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## ***Discworld and the Disciplines: Critical Approaches to the Terry Pratchett Works* Eds. Anne Hiebert Alton and William C. Spruiell**

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



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- Lindvall, Terry. *God Mocks: A History of Religious Satire from the Hebrew Prophets to Stephen Colbert*. New York UP, 2015.
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**DISCWORLD AND THE DISCIPLINES: CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE TERRY PRATCHETT WORKS.** Edited by Anne Hiebert Alton and William C. Spruiell. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2014. 9780786474646. 231 pp., ill. \$29.95. Kindle edition \$9.99.

THE EDITORS OF THIS VOLUME make the bold claim that Terry Pratchett could well be “regarded as the Chaucer of our time” for his insightful and humorous commentary on the human condition, but observe, correctly, that his choice of genre and sheer popularity make his *oeuvre* “not as attractive to literary critics as it might be otherwise” (8), a characteristic he shares with J.R.R. Tolkien. And as Lois McMaster Bujold has commented about her own Vorkosiverse, “series fiction [...] is difficult to teach within the time constraints of a semester” (Croft 2); the sheer mass of the Discworld series can make critical engagement with it, inside or outside of the classroom, a daunting task. This book makes a solid contribution to rectifying the situation. Secondly, many of the essays also demonstrate that fantasy is “the proper diet for the growing soul” (qtd. 8), a statement with which *Mythlore* readers will likely find themselves in agreement.

Alton and Spruiell note the “proliferation of Discworldiana” (3)—audio books, plays, films both live-action and animated, graphic and illustrated novels, cookbooks, maps, computer and board games, figurines, t-shirts, stamps, jewelry, conventions, even alcoholic beverages—as an indication that our definition of an author’s body of work or “text” must be very broadly expanded. I think perhaps in their introduction they blur the line too much between an author’s initial subcreation, authorized expansions of the work, and fan activity; the subsequent essays are clearer on this. But current literary theory may support their broad definition.

They are also on somewhat shaky footing in their application of the term *multidisciplinary*. Can Pratchett’s work be considered multidisciplinary simply because he mixed genres freely and drew on his knowledge of (using *Night Watch* as an example) “elements of criminal justice, history, philosophy, economics, geography, politics, and [...] physics” (4)? Can the use of paratextual

elements like mock-scholarly footnotes, typographic variation, and self-reference really be considered examples of multidisciplinary? On the other hand, they are on far more solid ground in framing works like *The Folklore of Discworld* and the *Science of Discworld* series as “appropriation[s] and reconstruction[s] of discourse types” (5) specific to certain types of non-fictional literature; the same might safely be said of the various Discworld maps, cookbooks, tour guides, and so on.

These quibbles with terminology should not be taken as criticisms of the collected essays, however, which are very clearly multidisciplinary in their approaches to Pratchett’s body of work. Roderick McGillis’s lead essay, for example, titled “*The Wee Free Men: Politics and the Art of Noise*,” unexpectedly applies the political and ethical thought of futurist painter Luigi Russolo to the evocative use of sound in Pratchett’s Tiffany Aching books, a series written for younger readers, and specifically to the joyously noisy race of the Nac Mac Feegles who play a large role in these books. In Russolo’s thought, noise is “provocative, creative, and stimulating [...] youthful and challenging to the status quo [and] in short, art—revolutionary art” (16).” For Pratchett, “noise makes us human, keeps us human, and brings us together”—it is “carnavalesque,” expressing all the contradictions of human life (16-17). McGillis notes that children’s books are often “more attuned to sound” and the narrator’s voice tends to “mimic orality,” citing *The Hobbit* as a prime example. Pratchett’s Nac Mac Feegle are stand-ins for the child reader—transgressive, exuberant, anarchic—and their antics can “alert young readers to the possibilities of transgression” and the way it can be “educative, healthy, and necessary for the free individual” (19). The highest good, and one the Wee Free Men wholeheartedly support, is “the human instinct for cooperation and care”; Pratchett’s constant theme is a concern with “communal responsibility and collective assistance” (21). As McGillis reminds us, “[t]he mind that loves, creates, and carouses joys in the things of the world” and thus exhibits hope for the future (24).

Co-editor Alton’s lengthy contribution to this volume, “Coloring in Octarine: Visual Semiotics and Discworld,” considers visual art related to Pratchett’s works. In order to limit this vast topic somewhat, she confines her attention to the cover and interior art for the novels, the illustrated books written by Pratchett, the fictional books within Discworld later published in our reality (like the children’s book *Where’s My Cow?*), and the published maps. What is multidisciplinary here is the way we read when visual images accompany the written word; the artist becomes more or less the author’s partner “in shaping the reader’s mental image and understanding of the text” (Shulevitz, qtd. in Alton 30). Though duly noting that illustration is as much a “despised ‘genre’” of art as fantasy is of literature (*pace* Le Guin, qtd. p. 28), Alton lists five basic

functions of illustration based on the theories of Lawrence Sipe: “representation, decoration, clarification, elaboration, and extension” (30). Alton then proceeds to a detailed discussion of the cover art (primarily by Paul Kidby and, earlier, Josh Kirby), showing, for example, how Kirby’s energetic and cartoon-like covers were well-suited to the parody-based humor of Pratchett’s early works, while Kidby’s more realistic depictions suited the shift to satire and social commentary in later books. Similarly, she addresses the other categories of illustration listed; her analyses of the children’s books *Where’s My Cow?* and *The World of Poo* are particularly insightful, and her discussion of the maps interestingly includes whether they would prove useful to actual inhabitants of Discworld itself. She concludes by observing that “good fantasy illustration enlightens readers by bringing images to life in an instantly familiar way, which allows us to see something for the first time but with a strong sense of recognition” (68).

The next essay, brief as it is, should probably come with some sort of warning, like a bottle of Wow-Wow Sauce, that it could take the top of your head clean off. Gray Kochlar-Lindgren’s fizzy roller-coaster of a piece, “Tell It Slant: Of Gods, Philosophy and Politics in Terry Pratchett’s Discworld,” considers the very nature of reality and language in the Discworld and our world, as it careens from *Hogfather* and Hegel to Deleuze, Derrida, and Didactylos, with a consideration of *Monstrous Regiment* and Knox’s “First Blast of the Trumpet” against it along the way. The author concludes, in the words of DEATH himself, that “TRICKERY WITH WORDS IS WHERE HUMANS LIVE” (90) and that Pratchett revels in this trickery, telling it “slant” while revealing the truth.

The interdisciplinarity in Caroline Webb’s “The Watchman and the Hippopotamus: Art, Play, and Otherness in *Thud!*” lies in the application of principles of art and play—human activities related by their non-utility and freedom of activity—to political concepts of the Other. “[I]nter-racial suspicion” (92) is a constant theme in the Discworld novels, and especially in the City Watch sub-series, where the great city of Ankh-Morpork’s sometimes uneasy absorption of immigrant populations so often drives the stories. In *Thud!* in particular, the many varieties of art represented, from landscape painting through children’s picture books (93), emphasize the way in which contemplating or creating art helps one “confront and critique the notion of the Other and the tensions [...] that obscure the commonality of the human” (93) by encouraging a change of perspective. The game of *Thud* itself is a sort of chess with unevenly matched sides—eight troll pieces versus thirty-two dwarf pieces—but players must switch off and play both sides during a match, requiring them to understand and master the “abilities and strategies appropriate to at least one species other than his or her own” (99) in order to

play the game competently. Yet again, we see that Pratchett's aim is to valorize "empathy [...], tolerance and cultural openness rather than [...] hatred" (106).

With "Counting Dangerous Beans: Pratchett, Style and the Utility of Premodified Bits," co-editor Spruiell also contributes a fairly lengthy piece, but much of the length is taken up by highly technical charts, as what he is doing here is a "corpus linguistics" study, applying the tools of stylistics analysis to detect the patterns that make up Pratchett's unique style.<sup>1</sup> This is a fairly new field, still trying in many ways to prove its worth; one may rightly ask "so what?" when confronted with a word or phrase-type frequency chart. Spruiell assures us that "word-counts" are "much more interesting than they sound" (109), and for one thing can be used to confirm or to test to destruction one's "hunches" about Pratchett's style (110) and the "Pratchesimilitude" (116) of imitators. One of the pitfalls of interdisciplinary work is that one cannot assume that readers will be familiar with the terminology, tools, and theory of all the disciplines in use, and thus Spruiell must devote several pages to linguistic and rhetorical theory and how it intersects with ideas about genre and humor; to the concept of basic "corpora" or bodies of sample writing and how specific corpora were chosen for this study (and the copyright issues complicating developing corpora for contemporary authors); and to tools of statistical analysis. Dense reading indeed for those of us whose native language is old-school literary criticism. Spruiell wryly concludes that "humor is notoriously resistant to algorithmic approaches" (142), perhaps requiring consideration of "amount of surprise *per time unit per reader per act of reading*," further adjusted for the blue-shifting caused by fast reading to get to the next good bit (145). One point of interdisciplinary interest within this volume itself (but unremarked upon by the editors) is that Spruiell's charts on Pratchett's "noise verbs" (129-130) nicely support McGillis's opening essay on noise in Pratchett's works for younger readers.

The final essay, Gideon Haberkorn's "Debugging the Mind: The Rhetoric of Humor and the Poetics of Fantasy," starts off promisingly, noting that "[h]umor can help us notice and correct mistakes our own mind makes in its meaning-making" and talking about Pratchett's work as flourishing in "the space opened up by the interplay between humor and fantasy" (160). But the opening sections fall prey to the worst temptation of writing about Pratchett: the temptation to just keep on quoting (alas, I know it all too well myself). An introduction to theories of humor (focusing on humor as a tool for "debugging the mind") is followed by numerous examples of Pratchett's puns, understatements and elisions, and self-disparaging irony. Haberkorn then

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Reid and Michael D.C. Drout have done similar corpus linguistics work with Tolkien's *oeuvre*.

moves on to the other element of his cross-disciplinary equation and provides a short history of modern fantasy and theories about the genre; much of this will already be familiar to most readers of *Mythlore*, at least. The point Haberkorn seems to be leading up to, but does not quite articulate clearly, is that the Todorovian definition of fantasy as the “moment of uncertainty [and] hesitation” (175) and the incongruity model of humor in which the “target” has to negotiate “at least two distinct and *opposed scripts*” (163) are roughly parallel, and Pratchett combines the two masterfully. But the true mind-debugging potential of Pratchett’s works arises from the way he uses story to make us question story, points out patterns so we will challenge the patterns we see, and leads readers to cheer on characters who subvert narrative causality. And Haberkorn does get to this concept of exploring “the role of the words in our heads, and how they control us,” but again, does not come straight out and state his conclusion clearly; it feels to me like I, as the reader, am having to do the work of drawing these conclusions. Well, perhaps that is part of the debugging process, in the end.

The volume concludes with bibliographies of: Pratchett’s works through 2014; articles, chapters, and monographs about Pratchett, with abstracts; interviews with Pratchett and with Paul Kidby; theses and dissertations; and relevant websites.

—Janet Brennan Croft

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Croft, Janet Brennan. Introduction. *Lois McMaster Bujold: Essays on a Modern Master of Science Fiction*. McFarland, 2013. pp. 1-6.



**THE HOBBIT AND TOLKIEN’S MYTHOLOGY.** Ed. Bradford Lee Eden. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2014. 236 pp. ISBN 978-0-7864-7960-3. \$29.95.

AS INDICATED IN EDEN’S INTRODUCTION, this book grew out of a 75<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebration of *The Hobbit* at a 2013 conference in Valparaiso, Indiana, featuring two plenary papers which turned into two of the best chapters included here, one by John D. Rateliff and one by Verlyn Flieger. It is unclear whether the rest of the essays were other papers presented at the conference, or solicited, or a combination of both; but the end result is a wide variety of perspectives on *The Hobbit*, from astronomy to theology to optics to media studies.