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Toying with Fantasy: The Postmodern Playground of Terry Pratchett's Discworld Novels

Daniel Luthi

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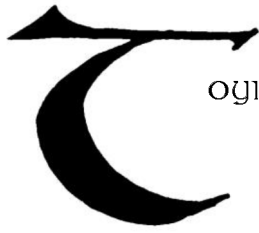


Abstract

Attempts to discover exactly how Terry Pratchett manages to get away with violating the rules of the fantasy tradition laid out in Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories." Pratchett consistently revels in the absurdity of Discworld as a concept, breaks the fourth wall, and disrupts Tolkien's proviso against satirizing magic itself; and yet the Discworld sails on, imperturbable. Pratchett's concept of narrative imperative is discussed as one of the keys to the success of his invented world.

Additional Keywords

Postmodernism; Pratchett, Terry. Discworld series; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"; Fantasy literature; Humor in literature



GOING WITH FANTASY:
THE POSTMODERN PLAYGROUND
OF TERRY PRATCHETT'S
DISCWORLD NOVELS

DANIEL LÜTHI

THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS PAPER STEMS FROM A REREADING of Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories." I had encountered the essay several times before while I was still an undergraduate student and writing my first papers on fantasy literature. After finishing my M.A. studies and beginning my doctoral thesis about Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, however, I read Tolkien's essay in a different light. In particular, I stumbled over these two famous passages:

There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away. ("On Fairy-Stories" [OFS] 33)

Children are capable, of course, of *literary belief*, when the story-maker's art is good enough to produce it. That state of mind has been called 'willing suspension of disbelief'. But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (52)

In all the works of fantasy I had conducted research on so far, these rules concerning the laws of a secondary world applied in a strict manner. Authors such as Jack Vance or Mervyn Peake use humour to give colour to certain characters or absurd situations, but the satire or irony never extends to the internal consistency of their secondary worlds themselves. Terry Pratchett, on the other hand, transgresses these boundaries, be it via meta-commentaries or footnotes or characters breaking the fourth wall. By doing so, he reveals the very fictionality of his world, seemingly destroying the literary belief which is necessary for reader immersion. As he does so repeatedly throughout his novels, real immersion should not be possible and the

secondary world remain abortive. According to the passages quoted above, making fun of a secondary world effectively means nullifying it—and yet the stories of the Discworld have been an on-going success and one of the major contributions to fantasy fiction since the mid-1980s.

In this essay, I therefore argue that the unique employment of humour in the Discworld novels led to its development from a mere parody into a fully-fledged secondary world. My analytic approach is roughly chronological. As a first step, I will analyse the Discworld in its most parodist roots, a feature that was soon to be replaced by more elaborate satire. As Pratchett himself emphasises in a 1999 interview, “If I’d written 25 versions of *The Light Fantastic* by now, I’d be ready to slit my wrists” (qtd. in Langford). This statement is no mere comment but hides one of the driving forces behind the sophistication of the Discworld: Rather than remaining in the parody genre and the examples set by books such as *Bored of the Rings* (hereafter abbreviated *BotR*) and *The Chronicles of Blarnia*, Pratchett’s creation began addressing issues of a more serious context and relatable to the real world. Similarly, the recurring Discworld protagonists and characters display additional depth in later novels. All of these developments are reflected in the increasing focus on stronger plotting and elaboration of the secondary world; for all the humour and meta-fictional irony, internal consistency is a topic not to be underestimated in any long-running series. Furthermore, the meta-fictional level of the Discworld points to another field of literary studies, namely narratology. Pratchett’s unusual attention to fictionality and the artificiality of a secondary world reveals insights into narrative conventions.

FANTASY AND DISBELIEF

For reasons of clarity and conciseness, the term “secondary world” will be used to describe literary spaces throughout my essay, as alternative terms and the full scope of possible-worlds theory in literary studies are too expansive for a paper of this length.¹ By “secondary world” I mean what Clute and Grant define as “an autonomous world or venue which is not bound to mundane reality, [...] which is impossible according to common sense and which is self-coherent” (847), closely following Tolkien’s coining of the term quoted in the introductory paragraph. Similarly, it would be futile to search for a definite terminology for “fantasy”—what constitutes the genre has remained as debatable as its date of creation. Nevertheless, Brian Attebery’s differentiation between fantasy as a mode and fantasy as a genre must not be neglected—precisely because the fantasy genre feeds from its modular ancestor (i.e. the mode provides the building blocks for the genre). For my purposes, it is more worthwhile to focus on the actual world-building in fiction rather than

¹ Lubomír Doležal and Marie-Laure Ryan are two of the most influential researchers in this field. I have included them in my bibliography.

attempting to find definitions. According to Mark J.P. Wolf, every secondary world must fulfil three axioms to a certain extent in order to evoke and hold the reader's attention, namely invention, completeness, and consistency:

If a secondary world is to be believable and interesting, it will need to have a high degree of invention, completeness, and consistency. Of course, no secondary world can be as complete as the Primary World, inconsistencies are increasingly likely as a world grows, and no world can be the product of invention to the point that there is no longer any resemblance to the Primary World. Nevertheless, unless an effort is made in all of these directions, the resulting subcreation will fail to create the illusion of an independent world. (M.J.P. Wolf 33-34)

Wolf's delineation of secondary worlds is crucial not just for fantasy but for all fictional worlds, e.g. his three axioms apply to the worlds of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* or James Joyce's *Ulysses* no less than to those of Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth* or Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*. As mentioned before, an author must become a good "sub-creator" to achieve the effects of immersion and secondary belief. Since fantasy is often strongly non-mimetic, the believability of its secondary worlds has to be addressed more critically. Compared to realistic fiction, a fantasy world relies less on pre-established literary content and more on invention, making use of supernatural elements. However, the "arresting strangeness" (OFS 60) of fantasy must be within appropriate measure in order to avoid breaking secondary belief—too much invention turns the world into a chaotic mishmash.

Humour can pose a similar problem for fantasy because one of its core concepts is absurdity, meaning "that some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations" (Morreall 11)—in the same manner as fantasy itself transgresses what is regarded as normal or possible. Like the supernatural elements that characterise the genre, humour must thus be applied in moderate amounts: A good example is the friendly rivalry between Legolas and Gimli in *The Lord of the Rings* (hereafter abbreviated *LotR*) which not only underlines their differing characters but furthermore predates their eventual friendship. Parody, however, ignores these limitations: since it "is fiction and metafiction at the same time" (Hanes 286), it breaks immersion and deliberately shows the artificiality of a secondary world. What is more, parodies akin to *BotR* or *Barry Trotter* lack invention; they rehash the plots and characters of their source text to achieve a maximum effect of recognition.² There is no sub-creation or original invention, the worlds of Hogwash and Lower Middle Earth are riddled with inconsistencies and white spots on their maps—the world is secondary to the plot

² In the case of *BotR*, the parody of *LotR* even copies its elaborate mapping—the landscapes of Middle-earth and Lower Middle Earth are nearly identical (cf. *BotR* vif).

(which in turn is a hasty copy of the original source plot). Within the context of such parodies, these inconsistencies are negligible because their goal is not to create a genuine secondary world but to make fun of an existing one in an almost parasitic manner.

These factors notwithstanding, fantasy is a mode and a genre which is remarkably resistant, perhaps even welcoming to parody. Precisely because supernatural elements can be traced back to antiquity (cf. Clute and Grant 432ff), the fantasy mode has undergone parody and mockery throughout its existence; individual elements were cherished by one generation and ridiculed by another. But parody reached a new height after fantasy as a genre had been formed:

It is as if emphasizing the ludicrous aspects of the genre, rather than denigrating or diminishing the mode, actually *augments* it. Less robust cultural phenomena would be exterminated by such mockery; fantasy, on the contrary, thrives upon it. (Roberts 28, author's emphasis)

When Tolkien paved the way for fantasy as a genre, its modular elements were cast in a more recognisable pattern—one which was easier to mock and parody, exemplified by works such as *BotR*. Pratchett took this more humorous outlook on fantasy as his outset: "Discworld started as an antidote to bad fantasy, because there was a big explosion of fantasy in the late '70s, an awful lot of it was highly derivative, and people weren't bringing new things to it" ("*Discworld & Beyond*" 4). Humour, in spite of its danger for disbelief, was a method to emphasise stagnation and stereotypical features of the novels following in the wake of Tolkien's *LotR*.

The Discworld, however, seems to suffer from the same problems as fantasy parodies per se: The reader's suspension of disbelief is repeatedly broken by blatant allusions to source texts (as in the dependence of *BotR* on *LotR*), meta-fictional commentaries, or puns and other plays on words.

This is an element that has been present in Pratchett's novels from the first: little asides, footnotes, small riffs, all destroyed the smooth impermeability of the characteristic mass market fantasy [...] [that] depends on the willingness of the audience to suspend judgment, depends absolutely on the main character's willingness to accept everything the mage figure tells him/her about the world. (Mendlesohn, "Narrative" 265)

Amongst other things, this undermines the coherence of narrative and character, leading to possible alienation or disturbance in the reader. While the freedom to interrupt and ridicule a story was Pratchett's intention and liberated his fiction from the constraints of the works he mocked, it also held the danger of putting the Discworld into the genre of parody akin to *BotR* and *Barry Trotter*, whose appeal lay largely in dependence on source texts which were highly popular. Yet as in

fantasy as a mode and fantasy as a genre, it is important to see the difference between these parodies and the parody that Pratchett aimed at.

Even though Pratchett's early Discworld novels may be considered parodies in a similar sense to the ones parodying certain source texts, true parody differs from *BotR* and *Barry Trotter*:

Parody is a particularly double-edged form of humour. It is not a matter of simply satirising a target: in fact, the most successful parody is hardly satire at all, for to parody a form or an institution effectively one has to understand it to the point of affection. (Sawyer, "Librarian" 114)

Understanding a genre thus means knowing it to its core, hence seeing it from a critical viewpoint. What is more, to truly take into account the full depths of a genre, one has to include its sources as well—in the case of fantasy, this amounts to myth and folklore. Keeping in mind that Tolkien's *LotR* is to some extent a very long fairy tale³, any author who desires to treat fantasy seriously must learn about its origins.

Always a voracious reader, Pratchett had been exposed to stories from a young age. As he states himself, "Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable was a major discovery. [...] I may have been the only twelve year old to read through it, end to end, for the dark pleasure of realising that the world is a fascinating and complicated place" ("Imaginary" 161). Fairy tales offer a plethora of narratives and ideas for fantasy—particularly in a Discworld context, where we find typical fairy motifs such as witches, trolls and elves, they are specifically apt for parody because of their recognisability:

Fairy tales, the extensive body of stories embodying folk-wisdom and wonder handed down from generation to generation, pervade the **Discworld** series. Because of their status as common-stock stories that many readers will remember at least the bones of from childhood, they are particularly important as the source of jokes (because they can be easily and recognisably parodied), as recognisable motifs and allusions and as sources for darker ironies. (Sawyer, "Fairy Tales" 138, author's emphasis)

Recognising these patterns in stories, be they oral or written, enhanced Pratchett's more subtle humour that had been a minor topic in the earlier novels and led the Discworld in a direction away from parody, providing it with a hidden, ever-increasing complexity. The remembrance of the "bones" of stories is an important point, as it highlights what Tolkien termed "the Cauldron of Story" (OFS 44ff) and

³ Cf. Tolkien's 1951 letter to Milton Waldman in which he underlines his passion for myths and fairy-stories and their importance for his works in *The Silmarillion*, xff.

uncovers narrative patterns that recur in the oral tradition of fairy tales and folklore and which may be reused again in fantasy.

While *BotR* was a carbon copy of *LotR* with brand names and other obvious real-world references, Pratchett's Discworld novels eventually aimed at a deeper parody, namely that of the fantasy genre itself and its sources (cf. Mason 54f). This is where the Discworld differs from many of the parodies that were to follow the publication of *BotR* in 1969 such as *The Chronicles of Blarnia* or *Barry Trotter*. While these rather commercial parodies usually limit themselves to one text and exploit its plot and characters mainly for profit—*BotR* even explicitly states that “[this] book is predominantly concerned with making money” in its introduction (5)—Pratchett's texts quickly evolved from their initial parodist outset. “The books acquired a sense of purpose” (Mendlesohn and James 179), a step which was reflected in their increasing complexity. By the early 1990s, Pratchett had largely abandoned the formula of sending characters across the whole world to ridicule epic fantasy and focussed on smaller and more intricate plots instead.

GOING BEYOND JOKES

Following the rather quest-oriented structure of the first novels emulating fantasy epics resembling *LotR* and *The Wheel of Time*, narratives set on the Discworld soon began to be much more character-driven. Staying true to its roots in parody, the protagonists were still the exact opposite of what is traditionally considered a hero in fantasy: witches, scoundrels, and alcoholic guards. As part of it going beyond parody to a critique and analysis of genre and reader expectations, “the Discworld series is peppered with unlikely heroes and challenges to the notion of hero” (Smith 185). The true implications of this play with the notion of heroism became apparent as Pratchett wrote further Discworld novels:

Terry Pratchett says that as the series developed, so he himself acquired a deeper interest in the art of plot-making. *Witches Abroad* is transitional in that regard also. Like the first novels, it sets its main characters on a journey, and during that journey, they encounter a number of fictional universes, ranging from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, through several fairy tales, such as Sleeping Beauty and Little Red Riding Hood, and moving on to 60s television series and *The Wizard of Oz*. But whereas Rincewind, the central character of the early novels, was little more than a cipher, and the episodes of his journey no more than beads upon a string, in *Witches Abroad* the protagonists change through their experience, and the different scenarios each make their own contribution to the development of the tale. (Mason 58)

Not just in fantasy but in fiction in general, “a quest is a process, in which [...] [t]he real reward is moral growth” (Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics* 4). Rather than continuing to litter his invention with parodies of the fantasy novels which had been

published on the growing market, Pratchett began working on the Discworld as a self-contained and independent secondary world. Yet like the protagonists of *LotR* during their travels across Middle-earth, Discworld characters began to change in their journeys through the parodies of quest fantasies (cf. Downes 56ff). Since most Discworld novels featured recurring characters, the increase in complexity began to be mirrored in the books themselves—references to previous adventures and character development would not be neglected. Eventually, Pratchett could not “ignore what has gone before” (*Lords and Ladies* 5) any longer since his creation demanded a greater attention to detail the further he removed it from mere parody. Yet as the linear quests of earlier novels were replaced with more complex and intertwined narratives, the role of humour became problematic again.

The more complexity a secondary world gains, the greater the dangers of repetition and contradiction become. Going back to Wolf's three major axioms of secondary worlds—invention, completeness, and consistency—they become exponentially important the more we learn or read about a secondary world:

The more complete a world is, the harder it is to remain consistent, since additional material has to be fit into existing material in such a way that everything makes sense. Completeness also demands more invention, as more of the world is revealed. The more invention a world contains, the more difficult it is to keep everything in that world consistent, since every Primary World default that is changed affects other aspects of the world, and those changes in turn can cause more changes. Likewise, consistency will limit what kind of invention is possible as a world grows. Therefore, all three properties must be considered simultaneously as the world takes shape and develops. (M.J.P. Wolf 34)

All conditions are fulfilled on the Discworld: It gains in completeness and consistency as new novels are written (i.e. invented) and published. Tolkien's credo of moderate and careful invention, however, is still violated: When the Discworld is introduced as “unusual and, possibly, impossible” at the beginning of *Witches Abroad* (ibid. 7), aesthetic illusion is if not destroyed then at least interrupted with this joke (cf. W. Wolf 2.1). Pratchett's fantasy fiction therefore contains a major problem: The secondary world itself is not free from being made fun of. Particularly in the first Discworld novels, we do encounter inconsistencies and alternate versions of the Discworld—some of which are even emphasised and derided. The fact that the Discworld is a fantasy, literally an invention, is not hidden from readers, and “we never quite forget that the Discworld is a game, an experiment” (Clute 25)—a fact made obvious as early as in the first novel where we watch the Discworld gods playing a board game with the characters we encounter in the book. Looking back at the previous section of this paper, Pratchett's fondness of parody can be destructive to suspension of disbelief because every time we recognise a parody of *LotR* or

another fantasy classic, literary belief may interrupted. When a Gollum-like creature emerges from the swamp in *Witches Abroad* and mutters “It’sss my birthday” (59), the humour works in the same manner as *BotR*’s straightforward parody—immersion is broken for the sake of a joke. To avoid too much explicitness with these references and to evade the trap of commercial parodies, a different approach was necessary.

For Pratchett, this meant taking the biggest weakness of his works—the humour threatening internal consistency and suspension of disbelief—and turning it into one of the Discworld’s greatest strengths, namely satire. Like Jonathan Swift and Oscar Wilde (cf. Butler et al., “Preface” viii and Brown 263), Pratchett began to employ humour not simply to evoke laughter but to address serious issues by ridiculing them:

Humour is much more than laughing at the ugly, whether it be at ugly people or ugly situations—at what Bakhtin labels the grotesque, the physically excessive body. It is a change to describe and to some extent criticise the real world. In his fantastical comic space Pratchett can, good-humouredly, offer such criticism. [...] It seems likely, as Socrates argued, that a writer like Pratchett knows how to write a tragedy, but for now we should appreciate the liberation through laughter he offers us. (Butler, “Theories” 87-88)

Over the years, the Discworld has lost its explicit pastiche nature and moved beyond merely making fun of stereotypical plots and protagonists. “The first Discworld novel [...] was almost entirely a simple parody of genre fantasy, but the baffling and wonderful thing about the Discworld novels is that they did not remain simply fantasy, parody, or anything else” (Hanes 286). Using humour in a serious manner, Pratchett’s on-going stories set on the Discworld eventually bound Wolf’s three axioms into an autonomous system of rules. Each new Discworld novel added a further layer of complexity and information to the secondary world, whose blank spots on the narrative maps began to thin. The hidden seriousness present in any true and thorough parody is now one of the core elements of the Discworld. In particular, the *Science of Discworld* books reflect this process of sophistication.

DEEP WORLD-BUILDING

It has become one of the common tropes of fantasy novels to provide certain details about their secondary world, and many of them copy the mythological-cosmological method from Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*. Yet while the Discworld pantheon consists of thousands of gods, Pratchett eschews a mythological background as a foundation for his secondary world. Instead, his *mode d’emploi* is one that seems to be rather paradoxical for a fantasy world: That of a science fiction

writer—a genre Pratchett is anything but a stranger to.⁴ Since science fiction is a literary genre that pays strong attention to detail and which follows “closely on the heels of science” (M.J.P. Wolf 97), its authors are known to spend great amounts of time to explain the technological developments of their visions of the future—the “big three” of science fiction, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, and Arthur C. Clarke, were authors keen on scientific accuracy or at the very least internal consistency within their novels. Taking the *Science of Discworld* books into account, Pratchett likewise investigates the inner workings of his creation and even attempts to uncover the Discworld's existence on an atomic level.

According to M.J.P. Wolf, “[t]he deepest level [of world-building] is the *ontological* realm itself, which determines the parameters of a world's existence, that is, the materiality and laws of physics, space, time, and so forth that constitute the world” (36, author's emphasis). Tolkien and Pratchett treat ontology with different measurements: Tolkien's account of the origins of Eä is a series of macrocosmic events. The quasi-deity Eru Ilúvatar and his angelic Ainur create the world on a grand scope—the famed Third Age of Middle-earth setting the stage for *The Hobbit* and *LotR* is but one part of the extensive history of Tolkien's secondary world. Compared to this comprehensive background, the beginnings of the Discworld remain unexplained.⁵ A Creator is alluded to in several novels and described in *Eric*, yet his portrayal is as ironic as that of any other Discworld character. Nevertheless, Pratchett does not overuse parody of the clichés of fantasy and science (fiction) to comic effect at the level of world-building. Even though the Discworld may exist “because the gods enjoy a joke as much as anyone” (*Sourcery* 13), there is a firm rule-set behind it—one that is adhered to in spite of irony. “Chaotic as it sometimes appears, the Discworld clearly runs on a special set of natural laws, or at least on guidelines” (Pratchett and Briggs 118). Here, we see one of the biggest differences between Tolkien and Pratchett as creators of worlds: Middle-earth reflects the historian's and linguist's approach whereas the Discworld clearly displays scientific and sociological influences. Tolkien describes his world on an epic scale spanning several ages and fills it with fictional genealogies and languages. Pratchett, on the other hand, focuses on the rules and mechanics that provide the existence and persistence of a secondary world—in other words, on the microcosmic. An insightful part of this microcosm is Pratchett's interpretation of one of fantasy's most defining features: magic.

Though we can find vastly different concepts of magic in fantasy fiction, “there is a remarkable consensus among fantasy writers [...]: magic, when present,

⁴ Indeed, among his first excursions into the worlds of fiction before creating the Discworld were the two science fiction novels *The Dark Side of the Sun* and *Strata*.

⁵ One possible origin is Pratchett's early science fiction novel *Strata* in which a disc-shaped Earth forms a major plot device. In the Discworld books themselves, however, no such precursor or any other source is ever given.

can do almost anything, but obeys certain rules" (Clute and Grant 615-16). Echoing the farcical yet stubbornly scientific experiments at the Academy of Lagado in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Discworld magic works using absurd ideas of real-world science, e.g. quantum physics, chaos theory and radiation (cf. Lee 242f). Perhaps the most prominent of these absurdities is the Discworld's *standing magical field*, a concept stating that "reality is extremely thin" on the Discworld and it thus "creates an extremely deep well in Reality [...] [causing] a permanent flux which, for want of a better word, we can call magic" (Pratchett and Briggs 118). By explaining magic in a scientific manner (absurd as this may be), Pratchett strips it of the mystery so prevalent in most works of fantasy while detracting nothing of its functionality within his secondary world. The rules to which Discworld magic is subject can consequently be measured with an almost mathematical precision. At its most basic level, magic consists of thaums, the definition of which is as follows:

The basic and traditional unit of magical strength. It has been universally established as the amount of magic needed to create one small white pigeon or three normal-sized billiard balls (a smaller measure for purposes of calculation is the milli-thaum). A thaumometer is used to measure the density of a magical field. (Pratchett and Briggs 350)

Pratchett seems to be taking cues from Arthur C. Clarke's famous dictum that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, coupled with the idea of reality being a relative concept on the Discworld. The localization of the world at the very edge of reality, close to impossibility, ensures that supernatural phenomena (such as magic) occur. While the emphasis on impossibility once more shows the fictional nature of Pratchett's secondary world to his readers, thus potentially breaking immersion, it is nonetheless part of a system of rules that the world does not simply follow but—as the next section will reveal—which is pivotal to the existence of the Discworld. This attempt to explain not just magic but the inner workings of a fantasy world with pseudo-scientific methods taken to absurd ends includes a topic of greater importance to literary studies: Narratology. Because without magic, there would be no stories—and without stories, the Discworld would not exist.

THE NARRATIVE IMPERATIVE

Throughout the Discworld novels, the vital connection between magic and its existence is emphasised: "You see, magic isn't just coloured lights and balls. Magic holds the world together" (*The Last Hero* 7). This saturation in magic is a key factor for the stories set on Pratchett's secondary world. In the same way that the power of thaums allows the creation of certain objects and magic tricks, they exert influence on narrative concepts as well. "Things that might *nearly* exist in a 'real' world [...] have no difficulty at all in existing in quite a natural state in the Discworld universe; so

here there *will* be dragons, unicorns, sea serpents and so on" (Pratchett and Briggs 118). Intrinsically linked to the Discworld's version of magic is narrative. More than just an abstract idea, it is a physical substance known as narrativium.

What runs Discworld is deeper than mere magic and more powerful than pallid science. It is *narrative imperative*, the power of story. It plays a role similar to that substance known as phlogiston, once believed to be that principle or substance within inflammable things that enabled them to burn. In the Discworld universe, then, there is narrativium. It is part of the spin of every atom, the drift of every cloud. It is what causes them to be what they are and continue to exist and take part in the ongoing story of the world. (*The Science of Discworld* 10)

While there undoubtedly is a lot of humour in this set of rules—they are a tongue-in-cheek scientific explanation for the supernatural elements of a secondary world, after all—they add to the consistency and completion of Pratchett's Discworld and thus fulfil Tolkien's ideal of immersion after all. The atomic emphasis of stories in the form of narrativium is Pratchett's version of what Wolf calls *narrative fabric*, an increase in the complexity of a fictional world when further information about it is provided:

As more information is added, the narrative material of a world grows more complex than that of a set of braids, and becomes what we might call a *narrative fabric*. [...] By allowing the audience to assemble narrative threads from world material, narrative fabric greatly increases a world's illusion of completeness, as well as the audience's engagement in the world. (M.J.P. Wolf 200-201, cf. also 33ff)

The increasing density of the Discworld's narrative fabric is furthermore in accordance with Mendlesohn's arguments concerning the immersive power of fantasy. Both the scientific excursions into the mechanics of the Discworld as well as the overall sophistication in plotting and characterisation in consequent novels add significance and believability to the secondary world; in short, they help "to deepen the immersion and build the world" (Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics* 63) and evoke what Tolkien calls "narrative art, story-making in its primary and most potent mode" (OFS 61). While Pratchett has always carefully stayed clear from the pitfalls of trying to emulate the linguistic and mythological depth of Middle-earth, he has certainly realised the importance of internal consistency and rules for a secondary world.

These features uncover the very core of the Discworld: it is a world literally driven by stories, by narrativium. The internal logic of this system introduces a consensus of reality: although located at the edge of reality, the denizens of the Discworld can influence reality by belief, a force so strong that it may reshape stories

and create objects out of mere thought. As a rule of thumb, the more people believe in something, the more real it is. On the Discworld, Death is hence the ultimate reality not because he stands at the end of life but because everyone believes in his existence. Due to this belief, events are often expected to turn out as they do in (clichéd) narratives—and “while events cannot change belief and expectations, belief and expectation *can* change events” (Moody 154). Narrativium is therefore the anchor for the stories that unfold on Pratchett’s secondary world, revealing another meta-fictional level and ensuring that stories follow certain patterns:

On Discworld, abstractions show up as *things*, so there is even a thing—narrativium—that ensures that everybody obeys the narrative imperative. [...] Even if a character tries to behave contrary to the story in which they find themselves, narrativium makes sure that the end result is consistent with the story anyway. (*The Science of Discworld* 267-68)

In Pratchett’s books, narrativium and the narrative imperative are the forces responsible for stereotypical plot elements that ought to prevail: As a “sense of predestination permeates Discworld” (Pratchett and Briggs 119), clichés are a force to be reckoned with, especially for the protagonists. Many Discworld novels show their struggle with narrative imperative⁶—at his best, Pratchett undermines the narrative expectations of clichéd fantasy novels with at times acerbic humour. Be it staged heroes challenging dragons in *Guards! Guards!* or corrupt fairy godmothers ruling the perfect fairy tale kingdom with a quasi-dictatorship in *Witches Abroad*, there are always serious topics addressed underneath the jokes (cf. Smith 186f & Butler, “Power” 299ff). Here, the Discworld shows if not postmodern then certainly meta-fictional qualities in its approach to storytelling: Pratchett “plunders popular culture” (Mason 55) but also myth and folklore to emphasise the stereotypical elements that characterise numerous works of fantasy.

Such playful rearranging also applies to the science of the Discworld. Apart from quantum physics and chaos theory, Pratchett has been inspired by a scientific story—the fictional element of phlogiston—to create his own fictional element called narrativium. Both this concept and its use in *The Science of Discworld* bear more than a passing resemblance to the role of narratives in real-world science:

‘Narrative’ is what is left when belief in the possibility of knowledge is eroded. The frequently heard phrase ‘the narratives of science’, popular in the new field of science studies, carries the implication that scientific discourse does not reflect but covertly constructs reality, does not discover truths but fabricates

⁶ In particular the novels featuring the Witches of Lancre, whose power depends on what people believe in.

them according to the rules of its own game in a process disturbingly comparable to the overt working of narrative fiction. (Ryan, "Narrative" 344)

Using Niels Bohr's model of an atom as a solar system, *The Science of Discworld* collaborators Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen point out the incorrectness of this model but at the same time acknowledge that the "[s]earch for understanding leads us to construct stories that map out limited parts of the future" (*The Science of Discworld II: The Globe* 248). In a similar very literal manner, Pratchett uses stories to ground his Discworld in the pseudo-scientific explanation of its existence. As we have seen, the Discworld stands on the margin between reality and impossibility, and narrativium enables the secondary world to exist at all, reflecting "Pratchett's interest [...] in the power of narrative expectation" (Mendlesohn, "Narrative" 264)—a power that pertains to reality no less than to fiction. Reminding ourselves once more of Tolkien's essay, "creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun" (OFS 65) and not mere fancy. The Primary World provides the building blocks for a secondary world, remote or modified as they may be (cf. Attebery 3f). Therefore, it is only logical that fantasy is to a certain extent a mirror of our own world, and the Discworld is no exception to that. As the series progressed, this "world and mirror of worlds" (*Moving Pictures* 9) explored new topics and ideas. Perhaps at the core of this examination of our world through the perspective of a secondary world is, once again, narrativium.

MENTAL NARRATIVIUM

In his book *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall points out how human beings are "addicted to story" and "spinning fantasies" (ibid. xiv & 11), be it in daydreams or science. By doing so, we create our own narrativium, namely one that exists in our minds. While narrativium naturally does not exist as a chemical element on our world, it is still *believed* in:

Discworld narrativium is a substance. It takes care of narrative imperatives, and ensures they are obeyed. On [...] our world, humans act as if narrativium exists here, too. We expect it not to rain tomorrow *because* the village fair is on, and it would be unfair (in both senses) if rain spoiled the occasion. (*The Science of Discworld II: The Globe* 24, authors' emphasis)

If we look beyond the jokes and parody, Pratchett's continuing examination of narratology and fictionality on his secondary world is nothing less than an exploration of how stories shape and influence our thinking and behaviour. The Discworld novels and the Discworld science books unravel what Taleb calls narrative fallacy:

We like stories, we like to summarize, and we like to simplify, i.e., to reduce the dimension of matters. [...] The narrative fallacy addresses our limited ability to look at sequences of fact without weaving an explanation into them, or, equivalently, forcing a logical link, an *arrow of relationship*, upon them. (Taleb 63-64, author's emphasis)

We tend to think in stories by our nature since they form a normal part of growing up (cf. Gottschall 22f) and of later adult life—be it fairy tales told by relatives, the on-going story of a television series, or the narratives we read in books.

Consequently, our minds are set for stories, whether mentally or on paper. It is therefore not surprising that the “most fundamental mental operations that we perform to extract a story out of a text are the same ones that we execute to interpret the behavior of our fellow humans and to make decisions in our own lives” (Ryan, “From Parallel Universes” 647). Our mental narrativium applies equally to fiction and to reality, and as Pratchett exemplifies in his novels, the two must not be mutually exclusive.

Part of the definition of fantasy is that its protagonists tend to know that they are in a Story of some sort, even if at first they do not know which one; at moments of RECOGNITION they find out just which Story it is that has, in some sense, *dictated* them. It would of course be injudiciously restrictive to claim that *all* fantasy texts convey a sense that their protagonists are under control of an already-existing Story, and that sooner or later they come to an awareness of the fact; it is, however, the case that many fantasy texts are clearly and explicitly constructed so as to reveal the controlling presence of an underlying Story, and that the protagonists of many fantasy texts are explicitly aware that they are acting out a tale. (Clute and Grant 901, authors' emphases)

While revealing the lighter side of tropes he makes fun of, Pratchett simultaneously uncovers the mechanisms which are at work behind stories. This is perhaps his most important discovery in the field of fantasy literature—certainly, it has had a decisive influence on the Discworld novels:

A theory that arose in my mind as a result of my reading, and later my writing, was that of narrative causality—the idea that there are “story shapes” into which human history, both large scale and at the personal level, attempts to fit. At least, a novelist would put it that way; it's probably more sensible to say that we ourselves for some reason have the story shapes in our mind, and attempt to fit the facts of history into them, like Cinderella's slipper [...]. And we like things in our stories that fit. We may have begun as *homo sapiens* but we have become *homo narrans*—story-making man. (Pratchett, “Imaginary” 166)

Pratchett's theory is in the same vein as what Gottschall describes as "Homo *fictus* (fiction man), the great ape with the storytelling mind" (xiv) and echoes Herman's idea of "narrative [...] as a powerful and basic tool for thinking" (163). As events happen in our lives, we tend to understand and interpret them in a pattern that forms a narrative. Discworld characters do the same—with the crucial difference that their world responds to such patterns and organises their lives around them. The only weapon against this narrative determinism is, ironically, common sense.

While rational thinking naturally appears to be an antidote to any supernatural element, fantasy "certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make" (OFS 65). For all its freedom of invention and humour, the Discworld does not reject reason: Discworld characters are remarkably down-to-earth for fantasy characters and display an unusual common sense towards their world and their role in it. They do not see themselves as "heroes" nor as any other pre-established archetypes. Granted, this is a common sense which is sometimes taken to absurd levels reminiscent of the works of Lewis Carroll, Jonathan Swift or G.K. Chesterton, but compared to stereotypical fantasy, the Discworld novels rely on a firm internal logic:

For what Discworld is, more than anything else, is . . . logical. Relentlessly, solidly logical. The reason it is fantasy is that it is logical about the wrong things, about those parts of human experience where, by tactic [sic] agreement, we don't use logic because it doesn't work properly. (Pratchett, "Imaginary" 160)

The absurdity of this common sense deliberately makes use of irony and paradox to achieve a sort of justification. But at its heart, it reflects Pratchett's literary endeavours: the mindset of Discworld logic invites readers not to abandon common sense and suspend disbelief—it challenges them to see the Discworld as a place where fantasy and rationalism can coexist and magic can be explained scientifically. In short, it allows us to see the workings of a secondary world and narrative beyond the actual story itself.

The parody of classic stories copies stereotypical patterns and places them on the Discworld to turn them on their head and cast unusual heroes as protagonists. In this regard, the Discworld is indeed a postmodern playground where fairy tales and myths, popular culture and high culture are rearranged and retold in innovative ways. Pratchett "does often do something akin to what Angela Carter has done with fairy stories: revisit them, not to undermine them in a spirit of rational scepticism, but to reveal them in a different light" (Brown 292). His preferred method to achieve this effect is humour; not as cheap jokes in the manner of *BotR* and *Barry Trotter* but as a parodist combination of realism and fantasy:

The comedy itself depended in part on puns, gags, and—often very obvious—jokes, but its mainspring was in the absurdities opened up by placing characters and tropes drawn from the fantasy genre in the context of a world that otherwise followed the rules of ordinary life, as conceived by English readers of the late twentieth century. (Mason 54-55)

Perhaps the most appealing feature of the Discworld is that it “is both a parody of a fantasy world and an engaging world in its own right” (Hanes 287). While literary belief may be challenged throughout a Discworld novel, there is depth beyond the jokes and the bric-a-brac employment of stereotypical fantasy elements. Tolkien’s suspension of disbelief is not broken but taken in another direction: An absurdity which nonetheless displays internal consistency and allows readers both to be immersed and learn about the construction of a secondary world. Pratchett’s Discworld is a mirror of pop culture and, more importantly, a critical reflection of fantasy and storytelling itself.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DANIEL LÜTHI is a PhD student at the University of Basel, Switzerland. He is currently working on his doctoral thesis about Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, space, and narratology. His areas of interest include literary geography, spatial theories, urban studies, fantasy and the fantastic, narrative theories, Romanticism, Gothic fiction, and popular literature.