabeth Gilbert goes so far as to say that ideas are a “disembodied, energetic life form” and that creativity “is a force of enchantment...like in the Hogwarts sense.” In order to collaborate with these life forms, you must simply engage in “unglamorous, disciplined labor” and write.