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## Courting Fantasy Fans (and Everyone Else)

By CHARLES McGRATH

NEIL GAIMAN'S novel "[Stardust](#)," the source for the new movie of the same name that opens Friday, is a bit of an anomaly among the works that have made him a legend in the comics world. To begin with, though it was originally published in four installments by DC Comics in 1997, "Stardust" was never a comic book series with panels and dialogue, like, say, Mr. Gaiman's famous "[Sandman](#)." It's a prose novel with Arthur Rackham-like illustrations by Charles Vess, and came out in a comics format only because traditional book publishers didn't want to spring for so much color printing. "Stardust (Being a Romance Within the Realm of Faerie)" was subsequently reissued as a hardback and trade paperback, and in 1999 was published in a text-only version, without the Vess illustrations.

Set in two parallel worlds, a quaint Victorian village named Wall and the fantastical kingdom of Stormhold, and with a plot that involves both a witch and a posse of murderous princes chasing after a fallen meteorite that is really a young woman, "Stardust" is also written in a consciously old-fashioned manner. Mr. Gaiman composed it in longhand, using a fountain pen and a leather-covered notebook, he said in New York recently, and the result was that he eliminated "a lot of computery bloat." His aim was to evoke the manner of early-20th-century writers like Lord Dunsany and Hope Mirrlees, who wrote fantasy stories of a sort that was sometimes called "faerie."

"In the first half of the century there was no genre distinction," he said. "People who wrote fantasy were just novelists. Hope Mirrlees, for example, was a friend of Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot. In this country you had someone like James Branch Cabell, who was a very distinguished figure. There was no sense that fantasy was in any way less than respectable. Then in the middle of the century you get Tolkien, who at first wasn't pigeonholed as a fantasy writer either. But by the early '70s 'Lord of the Rings' was a cult, and it spawned a whole genre, with genre expectations."

"Stardust," in other words, was intended to be pre-Tolkien, a fantasy novel that didn't read like one, and the movie's creative team — the

director, Matthew Vaughn, and the screenwriter, Jane Goldman — have attempted much the same thing: a fantasy film that can be watched not just by the “Lord of the Rings” crowd, or even by Mr. Gaiman’s worshipful following, but also by people who wouldn’t be caught dead at a fantasy film.

In many ways Ms. Goldman and Mr. Vaughn were unlikely choices for the movie — which stars [Claire Danes](#), [Michelle Pfeiffer](#) and [Robert De Niro](#) — especially considering that Mr. Gaiman is famously fussy about turning his work into film. His usual way of working — plotting a graphic novel frame by frame and then turning his instructions over to an artist — is as close, he has said, as you can get to moviemaking without actually making a movie.

“What I do is like being the screenwriter, director and editor,” he explained. “The artist gets to be the cameraman and the actors.” Mr. Gaiman has also made a real movie, [“A Short Film About John Bolton,”](#) which is a documentary about the other John Bolton: the fantasy artist, not the former ambassador to the [United Nations](#).

Ms. Goldman, on the other hand, had never written a movie before and is best known for an “X Files” guidebook and as the host of a British television series investigating the paranormal. Mr. Vaughn had directed only one other movie, [“Layer Cake,”](#) and is best known for producing [Guy Ritchie’s](#) heist films, [“Snatch”](#) and [“Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels.”](#) Some of Mr. Ritchie’s more recent movies, made without Mr. Vaughn, suggest that the producer’s contributions may have consisted of a good deal more than writing checks, but Mr. Gaiman settled on Mr. Vaughn mostly just because he found him trustworthy.

Mr. Gaiman’s first choice, he said, was [Terry Gilliam](#), but Mr. Gilliam, coming off [“The Brothers Grimm,”](#) wanted a break from fairy tales, and so Mr. Gaiman gave an option to Mr. Vaughn. “You just don’t do that, you don’t give away free options,” Mr. Gaiman explained. “To say that Hollywood producers are not trustworthy is like saying that lions are not vegetarians. But Matthew has always stuck to his word, and I do trust him.”

On the phone at least Mr. Vaughn sometimes sounds like one of Mr. Ritchie’s brash, fast-talking card sharks. “I wrote it, directed, produced it,” he said of “Stardust,” explaining that he raised the money independently. “I put the whole thing together. I’m quite good at doing things my way.”

When he spoke to Mr. Gaiman, he added, he already had the whole movie in his head. “I think a good idea is a good idea,” he went on. “If

there are too many problems with something, then just don't make it. But we had a very good idea for this."

The idea, in a nutshell, was to make the fantastical scenes seem in some ways more realistic than the Victorian ones. "Basically I love fantasy novels, but I wanted to make a nonfantasy fantasy movie," Mr. Vaughn said. "I kept telling everyone: 'Just play it normal. You're not wearing a costume, you're wearing clothes.'"

He added that he deliberately injected the Stormhold scenes with contemporary touches. The coach in which the princes travel was built to look like a Hummer, for example, and the princes' outfits owe less to traditional courtly raiment than to [Clint Eastwood's](#) getup in "[A Fistful of Dollars](#)." Much of the movie was filmed on location in Scotland and Iceland, and it makes considerably less use of computer-generated effects than many movies of this sort.

"The whole movie is really 'Midnight Run,' " Mr. Vaughn added, alluding to the 1988 chase movie in which a bounty hunter, played by Mr. De Niro, travels cross-country with a white-collar criminal, [Charles Grodin](#), who is wanted both by the feds and the Mafia, from whom he has embezzled \$15 million. "Yvaine and Tristran," he explained, referring to the fallen star and her half-mortal companion (Ms. Danes and Charlie Cox), "are Charles Grodin and De Niro. The [F.B.I.](#) is the princes. And the witches are the mob. That was my inspiration. I thought, 'I'm going to make a movie that has the fun and pacing of 'Midnight Run' with the veneer of 'Princess Bride.' "

Mr. Gaiman explained: "Matthew was very confident about all the boys' adventure parts of the story, but he was less sure of himself with the romance aspect, and it was clear that this couldn't just be 'Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Fairies.' " So Mr. Gaiman suggested Ms. Goldman, whom he had known for years and encouraged during the writing of her first novel, "[Dreamland](#)." According to Mr. Vaughn and Ms. Goldman, the two of them hit it off immediately and shared a view of how the movie needed to be structured.

The novel is both spare, only 50,000 words or so, and leisurely. The protagonist isn't even born until the second chapter, and the plot resolves not so much in a traditional climax as in a series of near misses. The screenplay both compresses the story and opens it up. For example Ms. Goldman and Mr. Vaughn expanded the role of the pursuing witch, played by Ms. Pfeiffer, who magically reverts from being an aged crone to a blond knockout and then back again. ("If we had more time and more money, we could have done even more horrible and funny things with the aging," Mr. Vaughn said. "I had

this book of nude photos of 90-year-olds, and it was scarier than any horror movie I've ever seen.”)

They also expanded a few lines in the book, about a journey Tristran and Yvaine make aboard a flying pirate ship that scavenges lightning bolts, into a transformative shipboard idyll, in which Tristran grows up, falls in love and has a hair and wardrobe makeover under the care of a pirate captain (Mr. De Niro) who if he's not gay nevertheless enjoys dressing up in a tutu in the privacy of his cabin.

“I don't know where that came from,” Ms. Goldman said in a telephone interview. “It was just one of those magic moments. Matthew and I were thinking it might be interesting if the captain was in some ways wrestling with identity issues the way Tristran is.”

That stars of the magnitude of Ms. Pfeiffer and Mr. De Niro would turn up in his story, which is all about star power of another but not entirely dissimilar kind, is something Mr. Gaiman never anticipated. “When I imagined casting, I dreamed of [Alec Guinness](#) playing all the roles,” he said. “I was in awe when I saw it. There were things I argued about and lost, and it turns out Matthew was right about them. When you look at it, all the subliminal cues that tell you you're in a fantasy movie aren't there. It's like watching a slightly skewed historical film.”