



BOOK REVIEW:

*Terry Pratchett's Narrative Worlds: From  
Giant Turtles to Small Gods*

*Andrew M. Butler*

Rana, Marion, editor. *Terry Pratchett's Narrative Worlds: From Giant Turtles to Small Gods*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. ISBN 978-3319672977.

This baker's dozen of essays on Terry Pratchett, edited by Marion Rana of the University of Bremen, is an entry in the Palgrave Macmillan series *Critical Approaches to Children's Literature*. This offers us a puzzle, as only a small proportion of Pratchett's oeuvre was aimed at younger readers – his (later heavily revised) debut, *The Carpet People* (1971/1992), the Truckers trilogy (1989–1990), the Johnny Maxwell trilogy (1992–1996), *Maurice and his Amazing Educated Rodents* (2001), *Where's My Cow?* (2005), *Nation* (2008), *Dodger* (2012), and the Tiffany Aching Discworld novels (2003–2015); in addition, posthumous short-story collections were issued between 2014 and 2020. The various target age groups of these books – from a picture book mentioned in and released at the same time as *Thud!* (2005) to young-adult titles – bring with them differing meanings of identity, coming of age, sexuality, freedom, and gender, but *Terry Pratchett's Narrative Worlds* mentions very few of these titles in passing, if at all.

Even the chapters that do pay attention to the child protagonists do not stick to the children's books. Maxi Steinbrück discusses education with varying degrees of formality: Mort's on-the-job training; Tiffany's mix of instinct, apprenticeship, and becoming a learner; Susan's boarding school; and the Unseen University. In covering these areas, it might have been worth mapping them onto Pratchett's ambivalent attitudes to formal education and his evident self-education over the decades – his informal, interest-driven reading that taught him more than he would admit to learning in school. Virginie Douglas's

chapter on the Truckers trilogy also considers formal and informal education and the nature of the Bildungsroman – although the book's index would not help you find those pages (and more on this later). She argues that Pratchett himself is teaching through the course of these novels. This chapter perhaps engages the most with children's fiction or books recommended for children, even if, as Douglas notes, Pratchett denies having read the trilogy's obvious precursor, *The Borrowers* (1952). The role of children's fiction as parodic sources for Pratchett, however, remains underexplored in this volume.

Nurul Fateha considers *Johnny and the Dead* (1993) and *Nation* (2008) as metamodern texts, which is to say characteristic of the aftermath of the high-water point of the postmodern where that aesthetic's sense of irony and collapsed metanarratives no longer seem attractive. Johnny navigates his identity through assisting the Dead and, in *Nation*, Mau, reconfiguring his rejected cultural traditions to rebuild his destroyed society. In both cases, storytelling provides agency for the protagonists and their communities while frustrating the threats of neoliberal forces. Oddly, Fateha does not seem to mention the other two Johnny books, but equivalent processes are nonetheless at work in dealing with aliens and home-front participants in World War Two; the similarities and differences between ghosts, extra-terrestrials, and their grandparents' generation in their youths would have been instructive.

The 2009 London National Theatre adaptation of *Nation* by Mark Ravenhill allows Justyne Deszcz-Tryhubczak, in her chapter, to consider the political agency of young people through theatre. The collective experience of going to see a play, she argues, potentially produces a utopian experience in which taking action is performed and witnessed, which may radicalise the adaptation's (mainly) young audiences. The radicalisation of the reader is also raised in Minwen Huang's chapter, which looks at the performative nature of storytelling by focusing on *Hogfather* (1996). Central to this is Text World Theory, developed by Paul Werth but here explained via an introduction by Joanna Gavins. At first sight, this looks like yet another secondary-world model that considers a metadiegesis within a fictional world – the novel within the novel, the dream within the novel, and so forth. Pratchett and the readers exist in the discourse-world, Huang writes, and they read the text-world in light of the characters having epistemic modal-worlds. Although this structure is hardly unique to fantasy, what seems different in Pratchett's novels is the tendencies of those stories-within-the-stories to come true. The characters' belief systems become true – gods exist when they are believed in.

My problem comes with Huang's suggestion that we can take the next step and make such things real in the real world. According to Huang, the "processing of the text at the text-world level, propels the potential formation of an action-world at the material-world level .... This action-world turns readers into actors in the actual world" (191). For a start, this ignores the place of the author: the beliefs become true because Pratchett writes on both "levels". He can load the dice. Since each level is constructed of words, they are not really nested within one another; they share the same ontological status. I'm not convinced that Pratchett's book would have any more impact than a book that does not dramatise the reifications of beliefs. Huang concludes that "fantasy as a literary genre that tells 'lies' in the minds of readers can bring about change in our actual world" (191). It can, but has it? Are these "lies" any different, say, from those Charles Dickens tells in his books? And as the other chapters that

consider identity and other politics explore, although we might want some of the lies to bring about change, it might not be the change we actually wanted.

The Discworld novels sometimes get described as being for adults of all ages, but by not unpicking that marketing slogan, *Terry Pratchett's Narrative Worlds* is missing a trick, and the slogan's assumptions about children and adults need development beyond seeing the all-too-frequent refrain "it's just for kids" as an excuse for any problems in politics or representation. Yet, although this volume is a laudable attempt to take Pratchett's fiction seriously, whatever his target market, the collection edges into this project nervously. As Rana's introduction notes, "Popularity and commercial success alone, however, do not necessarily warrant scholarly attention, at least not of the kind that this book is offering" (3), but it is precisely popular and commercial fiction that needs scholarly attention, even if it is of the snide variety offered by Q. D. Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932). An awful lot of SF and fantasy nonfiction would fall at this hurdle, and it is vital we understand the ideologies sustained and challenged by popular fiction. I had a sense of déjà vu at this point as I've myself fallen into defensiveness about literary worth and taking Pratchett's work seriously.

Twenty years ago, when Edward James, Farah Mendlesohn, and I edited *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* (2000), the first collection of essays on Pratchett, we rather defensively suggested that he was neglected because he was a popular writer of comic fantasy and thus had three strikes against him. Whilst several chapters covered the children's books, we did not especially emphasise that further bar to taking him seriously. In the intervening years, fantasy seems to have gone mainstream, across media – with Martin, Pullman, Rowling, and Tolkien being the most visible crossovers to bestseller charts, small and large screens, and big budgets. Do we really still need to defend taking Pratchett's books seriously? The main Discworld sub-sequences were already in place by then, and we commissioned chapters on topics such as the Witches, the City Watch, the Librarian, and Death, as well as a handful of more thematic chapters. Since the second edition of *Guilty* in 2004, Discworld has had the Tiffany Aching subseries and the Moist von Lipwig novels, plus standalones. As far as I can see, von Lipwig is absent from this volume, although Aching appears in a number of the chapters. Indeed, to judge by the index, only a relatively narrow selection of the novels gets in-depth coverage.

The chapters, as I have already begun to show, do pay Pratchett scholarly attention, but the chapter by Alice Nuttall on the Witches shows some of the problems with the attempt to say something new – the first half, on Tiffany and emotional labor, feels fresh, and not only because it is discussing Pratchett's late works. Nuttall shows Pratchett subverting gender stereotypes for comic and narrative purposes, as he so often does, but her chapter's second half, which relates the various triads of witches back to the Maiden, the Mother and ... the other one ... takes us back to what Karen Sayer had already written in her chapter for *Guilty of Literature*, which is cited in Nuttall's notes but not the bibliography, and I think there is a greater scholarly debt than is quite acknowledged. Editor Marion Rana's own chapter on the City Watch's werewolf Angua takes us both into issues around ethnicity and intersectionality by focusing on monstrosity and gender. The City Watch recurs in Mel Gibson's following chapter through a discussion of multiculturalism that draws upon the other potentially tokenist identities within a diverse police force. In a

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fascinating consideration of how Pratchett uses and undercuts his characters' racism, Gibson notes how the disparate members of the Watch are united by a work ethic and a performed masculinity, the latter of which rather undercuts the institution's true equality. Although there are many such interesting ideas explored through this volume, all too often I was left with a sense that most chapters got going only just as the word counts were reached.

Earlier, I mentioned the index and hinted at some problems. This index lists character names in a single place (with cross-references) (248–49), but some individual books get separate entries in addition to a list of all titles by Pratchett, under N for “Novels, series and plays by name” (252). Yet not all mentions of names or books get indexed, and some page references appear to be wrong. For example, the entry for *Jingo* (1997) points us to p. 147, but the longer list suggests pp. 60, 63, 66, and 147. There's a James Butler in the index (225), which seems to be a mangling of the names for my coeditor Edward James and myself in that chapter's notes which contradicts its bibliography (225). I know we did not help matters by leaving the publication date off *Guilty of Literature* (2000), but a couple of the bibliographies have a ghost 2008 edition (34, 54, and 71). Meanwhile, all the page numbers in cross-references to other chapters in this volume appear as (xy). The copy editing and proofreading seems to have been rushed.

This volume ought to inspire more people to take seriously a popular writer who just happens to have mainly written comic fantasy – some of which, yes, is aimed at children, and much of which could be enjoyed by children. Many of the ideas here deserve further development. However, the editing and especially the index do limit its usefulness.

*Biography:* Andrew M. Butler wrote *Terry Pratchett* (2001), edited *An Unofficial Companion to the Novels of Terry Pratchett* (2007), and co-edited *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* (2000, 2004). He is now managing editor of *Extrapolation*. He is currently researching 1980s SF and SF romcoms. In his spare time, he collects shiny trousers.