

From Cynic to Believer: 'American Gods' Star Ricky Whittle Boasts About Shadow Moon

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From an outpouring of social media buzz to a 5-month long audition, Ricky Whittle clinched the coveted role of Shadow Moon in the small screen adaptation of Neil Gaiman's best-selling book *American God*. The Starz series, which has talented showrunners such as Bryan Fuller and Michael Green at its helm, has eloquently entwined a new age tale of Ancient Deities that is surprisingly extremely relevant in present day America.

This show, which is unlike anything on TV right now, runs circles around its predecessors which unfortunately have fallen short when trying to achieve this mind-bending concept. Whittle, well-known for his role on The CW's *The 100* as Lincoln, a Grounder with a heart of gold who ultimately met his untimely fate by sacrificing himself for the greater good, is captivating (and did we mention brooding?) in the role of Shadow. Fans of Whittle's *The 100* character were severely scorned last year following Lincoln's death, and immediately threw Whittle's name in the hat once the opportunity for the iconic *American Gods* role came into the picture. And the timing couldn't be more perfect..

Though his character on *American Gods* possesses similar traits to Whittle's character on *The 100*, Shadow often finds himself in the midst of a world he can barely make sense of, but throughout the season goes from cynic to believer. Throughout season one, we peel back the layers of Shadow Moon and explore a war between the Old gods and the New Gods. A war, if you're not caught up on, is definitely worth binge-watching.

Whittle was kind enough to catch up with an old friend, as we discuss our beloved Lincoln's subtle reincarnation into an *American God*, his high hopes for Season 2, and his eagerness to spread the love and finally attend New York Comic Con in October of 2017.

MCKENZIE MORRELL: Let's start by hearing the tale of how you landed this coveted role of ex-con Shadow Moon. I heard the fans had a huge hand in it.

RICKY WHITTLE: Yeah. It's all about the fans and it's something I'll always be grateful to them for. Fans of *The 100* will know that I've always had a great connection and interaction with them and it's something I'll always continue because without them I wouldn't have this job. They brought this role to my attention when they started hashtagging casting Shadow when STARZ sent out a search for who fans of the book want to play Shadow Moon. Fans put my name forward and brought it to my attention on social media. That's when I asked my representation to look into it and the casting department said "yeah, we'd love to see Ricky for this role." It worked out perfect really because I was due to be finishing on *The 100* around January, February. Season three was going to be finishing then and I'd worked out with Warner Bros and CW that I could leave at the end of the season. Filming for *American Gods* was going to start in April. It worked out perfectly and then a five month audition process began.

MM: It sounds like it was fate, though. Now you get to headline your own show and the fanbase is amazing.

RW: It's insane. I didn't realize until *The 100* and even more so in *American Gods*, how passionate and fierce the Sci Fi audiences are. Without that passion and that vocalness that they have, I never would have learned about this project or even considered myself as a



Image Credit: Starz

viable option. It's definitely something I owe to them. Now that they've given me this gift it's great that I'm able to give that gift back. So far they seem to be receptive to the way I've played the role and the nuances I've added to the character from the book.

MM: Has that pressure from the hard core book fans, who have been waiting forever to see this from book to screen, subsided since Season 1 aired?

RW: That subsided the moment we started shooting because we have a cast that is, in my opinion, the best ensemble cast on TV. Then we started working together and you start to see the show come together. And we're helmed by two incredible show runners in Brian Fuller and Michael Green. Michael Green is responsible for my favorite film of the year. He did *Blade Runner 2* and *Orient Express*. He's an incredible, creative genius. And in Brian Fuller you have this beautiful, visual showrunner who took his tone from *Hannibal* and brought it to *American Gods*. Between those two great minds, they've created a show unlike anything you've ever seen so I really don't feel any pressure. And during that five month process, they worked with me to bring Shadow Moon off the page. My early auditions were tied to the book and I played it very blase and very internal. They wanted me to add a few more layers and bring it off the page more so that the adaptation to screen was more watchable. They wanted to add a bit more color. And one of the beautiful things that Brian said that Michael said as well was "we love Shadow, and we love Ricky. If you could bring a bit of Ricky into Shadow and brighten him up, this is what we want. We have Shadow. We just need a bit of Ricky to pull him off the page." And that's the Shadow we brought to screen.

MM: How do you interpret this character?

RW: He's a Shadow of his former self and I knew where I wanted to take Shadow and I had to kind of work backward so the Shadow we see right now is this empty vessel, this empty shell of a man who has lost everything he holds dear in the world. Those fans of the book completely understand how I started the show and that he has to earn his personality. Shadow isn't going to have fun and jokes just yet. He's lost everything he holds dear. It's exciting to bring this arc from the rock bottom of a man's life to where we eventually take him. I'm excited that the fans have given me this opportunity and their love and support has been apparent from the very beginning, from the moment my casting was announced visually. And now they've been very receptive to the way I play it. All that pressure really did dissipate early on and I'm excited to get back to season two and give them more of the same.



MM: I know it's got to mean a lot that a few weeks after *American Gods* premiered, STARZ went and picked it up for a season two. That is a testament to the story, to you guys as actors.

RW: After two episodes. That's huge. We didn't even get halfway through the season, just two episodes in and they already picked up season two. It's exciting and we always knew it was an incredible project and we knew that we were going to do great things with this great cast but to get that rubber stamped by the network and the audience is always nice and it gives the show a greater prestige. The fact that it goes world wide the next day on Amazon Prime video and we're up already for season two. It's making all the right noises. We were already up for consideration for the Emmys and we hadn't even finished the season yet. It's getting a lot of great reactions. The spectrum of support is huge as well. I'm doing interviews with women's' magazines about my favorite color to fitness magazines about my workout regime to political interviews with USA Today and NY Times. We're in Vanity Fair. It's

incredible the spectrum of press we've had to do for the show and the interest in the show. We're dealing with some really important themes in these scenes, so we're not just entertaining. We're educating and enlightening people and having conversations about very important themes and topics.

MM: I totally agree and you've come so far from where you started to where you are now and you deserve all the success you're getting.

RW: Thank you so much.

MM: Obviously the show deals with a lot of different topics, is there a topic the show hasn't covered you'd like to delve into in Season 2 or in Seasons to come?

RW: Yeah. Because we're talking about New Gods and not really following the book word for word. We're able to kind of invent characters. I think it's very powerful with gun control in America, it's a very passionate point to bring forward. For me, something on a personal level that I find intriguing and interesting would be, we're very involved in our physical appearances. Would there be a God of beauty? I feel that the world today is so infatuated with the visual, through social media and Instagram and pictures. How often does someone just post a picture of themselves without editing, without special coloring and all this stuff. Women are scared to leave the house without make up for fear of "you look tired" or "what's different about you." It's sad that we're so tapped into having to look great all the time. And what is attractive in the world? What is beautiful? Because to me it's individual and beauty isn't aesthetic for me. Beauty comes from within in my eyes so it'd be interesting to see if there was a God. I think that'd be interesting if she was so infatuated with her looks. I think that's something that's poisoning the world of today at the moment. We should be educating the world that there is no such thing as normal. There is no such thing as one type of beauty. There is beauty in everything and everyone.

MM: I totally agree. That would be interesting to see the different levels and what the obsession with being beautiful would do to that God and the other people surrounding them, whether it's good or bad. I think that'd be interesting to see.

RW: You never know. It'd have to fit into the show but with Vulcan [God of Weaponry and Fire] we're able to tell a beautiful story and great story to progress the show and educate the show with our point of view on guns and sacrifice. You never know. Brian and Michael are very intelligent creators. I'm sure they'll be able to write that idea or wrench it into a script somehow.

MM: We can only hope. Obviously Shadow has to quickly come to terms with this Old Gods versus New Gods mentality. If this were to happen to you in real life, how would you react to this situation?

RW: I'm not so sure. The great thing about Shadow is that he has nothing to live for. He's

empty and alone in the world. Where as I'm a little more open and receptive and open to the world around me. Shadow is a cynic. That's his journey from cynic to believer in this season. Where as I'm very much a believer from day one. Where Shadow says he doesn't believe in anything he doesn't see. I believe anything until you prove me wrong. I'm very open to angels and Gods and ghosts and aliens because until you prove it wrong. It's nice to believe in that magic. It may be naive or childlike but what's wrong with believing in the good in the world and the magic in the world? I feel like there's so much out there, it would be naive to believe we're the most intelligent human beings in this whole galaxy and universe. It'd be arrogant to believe we're the top of the food chain. So until someone proves me wrong, I'd like to believe in that and we see children and animals react to nothingness so is there something there? We're brainwashed into thinking you don't have an imaginary friend. It's just your head playing games? But what if there is someone there? What if there is someone on the other side, or speaking to Gods and all that? We're very quick to shut people down. For me if Mr. Wednesday told me a few things, he'd have to prove it, but if a six foot tall Leprechaun started pulling coins out of the air, he'd have my attention straight away.

MM: Without a doubt. The world you guys have created is already amazing, but if you could drop another character from another show you watch into the *American Gods* world, who would it be and why?

RW: Wonder Woman because I think Shadow Moon should date her?

MM: Doesn't everyone want to date Wonder Woman right now? [Laughs]

RW: I think so. I think they'd make a beautiful couple. There both good people and would just want to love each other. Shadow Moon would be very loyal and eventually he'd finally find a woman that he can love truly and not treat him like his best friend. Gal [Gadot] did a great job. It's nice to see a fantastic female lead breaking records, proving that women can lead a franchise. For me, it's the best DC film I've seen in awhile.

MM: That's so true. It was a long time coming. It was amazing. I'm glad we finally got to see it in our lifetime and hopefully there are many more to come.

RW: Oh yeah for sure. I'm already putting myself forward for Trevor Barnes, one of her boyfriend's through the ages. I went straight onto the internet and was like "who can I play?" How can I get in Wonder Woman's life? I was tracking it down. I found out yes she did date a black guy. They didn't last but I'll take a cameo.



Ricky Whittle as "Lincoln" on *The 100*.

MM: [Laughs] Fingers crossed. Obviously you're well known for your role on *The 100* as Lincoln. As far as this new role, do you see any similarities between Shadow and Lincoln?

RW: Very much so. It's almost like Lincoln died and became an American God. They're both very good characters and they're both ruled by their hearts and the woman they love. Lincoln constantly made sacrifices, even until the very end, for the love of his life, Octavia. We've seen how horrible a person Laura can be but Shadow has this idealistic vision of her. She wasn't the woman that he thought she was but it was because she was so infatuated. She even called him puppy. He was completely ruled by that. It's kind of nice that they have this love for that one person and they wear their heart on their sleeve. I feel Lincoln was probably more moral in the fact that he constantly put everyone else before himself even until the very end where he sacrificed his own life for people he'd never met and never knew the names of and would never see again. Shadow has a little bit more about him, he's an ex con. He likes to push against authority. But again, they're both good characters, moral characters which is fun to play.

MM: I can only imagine.

RW: I'd like to see the two fight, as well. Lincoln is smaller. Lincoln was only 175 pounds but he was a warrior. Shadow is 210 pounds but he's a badass ex con. It'd be interesting, with no weapons who wins.

MM: That'd be interesting to see if you had to do a double of yourself, play both roles and essentially fight each other.

RW: Maybe there will be a computer game come out.

MM: We can hope. Now who is more rabid, *The 100* fan base or *American Gods*? I'm pretty sure this is a question where no one wins. But I'm interested.

RW: No one wins. And I have a lot of love for both fans.

MM: That's a diplomatic answer.

RW: As long as the love is going, we both win.

MM: Everyone can coexist. You just announced that you're going to be at New York Comic Con. Is this your first NYCC experience?

RW: It will be. I just finished my fourth New York press junket. I feel like New York is my second home at the moment. They constantly have me over there. but I'm really excited. I can't wait to meet the fans on the East Coast and see what it's all about. I've heard great things and I'm looking forward to seeing the *American Gods* public. I've always got a lot of love and my *The 100* fans who are awesome and have me flying all over the world to come see them. And as *American Gods* comes out now and we introduce me to a new genre and new group of fans, it's interesting to see how they react when we get to go face to face. So far, I'm just loving life and I feel very blessed that I'm able to give back and meet the fans that have created my career. Big thanks to them and I'm looking forward to getting over there.

MM: We're waiting for you. And I'm going to be covering the convention in October so I expect to get the chance to treat you to a drink or something. It won't be poolside but we'll sip a martini and hang on a couch or something. We'll definitely have to connect when you come over.

RW: For sure, yeah.

MM: To conclude, for those who haven't seen the show yet, can you tease the readers, and tell them why they should tune in and get caught up?

RW: You can't really tease. There's a book out. The guide to *Shadow Moon* is already out there. The great thing about Neil Gaiman's book and about our show is we've told you everything in the first episode, in the first chapter, but you won't know until the very end of the show and the very end of the book that it's all there. It's genius. It's incredible. Don't look away. There are moments and easter eggs throughout every episode that tell you more than you're paying attention to. So keep watching, watch *Shadow* grow and maybe you'll figure it out before he does.

Catch up on *American Gods* with Starz on Demand.

