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In Memoriam: Sir Terry Pratchett (28th April 1948 – 12th March 2015)

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Terry Pratchett spent most of his life writing and publishing fantasy – his first short story was published in *Science Fantasy* when he was 15, and with the payment he bought his first typewriter.¹ He studied journalism but left school to work in a weekly local newspaper. In the 1980's, he served several years as publicity officer for three nuclear power stations (“What leak? Oh, **that** leak...” – an organizational experience that he used effectively later in his fiction), writing in his free time. When his books proved to sell, he decided to become a full time writer in 1987, and usually published two books a year.

Pratchett's first novel *The Carpet People* was published in 1971. That was followed by science fiction in *The Dark Side of the Sun* (1976) and *Strata* (1981). He had played with the idea of a flat earth in *Strata*, but moved the concept to a fantasy setting, creating a world in the shape of a Disc balanced on the back of four elephants standing on the back of a giant turtle moving through space. Discworld was born. The first Discworld novel, *The Colour of Magic* was published in 1983, and it was also broadcast as a series on BBC4. Since then, he wrote closer to fifty Discworld books and several YA and children's books on our Earth, plus collaborated with other authors, such as Neil Gaiman for *Good Omens*, Jack Cohen & Ian Stewart for the *Science of Discworld* books, Jacqueline Simpson for *The Folklore of Discworld*, and with Stephen Baxter for the *Long Earth* tetralogy (based on a 1984 short story by Pratchett). Several of his books have been adapted to stage, TV or radio.

Readers of fantasy have always loved Terry Pratchett. By now the best guess of Pratchett's lifetime sales worldwide might be close to 100 million books, translated to something like forty languages (an upgraded estimate of Wikipedia information from 2010). Through the 1990s, he was the UK's best-selling author, his books consistently topping the charts and staying there for long periods at a time. Even his children's books appeared on adult pocket book best-seller lists – a remarkable event before the time of Harry Potter. The boost to British economy obviously did not go unnoticed, as he was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1998, and in 2000 he received The Services to Bookselling Award by British booksellers.

But there is definitely more to Terry Pratchett than commercial success, as attested for instance by the specialists in book content, the librarians. In 2001, he won the annual Carnegie Medal, awarded by British librarians for the outstanding children's book of the year, *The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents*. Later, in 2011, he also won the Edwards Award from the American Library Association, a lifetime honour for "significant and lasting contribution to young adult literature". Altogether the list of literary awards and honours is quite lengthy. Three Discworld novels that centre on the "trainee witch" Tiffany Aching won the annual Locus Award for YA book in 2004, 2005 and 2007 and one of them, *I Shall Wear Midnight*, won the 2010 Andre Norton Award for YA science fiction and fantasy presented by the SFWA as a part of the Nebula Award ceremony. Terry Pratchett received the NESFA Skylark Award in 2009, and the World Fantasy Award for

¹ Biography and quotes from interviews: <http://www.lspace.org>.

Lifetime Achievement in 2010. The academic world also took notice of Pratchett's work: he was awarded ten honorary doctorates in literature within the British Commonwealth between 1999 and 2014, and made an adjunct professor in the School of English at Trinity College Dublin in 2010, with a role in postgraduate education in creative writing and popular literature. To top it all, he became Sir Terry Pratchett when he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth for services to literature in 2009. However, as awards go, Pratchett was not only at the receiving end: from 2011 he sponsored a biennial award for unpublished science fiction novelists, Terry Pratchett First Novel Award, where the prize is a publishing contract with his publishers Transworld.

An international active fandom of Terry Pratchett lives in the L-space (www.lspace.org: "All libraries are connected in L-space by the bookwormholes created by the strong space-time distortions found in any large collection of books"). One favourite activity of Pratchett fans is to annotate the cultural references in his books, from popular culture to classical mythology and modern physics.² They also started to organize Discworld Conventions in 1996, first in the UK, later globally; Pratchett usually participated as the Guest of Honour, as indeed he was in many other SF cons around the world. It should be noted that Nordic readers discovered Terry Pratchett quite early: he was the Guest of Honour in the SF Con in Sweden already in 1992, and in Finncon in 1993.

In December 2007, Terry Pratchett publicly announced that he was suffering from early-onset Alzheimer's. He later filmed a TV-documentary of his experiences with the disease for BBC, donated extensively to Alzheimer's Research UK, and in many ways became a voice for people living with dementia. He also publicly argued for the right of a terminally ill person to be able to choose the time of one's death. However, he continued to work with his numerous book ideas, finishing several books. By 2010 he was finding it hard to visually work with text and changed to dictating his books to an assistant.

When Pratchett started the Discworld series in 1983, it was to "have fun with some of the clichés". The first two Discworld books are clearly written in that vein – in addition to a wild and absurd imagination – but soon he changed his approach to comment on modern culture and society. Many of the Discworld novels take up real-world subjects from religion, philosophy and rock-and-roll to film industry, newspaper publishing, finances, police and army organization and a variety of bureaucratic and ruling systems. The common plot in generic fantasy takes its world through a crisis back to balance when evil is banished: the world is moved by politics, war and power struggles, but it stays basically the same. Science fiction is left to deal with technological change and its effect on society. Terry Pratchett is the rare fantasy writer who takes that theme to a fantasy setting, book by book: Discworld is always changing, it grapples with modernization and technological change continuously, as it's taken "kicking and screaming into the Century of the Fruitbat". Pratchett uses with equal ease old myths, the ancient Greece and Egypt as well as modern university politics. Indeed, his text is chock-full of (classic and popular) literary allusions.

Read a Pratchett book, and you'll get a complicated plot, some unforgettable characters, and storytelling that is simultaneously funny and deadly serious. As a British humourist he was an offspring of Monty Python – especially in the abundant footnotes. Some call him sarcastic, but he is always humane, and if he grins showing his teeth, it's because he is on the side of the downtrodden. The consistent theme of his books, Discworld and others, is how to oppose prejudice, injustice, inequality and intolerance. He mercilessly parodies heroes, his protagonists are fallible, they have their weaknesses and dark sides and they live in a chaotic world. They often have a cynical common sense attitude to the world, but they always manage to stand for justice, tolerance and equality. Pratchett himself saw fantasy as fundamental to the way we understand the world. To him a good fantasy novel "is just a mirror of our own world, but one whose reflection is subtly distorted." As one of his famous characters, DEATH, expressed it in *Hogfather*: "HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN." Thank you, Sir Terry, for strengthening our humanity.

² See <http://wiki.lspace.org/mediawiki/Annotations>.