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Responsibility and Critical Thinking as Markers of Adulthood in Two Coming-of-Age Fantasy Series: Terry Pratchett's Tiffany Aching Novels and Jonathan Stroud's Bartimeus Trilogy

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Abstract

Empirical studies have found that young people do not conceptualize adulthood as something achieved by reaching various traditional milestones, but rather as the result of more intangible psychological processes. They overwhelmingly agree on the importance of two aspects: taking responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, and developing personal beliefs and values independently of one's parents or other influences. This paper explores the role that responsibility and critical thinking (as prerequisite to developing personal beliefs) play in the coming of age of the protagonists of two young adult fantasy series: Tiffany Aching in Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels and Nathaniel in Jonathan Stroud's Bartimaeus trilogy. While Pratchett and Stroud approach these issues from opposite directions—with one protagonist willing to take on responsibility and think independently, and the other long refusing to do so—they both essentially advocate the same values, suggesting that responsibility and critical thinking are not only markers of adulthood, but markers of being a good person. Both promise young readers that accepting responsibility and questioning the things they are told may not always come easy, but that doing so is inherently empowering.

Additional Keywords

Mythlore; Responsibility and Critical Thinking as Markers of Adulthood in Two Coming-of-Age Fantasy Series: Terry Pratchett's Tiffany Aching Novels and Jonathan Stroud's Bartimeus Trilogy; Anna Köhler

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RESPONSIBILITY AND CRITICAL THINKING AS
MARKERS OF ADULTHOOD IN TWO
COMING-OF-AGE FANTASY SERIES:
TERRY PRATCHETT'S *TIFFANY ACHING*
NOVELS AND JONATHAN STROUD'S
BARTIMAEUS TRILOGY

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ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS TODAY do not understand adulthood as something achieved by reaching various milestones (transitional events such as reaching a certain age, marriage, financial independence), but primarily as the fruition of “various subtle psychological processes” (Arnett 21, also cf. Nelson and Luster). Young adults consistently identify two markers of adulthood as the highest-ranking ones (i.e. the ones that participants near-universally agree on as indicators of personal maturity): Willingness to take responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions, and developing personal beliefs and values independently of one’s parents or other influences.¹ Young adult (YA) literature, for rather obvious reasons, frequently focuses on coming-of-age narratives, and fantasy is no exception to this: Many of the most popular works of our time centre on the teenage years of a protagonist as they try to find their place in the (magical) world. For young readers, fantasy literature in particular can offer both escape from and engagement with the issues they face in their everyday lives by presenting them with a world markedly different from our own, but also with protagonists going through a similar process as they themselves. This paper explores how two contemporary YA fantasy series—Terry Pratchett’s *Tiffany Aching* novels (2003–2015) and Jonathan Stroud’s *Bartimaeus* trilogy (2003–2005)—engage with the themes of personal responsibility and independent thinking as part of their protagonists’ path towards adulthood.

¹ While Arnett’s original study focuses on American subjects, similar answers to the question of what constitutes adulthood were given in follow-up studies conducted in other countries such as Sweden, Austria, and Greece, implying that Arnett’s findings are likely applicable to Western (individualistic) culture in general (cf. Nelson and Luster for an overview of the studies).

These two texts—similar enough at the surface level in that they are commercially successful, often comic British fantasy for young readers² centred on their protagonist’s magical education—approach the same questions and issues from opposite directions: The *Tiffany Aching* subseries of Pratchett’s *Discworld* novels depicts witches as fundamentally good (though not necessarily nice) people who care deeply about doing what is right for their communities. The protagonist Tiffany, a young witch who grows with the supernatural as well as the mundane challenges she faces, is a thoroughly admirable figure. While she constantly questions the society she grows up in as well as the conventions of witchcraft, this system of magic, rooted in a deep sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of others and requiring critical thought to see things—supernatural or not—for what they really are, is not inherently destructive—unlike that of Stroud’s *Bartimaeus* trilogy: These novels depict the development and gradual corruption of Nathaniel, a young magician’s apprentice growing up in a patriarchal society founded on magical oppression. Magicians in Stroud’s universe—a sort of alternate-history, modern-day version of London—do not have inherent supernatural powers, but instead spend years studying how to summon spirits and force them to do their bidding. The spirits—represented in the trilogy by the eponymous Bartimaeus, a djinni frequently summoned by Nathaniel—resent their enslavement and the physical pain that materializing in the magicians’ world causes them. They therefore constantly look for loopholes in their bindings that will allow them to kill their masters and be free, rendering the profession of magician a rather high-risk and, more importantly, an immoral one. In addition to the oppression of spirits, the ruling class of magicians oppresses commoners, who have no representation within the supposedly democratic government and are kept down through a combination of fear, misinformation, and propaganda. Motivated by selfishness and greed, the magicians themselves constantly strive for more power. Within this system, there is no room for Nathaniel to show any sort of empathy for the oppressed (either the spirits or the commoners) because this would immediately be construed as a weakness to be exploited by other magicians. In short, while responsibility and critical thinking are not just encouraged, but prerequisites for being a competent witch on the Disc, Stroud’s magicians largely escape accountability for the consequences of their actions, and Nathaniel must learn to question the propaganda he has been fed throughout his childhood and confront the consequences of his actions within a system that grants him

² Neither of the series is explicitly sold as either children’s or YA literature. The *Tiffany Aching* books are generally marketed as “for younger readers”; the back cover of Stroud’s *The Amulet of Samarkand* proclaims it as suitable for “readers of all ages”. Both series confront their readers with increasingly dark and adult themes as the protagonists grow older and can be seen as crossing from children’s to YA literature as they progress.

incredible privilege. Through the analysis of responsibility and critical thinking as two core markers of adulthood in the *Tiffany Aching* series and the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, this paper sheds light on the strategies that YA fantasy literature employs to instill these values in its readers.

RESPONSIBILITY

Arguably, the values presented in YA literature are indicative of what kind of adult society wants to produce. Since taking responsibility for one's actions and their consequences is near-universally considered an essential aspect of adulthood, it is not surprising that it is a common theme in coming-of-age narratives—the importance of responsibility in both of the fantasy series discussed here showcases the value we place on such behaviour in our everyday lives. It is important to note here that this should not only include responsibility for one's actions, but also for one's *inaction*: Choosing to stand by and watch instead of interfering still has consequences, and what we choose to do or not to do directly impacts the well-being of others.

Pratchett and Stroud have created two oppositional systems of magic and magical education, essentially approaching the theme of responsibility from two different directions: Pratchett's novels present their readers with a heroine who is willing to take on responsibility from the very start—it is inextricably linked to her desire to become a witch in the first place, even though she does not always feel up to the task. In contrast, Nathaniel in Stroud's *Bartimaeus* trilogy undergoes a less straightforward development, learning at age twelve that owning up to the consequences of his actions is in fact detrimental to his ambition of becoming a successful magician. It is only after various trials and tribulations force him to question the system he lives in that he (then aged seventeen) becomes willing to face the consequences of what he has done. The two series approach the topic of personal responsibility from opposite directions, but both present their readers with protagonists whose coming of age includes the *struggles* of taking responsibility: doing so in situations when they would much rather run and let others, preferably grown-ups, solve their problems or take the blame for their actions.

“EVEN IF IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT IT'S YOUR RESPONSIBILITY”: TIFFANY

Witches in Pratchett's universe are respected (though not always liked) authority figures in usually rural communities, where they dispense remedies and advice, assist births and sit up with the dying, and generally ensure that the vulnerable in their community are taken care of. To become a witch requires some innate talent for magic, but this alone is not enough: a witch must be willing to take responsibility for anything that is put in front of her. It is therefore not only her innate gift for magic that makes Tiffany Aching, a young girl

growing up in a shepherding community, a “natural born witch”, but her “instinctive ability to accept responsibility, to cope with threats to herself and others” (Pratchett and Simpson 280). Tiffany displays this sense of responsibility from an early age: It is at the heart of her decision to become a witch. As a nine-year-old in the first book in the series, *The Wee Free Men*, she witnesses the death of Mrs Snapperly, an old woman who lives alone and looks like a fairy-tale witch and is therefore blamed by the villagers for the disappearance of a child. The villagers burn Mrs Snapperly’s cottage, and she freezes to death the following winter. Tiffany goes to investigate and, upon finding no evidence that Mrs Snapperly committed any crime, decides, perhaps counterintuitively, that she herself wants to become a witch:

“Tell me why you still want to be a witch, bearing in mind what happened to Mrs Snapperly?”

“So that sort of thing doesn’t happen again,” said Tiffany.
(Pratchett, *The Wee Free Men* [Wee] 48)

Her decision is influenced by the philosophy of her late grandmother, who taught her to “[s]peak up for those who don’t have voices” (*Wee* 43), thereby instilling in her “a keen sense of responsibility” (Croft, “Nice, Good, or Right” 154). Tiffany sets out on her path to becoming a witch because inaction—standing by and watching others do wrong—also has consequences that she feels responsible for. When she is warned that something bad is coming, Tiffany—still nine years old and with no formal training as a witch—asks whether she herself can stop it, impressing her fellow witch Miss Tick: “You said, ‘Can I stop it?’, not ‘Can anyone stop it?’ or ‘Can we stop it?’ That’s good. You accept responsibility. That’s a good start” (*Wee* 43–44). In this sense, Tiffany has already attained an important marker of adulthood at age nine—she is an incredibly mature child, and this in turn qualifies her to become a witch. In Pratchett’s *Discworld* novels, taking responsibility for the well-being of their community is the “ethic that defines the witch” (Webb 157). This is reiterated again and again throughout the series: “You were there, you had the hat, you did the job. That was a basic rule of witchery: *It’s up to you*” (*A Hat Full of Sky* [*Hat*] 201, Pratchett’s italics). This is the core of witchcraft, portrayed by Pratchett as a kind of everyday heroism that communities desperately need. As a result, witchcraft on the Disc is less about grandiose acts of magic—though Pratchett’s witches do frequently and often unnoticedly keep their villages safe from supernatural invasions—and more about the mundane but equally important work of taking care of others: it is “mostly about helping people by doing quite

ordinary things”³ (Pratchett and Simpson 285). Tiffany struggles with this throughout the series because her everyday work is thankless, but as she grows up she comes to accept this as the necessary reality of witchcraft—most days, the job in front of you is not one of fighting off supernatural threats through spectacular displays of magic, but one that needs to be done nevertheless. Boulding concludes that the witches’ profession “commits them to being particularly good human beings, and to ensuring that the good life be available for others by redressing wrongs—such as domestic violence—and ensuring that vulnerable people are cared for” (§12).

However, the subsequent novels showcase that even for Tiffany, who is so naturally inclined to take responsibility for both her own actions and the well-being of others, this is a struggle. In the second book, *A Hat Full of Sky*, her careless use of her ability to step outside of her own body (primarily as a means of looking at herself, since she has no full-length mirror) invites in the hiver, an ancient invisible entity that takes over the mind of its host, attempts to give them whatever they want (which is often the opposite of what they *need*), and eventually drives them insane. During her subsequent possession, her own worst urges are brought to the forefront, unchecked, and she steals an old man’s savings and spends them on frivolities. Once she has managed to expel the hiver, she is forced to confess what she has done and take responsibility for her actions, and while she would really rather be anywhere else, she accepts that she cannot escape this:

No dragon’s cave was ever approached as carefully as the cottage in the overgrown garden.

[... Tiffany] opened the gate and walked up the path.

You couldn’t say: It’s not my fault. You couldn’t say: It’s not my responsibility.

You could say: I will deal with this.

You didn’t have to want to. But you had to do it.

Tiffany took a deep breath and stepped into the dark cottage. (*Hat* 259–260)

Accepting responsibility for one’s mistakes is one of the core themes of the third book in the series, *Wintersmith*. Now almost thirteen years old, Tiffany unthinkingly joins a Dark Morris dance welcoming the winter, thereby capturing the attention of the Wintersmith, the personification of winter, who in turn mistakes her for the Summer Lady, the personification of summer. The Wintersmith is enchanted with her and tries to impress her by covering the

³ It does, however, help the witches’ social standing and the effectiveness of their remedies and advice if they look and sound magical (cf. Pratchett and Simpson 285).

world in ice and snow, threatening the shepherding community that is Tiffany's home, and she must find a way to restore balance and end the winter. More than any of the other books, *Wintersmith* explicitly links responsibility for the consequences of one's actions to adulthood. Miss Treason, the witch Tiffany is apprenticed to, is disappointed that Tiffany has committed such a childish mistake: "Miss Treason hadn't shouted, hadn't even raised her voice. She'd just sighed and said, 'Foolish child,' which was a whole lot worse, mostly because that's just what Tiffany knew she'd been" (*Wintersmith* 69). Tiffany tries to explain that joining the dance was an accident:

"It was my feet! I said I didn't mean to!" [...]

"Oh, that's all right then," said Miss Treason. "Once again, you didn't mean it. A witch takes responsibility! Have you learned *nothing*, child?"

Child. That was a terrible thing to say to anyone who was almost thirteen. (79, Pratchett's emphasis)

Tiffany is angry at herself for her behaviour — she feels like she should be above careless, impulsive actions not only because she is "almost thirteen", but because she is a witch: "A witch didn't do things because they seemed a good idea at the time! That was practically cackling!" (70).⁴ Witches on the Disc are by definition more sensible and responsible than ordinary people — in other words, "witches are the grown-up grown-ups" (Haberhorn and Reinhardt 51), and as such Tiffany's mistake weighs heavily on her. Tiffany learns early on that since she is a witch, whether she is truly to blame or not is irrelevant: "*Even if it's not your fault it's your responsibility. Witches deal with things*" (*Hat* 57). While she doubts whether she is strong enough to fight back the Wintersmith and save her community's lambs from a snowstorm, she accepts that the situation, while unfair, is her fault and her responsibility (*Wintersmith* 16–20), and she is prepared to pay any price to make it right: "This I choose to do. If there is a price, this I choose to pay. If it is my death, then I choose to die. Where this takes me, there I choose to go. I choose. This I choose to do" (18–19). By taking responsibility, Tiffany "claims her right to agency" and "accepts the burden of adulthood" (Donaldson 160). At the end of the novel and after her defeat of the Wintersmith, Tiffany has grown considerably as a person through her

⁴ *Cackling*, to Discworld witches, is a shorthand referring to going bad, to losing sight of right and wrong and therefore eventually becoming a fairy-tale wicked witch: "It meant you thinking that the fact you knew more than anyone else in your village made you better than them. It meant thinking that right and wrong were negotiable. And, in the end, it meant you 'going to the dark', as the witches said. That was a bad road. At the end of that road were poisoned spinning-wheels and gingerbread cottages" (*Wintersmith* 29).

acceptance of responsibility, finding both agency and a sense of self-assurance. She meets the Summer Lady, who offers her a reward:

“You saved the world from the Wintersmith!”

“Actually, I saved it from a silly girl, Miss Summer. I put right what I put wrong.”

“One simple mistake? You’d be a silly girl not to accept a reward.”

“I’d be a sensible young woman to refuse one,” said Tiffany, and it felt good to say that. “Winter is over. I know. I’ve seen it through. Where it took me I chose to go. I chose when I danced with the Wintersmith.”
(385)

Tiffany refuses to be rewarded for fixing her own mistakes, and in doing so claims her own adulthood: Only a child—a silly girl—would expect a reward for taking personal responsibility, and by the end of the novel, Tiffany has become a “sensible young woman.” This theme continues further into the fourth novel in the series: In *I Shall Wear Midnight*, Tiffany has concluded her apprenticeship and taken over her own steading as a witch, which brings its own challenges. Tiffany is not always sure she is up to the task, but is reluctant to ask other witches for help because she wants to prove herself worthy of the trust placed in her:

Other witches would probably come and help if she asked, *of course*, but although they wouldn’t say so, this might mean that you couldn’t cope with responsibility, weren’t up to the task, weren’t sure, *weren’t good enough*. (*I Shall Wear Midnight* [*Midnight*] 18, Pratchett’s emphases)

Amidst her new responsibilities, she finds herself threatened by the Cunning Man, the spirit of a long-dead witch hunter who was awakened by the powerful magic Tiffany used to defeat the Wintersmith. He spreads distrust and hatred of witches wherever he goes, and Tiffany must defeat him to prevent the death of innocent bystanders who are used as scapegoats as a result of the toxic anti-witch sensibilities that the Cunning Man brings. Once again, Tiffany briefly questions whether any of this is really her fault, and is in turn asked, “Is that the sarcastic whine of a little girl or the rhetorical question of a witch with her own steading?” (170). Because she is a witch, it does not *matter* whether she is to blame or not, she must take action anyway, and doing so makes her an adult rather than a little girl. In the end, she not only decides to take on the Cunning Man, but to do so alone without the help of the other witches because she is determined to prove herself worthy—as a witch and a responsible adult—of her steading: “My steading. My mess. My problem” (304). Tiffany’s stubborn determination to see things through on her own gains her the respect of her

peers, authority in her community, and a “place where [she] fit[s]” in society (329).

“SOME CHILDISH CONCEPT OF NOBILITY”: NATHANIEL

In sharp contrast to Tiffany Aching, Nathaniel, the young magician protagonist of Stroud’s *Bartimaeus* trilogy, has no choice when it comes to his apprenticeship. In this universe, poor commoners are encouraged to give up their children to magicians, who are not allowed to conceive children of their own to prevent the formation of feuding dynasties, and so Nathaniel is sold as a six-year-old to become a magician’s apprentice. While he is stripped of any agency, Nathaniel is talented and ambitious, but constantly underestimated and underchallenged by his master, Mr Underwood, who himself is a mediocre magician. In the first book, *The Amulet of Samarkand*, twelve-year-old Nathaniel secretly summons the djinni Bartimaeus to take revenge on Simon Lovelace, an influential magician who has previously publicly humiliated Nathaniel. Nathaniel spies on him and tasks Bartimaeus with stealing a valuable magical artefact, the eponymous amulet, from Lovelace. Things quickly spiral out of control as Nathaniel comes to realise that the amulet is an integral part of a coup against the government that Lovelace is planning. When Lovelace traces the theft back to the house of Mr Underwood and confronts Nathaniel’s master, Nathaniel steps up and takes responsibility for the theft. He is terrified of doing so, but idealistic enough to do it anyway, because he believes that “[r]unning and hiding were not the actions of an honourable magician” (Stroud, *The Amulet of Samarkand* [*Amulet*] 310). Underwood is only too happy to let Nathaniel take the blame to escape punishment himself, going so far as to tell Lovelace to kill him (316), but Lovelace wants to know about Nathaniel’s motives:

“What possessed you to own up to your action? I might have dealt quietly with Underwood and left you alone.” [...]

“Because it wasn’t his fault,” Nathaniel said, stolidly. “He knew nothing. Your quarrel was with me, whether you knew so or not. He should be left out of it.” [...]

“Some childish concept of nobility, is it?” [Lovelace] said. “I guessed as much. The honourable course of action. Heroic, but stupid. Where did you get that notion from? Not from Underwood here, I bet.” (315)

Lovelace makes clear that he perceives Nathaniel’s actions as those of an idealistic child: An experienced adult magician such as himself or Underwood would never take responsibility for their own mistakes if they can let someone else take the fall instead. As he prepares to kill both Nathaniel and his master, Lovelace gives him some final advice:

“You see, John,⁵ Underwood and I are giving you a final lesson in the art of being a magician, and perhaps with our help you will understand your error in owning up to me today. You believed in the notion of the honourable magician, who takes responsibility for his actions. Mere propaganda. Such a thing does not exist. There is no honour, no nobility, no justice. Every magician acts only for himself, seizing each opportunity he can.” (316–317)

This philosophy is in sharp contrast to the ethics of witchcraft in Pratchett’s novels, with their focus on the importance of personal responsibility as a marker of both adulthood and one’s prowess as a witch. Unlike the witches, Stroud’s magicians are not preoccupied with doing what is morally right and have created a system in which responsibility and accountability are childish ideals rather than markers of adulthood. Nathaniel manages to escape, but Lovelace sets fire to the house and kills both Underwood and his wife, Nathaniel’s only mother figure. Their deaths weigh heavy on his conscience, but he insists that since he did not start the fire, they are not his fault (339). When Bartimaeus disagrees and tells him to accept the consequences of his actions, Nathaniel instead blames the djinni: “If you hadn’t led them to the house none of this would have happened! [...] It’s all your fault and I’m going to pay you back!” (340). At this point, Nathaniel has already decided to follow Lovelace’s advice and henceforth act only in his own self-interest (337). If willingness to take responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions are markers of adulthood and personal growth, then Nathaniel regresses by abandoning his ideals and giving in to the toxic and oppressive system that the magicians have created. His gradual corruption within this system is further detailed in the second novel, *The Golem’s Eye*: After foiling Lovelace’s coup at the end of *The Amulet of Samarkand*, he becomes a favourite of the Prime Minister and, aged fourteen, starts working as an assistant to the Head of Internal Affairs, who tasks him with defeating the Resistance movement among the commoners. While Nathaniel has not yet given up entirely on his notions of honourable conduct, the magicians around him continue to care only for their own interests: Whenever something goes wrong, both his boss and his new master foist all responsibility on Nathaniel (*The Golem’s Eye* [Golem] 87, 203, 382). Ultimately, Nathaniel forfeits these ideals when he promises a commoner, the Resistance member Kitty Jones, her freedom in exchange for cooperation in a case and then goes back on his word, arguing that “[p]romises made to terrorists are scarcely obligatory” (521). Bartimaeus sees this as the moment in which Nathaniel loses

⁵ Magicians hide their birthnames because they give others power over them; at age twelve, Nathaniel is given the public name of John Mandrake in a coming-of-age ceremony.

his childhood self and truly becomes his public persona of John Mandrake (563). For Nathaniel, growing up within this system does not mean living up to higher standards and ideals, but rather giving them up in order to succeed and fulfil his own ambitions with no regard for the well-being of others. His complicity in the oppression of others has corrupted him: At the start of the final novel, *Ptolemy's Gate*, seventeen-year-old Nathaniel has risen to the post of Information Minister and is responsible for spreading war propaganda and recruiting commoners to fight and die for the Empire (*Ptolemy's Gate* [Ptolemy] 20–22).⁶ This is not, however, where his development ends—three key events occur that lead Nathaniel to reconsider the consequences of his actions: First, Bartimaeus almost dies in his service after Nathaniel has kept him from returning to the Other Place (the spirit world) for too long and sent him on a mission to gather intelligence in his weakened state. In a spur-of-the-moment decision, Nathaniel dismisses Bartimaeus (granting him leave to return to his own world) before the djinni can share the findings from his mission, thereby putting Bartimaeus's survival ahead of his own interests. The other magicians are shocked at this decision and delighted to have found his weakness, calling him a "sentimental fool" (163). Nathaniel himself struggles with his decision:

He should have squeezed [the information] out of his slave without a second thought. But instead . . . he had let him go. It was absurd! [...]

Sentimental and weak . . . Perhaps Farrar was right. John Mandrake, minister of the government, had acted against his own interests. Now he was vulnerable to his enemies. Even so, no matter how much cold fury he tried to muster—against Bartimaeus, against Farrar, and most of all against himself—he knew he could not have done otherwise. The sight of the djinni's small, broken body had shocked him too much: it had prompted an impulsive decision. (179–180, Stroud's italics)

To show care for the well-being of others, particularly for that of spirits, is so antithetical to everything this magician society stands for that it unsettles Nathaniel's carefully cultivated public persona. Bartimaeus is one of Nathaniel's last reminders of the idealistic child he once was, and this near-death experience at his hands leads him to seek out Ms Lutyens, one of his childhood tutors. This

⁶ The contrast between Nathaniel's and Tiffany's daily work is stark: Most magicians in Stroud's universe work in government or other professions that allow them to accumulate wealth and power. The notion of altruistic work similar to the everyday heroism of Pratchett's witches is entirely alien to them, and while Nathaniel *believes* that his work is for the good of the community, Stroud makes the negative impact of his government work perfectly clear through chapters that switch from Nathaniel's rather myopic narrative perspective to that of Bartimaeus and Kitty—those directly affected by Nathaniel's everyday choices and actions.

confrontation is the second key event in Nathaniel's redemption arc. He expects her to approve of his success and be proud of how far he has come, but instead, she holds him responsible for his role in the creation of war propaganda that says "that death is a fit price to pay for the survival of the Empire" (230). She tells him that since he is no longer the boy he used to be, she has "nothing in common" with him (232). The third key event follows shortly thereafter, when Nathaniel comes face to face with Kitty Jones once more. She, too, calls him out on his complicity in an oppressive system, and while he still tries to deflect his own responsibility for the actions of other magicians (255), he cannot shake off her words. He finds he no longer wants to play the role of John Mandrake:

But he had long been tired of the other ministers, and sickened by their moral corruption, by their self-preserving greed. It had taken until today, with the disdain in the eyes of Ms Lutyens and of Kitty Jones, to recognize that sickness in himself. Well, he would not sink back into the routines of the Council! Decisive action was needed to save the country from their mismanagement.⁷ (291)

The first time that Nathaniel achieves a true sense of agency is when he decides to take responsibility for the government's faults and make changes himself. In short, this is when he takes his first real step towards adulthood in years. However, it never quite comes to this as Nathaniel is then swept up in another magician's conspiracy to take over the government, in the course of which most of the high-ranking magicians are killed and an uncontrollably powerful spirit is set loose in London. As Nathaniel, Bartimaeus, and Kitty are forced to work together to stop the ensuing carnage, Nathaniel finally realizes his own responsibility for the death of commoners as a direct result of his ambitions (334) and apologizes to Kitty for everything he has done (360). In the end, Nathaniel and Bartimaeus choose to go after the destructive spirit, fully aware that they are unlikely to survive the encounter (501–503). Through this ultimate act of taking on responsibility for something that is not directly his fault at great personal risk—reminiscent of Tiffany's confrontation with the Wintersmith, and her mantra, "This I choose to do. If there is a price, this I choose to pay. If it is my death, then I choose to die" (Pratchett, *Wintersmith* 18–19)—Nathaniel gains agency, maturity, and redemption. The novel ends with

⁷ It is worth noting that while Nathaniel starts to reflect on his own actions here, he does not fully realise the oppressive nature of the system he supports. His gripe is with the other magicians' corruptness and what he sees as 'mismanagement'; he does not object to the fact that the entire system is built on slavery. In this scene, he instead envisions himself as a new, more moral leader—because he is convinced "[t]he commoners needed to be led" (291).

Nathaniel sacrificing his own life while dismissing Bartimaeus at the last second to save his, the government destroyed and a group of surviving magicians and outspoken commoners working together to create a new system of government.

To sum up, Pratchett and Stroud present their readers with two opposite systems of magic, one rooted in a deep sense of responsibility for both one's own actions and the well-being of others, and the other based on selfish ambition that is incompatible with any real accountability. Pratchett explicitly links the taking on of responsibility to adulthood, while Stroud stresses the need for responsibility as a basic requirement of being a *decent person*. Pratchett's witches—fundamentally good people—see responsibility as not only a requirement of adulthood but as something worth striving for, whereas Stroud's magicians in their moral bankruptcy see it as a sign of childish naivete. Stroud shows the corruptive power of a system created by those with no accountability, a system in which growing up means giving up one's childhood ideals and learning to act only in one's own interest. It is impossible for Nathaniel to come of age within this system and not be tainted by it, and he needs other people to hold him responsible for his actions before he can do so himself and truly grow as a person. This external influence is in sharp contrast with Tiffany's intrinsic motivation: She is a very mature child inclined to take on responsibility from a young age. While she does struggle at times, she grows with the challenges she faces and gains agency, the respect of her peers, and a sense of belonging. Nathaniel similarly gains agency when he is finally ready to take responsibility for his actions, as well as the respect of those he has wronged yet has come to care for, and thereby restores his personal integrity and achieves redemption.

CRITICAL THINKING

Deciding on one's personal beliefs and values independently of one's parents or other influences is the second-highest rated marker in Arnett's study of what it means to be an adult. Doing so requires critical thinking—questioning the things we are taught as children and take for granted, including the systems we live in and the traditions we adhere to, so that we can actively decide who we want to be and which values we want to live by. Critical thinking skills are vital to both Tiffany's and Nathaniel's personal development, but as with responsibility, they start from very different places: Critical thinking is a skill that Tiffany has had (and made copious use of) throughout her childhood, whereas Nathaniel, despite his intelligence, does not truly question the things he is taught until he is exposed to other people's viewpoints at age seventeen. Independent thinking, changing his mind and questioning the system he benefits from at the expense of others is an essential part of his personal growth and eventual redemption. Both Pratchett and Stroud thereby encourage their readers to think for themselves and examine the things they take for granted.

“WHY NOT DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY?”: TIFFANY

As with responsibility, Tiffany has a natural inclination towards critical thinking that motivates her decision to become a witch. When asked why she wants to be a witch, she recalls reading the *Goode Childe's Booke of Faerie Tales*, which features plenty of wicked witches but no actual evidence for their wickedness (Pratchett, *Wee* 37). Reflecting on the limited roles that the fairy tales offer, she realizes that she does not have the right hair-colour to be a princess, which means that she can only become a servant —

Or you could be the witch. Yes! You didn't have to be stuck in the story. You could change it, not just for yourself, but for other people. You could change the story with a wave of your hand. (*Midnight* 136)

Even as a young girl, she questions the messages that these fairy tales convey, and finds empowerment in breaking free from their stifling structures: “for Tiffany, becoming a witch represents precisely resistance to stultifying and destructive social conventions” (Webb 159). Furthermore, Tiffany connects these overly didactic fairy tales with the case of Mrs Snapperly, the old woman turned out of her house and killed because she happened to look like a fairy-tale witch, and realizes the danger of uncritically taking stories at their word, having seen the real-world consequences of unthinking action:

A lot of the stories were highly suspicious, in her opinion. There was the one that ended when the two good children pushed the wicked witch into her own oven. Tiffany had worried about that after all that trouble with Mrs Snapperly. Stories like this stopped people thinking properly, she was sure. She'd read that one and thought, Excuse me? *No one* has an oven big enough to get a whole person in, and what made the children think they could just walk around eating people's houses in any case? [...] The stories *weren't real*. But Mrs Snapperly had died because of stories. (*Wee* 63, Pratchett's emphases)

In this context, Donaldson concludes that “Pratchett equates maturity with using one's cognitive abilities to see through story's illusions” and “thus urges his readers to challenge stereotypes and decide the truth for themselves” (160). Tiffany's gift for critical thinking includes a constant awareness of her own thought processes, a skill referred to Second (and sometimes Third and Fourth) Thoughts:

First Thoughts are the everyday thoughts. Everyone has those. Second Thoughts are the thoughts you think about the way you think. People who enjoy thinking have those. Third Thoughts are thoughts that watch

the world and think all by themselves. They're rare, and often troublesome. Listening to them is part of witchcraft. (*Hat* 71)

This skill keeps Tiffany grounded when the Cunning Man creeps into her head and she finds herself thinking about murdering a woman who is accusing her of being wicked: "First Thoughts, Second Thoughts, Third Thoughts, and the very rare Fourth Thoughts lined up in her head like planets to scream in chorus: *That's not us! Watch what you are thinking!*" (*Midnight* 209, Pratchett's italics). The fact that her critical thinking extends to her own thought processes "keeps her from abusing her power, because she is constantly analyzing herself and the situation honestly" (Haberkorn and Reinhardt 54). Like responsibility, a propensity for critical thinking is a requirement for being a competent witch: "the process of becoming a witch (and an adult, too) is to become a mentally independent individual" (ibid. 49–50). In terms of responsibility and critical thinking, Pratchett's witches are indeed "the grown-up grown-ups" (ibid. 51)—an above-average level of maturity is essential to the profession. Tiffany is an excellent witch because she always asks the right questions (*Hat* 84), giving her strong problem-solving skills that, for example, allow her to defeat the hiver by finding out what it wants and needs (*Hat* 300). Haberkorn and Reinhardt find that

inquiry and critical thinking, observation and evidence, logic and rational analysis are the means a witch uses to understand and describe her world and solve the problems she encounters. She approaches tradition and faith with skepticism, and she questions anything and everything. (50)

Tiffany's willingness to question established traditions is clearest in the final *Discworld* novel, *The Shepherd's Crown*: After the death of Granny Weatherwax, the most influential witch on the Disc, Tiffany is chosen as her successor, making her the unofficial leader of the Disc's witches. Tiffany struggles with the pressure to live up to the expectations placed upon her, which makes her feel "very young" (*The Shepherd's Crown* 68): "*How can I possibly tread in the footsteps of Granny Weatherwax? She is . . . was . . . unfollowable!*" (53, italics in original). Soon after, however, Tiffany's Second Thoughts point out that she does not *need* to follow in Granny's footsteps: "Why? Why not do things differently? Why should we do things how they have always been done before?" (69). Tiffany realizes that there is no point in trying to be Granny Weatherwax: "I want to do it my way. Not how the other witches think it should be done. I can't be Granny Weatherwax for them. I can only be me, Tiffany Aching" (121). This realization frees her up to truly be herself and make her own choices, such as breaking with long-standing witchcraft traditions by taking on a boy as an apprentice because she can see no reason why a boy should be excluded from

witchcraft on the basis of his gender (150). Her critical thinking allows her to do away with stifling traditions and ultimately gives her confidence as well as a stable sense of self. Before the final supernatural confrontation of the series, she briefly finds herself wishing that she “had brought Granny Weatherwax’s boots to wear for this fight. They would have given me strength. And then she stopped this thought. No. This is *my* land. *My* turf. *My* feet. *My* boots. *My* way . . .” (294, Pratchett’s emphases). By the end of *The Shepherd’s Crown*, Tiffany is sure of who she is and what she must do—in short, she has truly come of age.

“TO BE A MAGICIAN IS THE GREATEST CALLING”: NATHANIEL

Nathaniel, for all his intelligence and ambition, is not a critical thinker. In fact, it is his failure to question the things he is taught as a child that most hinders his personal development—he cannot begin to take responsibility for his wrongdoings as long as he refuses to even consider he might not be in the right. When Nathaniel is six years old, Underwood deliberately traumatizes him by locking him in a room filled with minor spirits tasked to torment him, thus instilling fear and hatred of spirits in Nathaniel—the foundations upon which the magical oppression of this society is built (Stroud, *Amulet* 39–46). This event is deeply formative: “This was one of Nathaniel’s earliest experiences. He did not speak of it to anyone, but the shadow of it never left his heart” (46). Furthermore, Nathaniel is taught early on that to be a magician is “the greatest privilege that any boy or girl could have” and that his “parents have made the ultimate sacrifice by giving [him] up for this noble destiny” (69), and quickly adopts this viewpoint. Even after Lovelace’s lesson that the notion of the honourable magician is “[m]ere propaganda” (317), which forces Nathaniel to give up large parts of his childhood ideals, he remains convinced of the magicians’ right to rule over others: “To be a magician is the greatest calling. Our skills and sacrifices hold the country together, and those fools [the commoners] should be grateful we’re there” (378). While Bartimaeus is happy to call him out, asking “Grateful for people like Lovelace, you mean?” (ibid.), this does not suffice to make Nathaniel question what he has been taught. Moreover, when Lovelace teaches him that magicians act only in their own interests, Nathaniel takes him at his word and resolves to do so himself—at no point does it occur to him that he could attempt to break this toxic cycle.

As Nathaniel grows older and joins the ranks of the government, he retains his conviction that the overall system is beneficial for all, calling the Resistance’s opposition to the “benevolent leadership of the magicians” bizarre (*Golem* 31). It makes sense that it takes a long time for Nathaniel to truly begin to question the system: He is in one of the most privileged positions in the country and therefore has a lot to lose from any changes. To reflect critically on the system and his own actions, then, he must first be exposed to different

viewpoints—viewpoints of the people he oppresses. Ms Lutyens' disdain for his ministerial position plays a part, but the key scene is his encounter with Kitty, in which he attempts to justify the magicians' rule:

"Yeah, because the people are *so* safe in your care," Kitty sneered. "Half our young men are dying in America, and we've got the police mauling others in the street, and demons attacking anyone who protests, and enemies and spies at large in our suburbs. We're all having a great time!"

"If it wasn't for us, it would be much, much worse! [...] We use our power to rule for the good of all. The commoners need guidance. Admittedly, we're going through a ropery patch, but—"

"Your power is based on slavery! How can it be for *anyone's* good?"

The magician seemed genuinely shocked. "Not human slavery," he said. "Just demons."

"That makes it better, does it? I think not. Everything you do is tainted with that corruption."

His answer was faint. "That's not so." (*Ptolemy* 257–258, Stroud's emphases)

Kitty puts her finger on the root of this society's problem: While in Pratchett's universe, "it is personal ethics that marks the good or evil practitioner of magic" (Croft, "The Education of a Witch" ["Education"] 130), there can be no ethical use of magic and no ethical government in Stroud's system as long as magic is based on the enslavement of sentient beings. Nathaniel's exposure to Kitty's point of view in particular finally prompts him to reflect on his actions and to realize that he is not immune to the moral corruption of the government (*Ptolemy* 291). In the end, however, it takes another traumatic event—witnessing his friend Makepeace, a fellow magician, initiate a violent coup against the government—to truly rattle him:

The two key certainties that governed him—his belief in the invulnerability of the government and in the essential virtue of his motives—were dashed from him in a matter of moments. The magicians were overpowered. Kitty was struck down. Both came at the hand of Makepeace, and it was with horror that Nathaniel recognized, in that callous, indifferent hand, a reflection of his own. (334)

Seeing Kitty's life at risk as a direct consequence of his own actions finally leads him to realise that his and the other magicians' constant power play and selfishness can only lead to one thing: "bodies like Kitty's lying on the floor" (*ibid.*). Only after Nathaniel has gone through this process can he take decisive action for change—both regarding himself and the system he has helped perpetuate. In questioning and then acting against this system, Nathaniel gains

the freedom to think for himself, freedom from the petty scheming and immorality the system demands from him if he wishes to succeed, and the freedom to genuinely care about the well-being of others. By witnessing Nathaniel's blindness towards the faults of the system he profits from, readers are encouraged to question the things they take for granted in their everyday lives themselves. Nathaniel's development—his failures and his redemption—show that to think critically about the foundations of your life and your personal philosophy is not always easy, but vital in order to grow not only into adulthood, but as a human being.

Overall, the centrality of critical thinking for both Tiffany and Nathaniel's coming of age showcases the importance that we as a society place on independent thought in our personal development, i.e. as a marker of adulthood. Books like these can inspire young readers to think critically themselves—about the stories and traditions that they have grown up with as well as about society as a whole. "Pratchett's witches encourage child-readers to question what is right and wrong, what is wicked and what is good, what is true and what is illusion" (Donaldson 151). Stroud achieves a similar result by featuring what Coats calls the "abject hero":

a common character type in adolescent literature [...] who forces the reader to confront his or her own complicity in the creation and maintenance of those oppressive cultural and psychic systems, not as victim, critic, or mere spectator, but as someone who stands by and lets victimization occur at best, a victimizer herself at worst. (319)

Nathaniel's lack of critical thinking hinders his personal development and perpetuates a toxic system. By juxtaposing his point of view with those of Bartimaeus and Kitty—both suffering directly from Nathaniel's complicity in this oppressive system—Stroud ensures that readers keep a constant critical perspective of Nathaniel's actions.⁸ Nathaniel may attempt to do what he believes is morally right, but ultimately this is shown to be impossible as long as he acts within an inherently immoral system. Only through critical thinking can Nathaniel finally gain a grown-up's agency to change the system he had previously thought inevitable and morally justified. Similarly—though much

⁸ Pratchett and Stroud follow different narrative strategies here that reflect Tiffany and Nathaniel's contrasting critical thinking skills: Tiffany is the primary focalizer in her books, but her deeply self-reflective way of thinking, including First, Second, and Third Thoughts, sets her apart from Nathaniel's more myopic view. She holds herself to high moral standards, and when other witches call her out on some of her worse impulses, she is quick to accept that criticism as valid—something that takes Nathaniel a long time to learn. In short, while Tiffany reflects on her own development critically *herself*, Nathaniel's development is largely viewed critically through the perspectives of others.

earlier in her personal development—Tiffany gains agency from her constant questioning of the things she is taught that others take for granted. Tiffany's Second Thoughts ensure that she is almost always aware of what she is thinking and the way she is thinking it, thereby keeping herself in check and preventing herself from abusing her powers. Critical thinking empowers her to break free from stultifying conventions, first in that she chooses to become a knowledgeable, powerful witch rather than attempting to be a fairy-tale princess, and later on by overthrowing stifling traditions of witchcraft itself.

CONCLUSION

The importance that we as a society place on critical thinking and taking responsibility for our actions as essential steps on the way to adulthood is evident in the two coming-of-age fantasies discussed here. The two protagonists go down very different paths, but both must learn to take responsibility and think critically *especially* when doing so is hard and/or carries the risk of losing social status or someone's respect. While the values they advocate are largely the same, Pratchett and Stroud take contrasting approaches in terms of world-building and the moral outset of their universes: Pratchett's novels are fundamentally shaped by the strong moral convictions of his protagonists, who seek to do right in a world that does not always make this easy. This inherent morality is less present in Stroud's universe, which instead focuses on the corrosive effects of an oppressive system on social relationships and personal growth through a deeply flawed protagonist. Through their vastly different main characters, these books showcase two different approaches that YA literature can take in exploring what it means to come of age: The *Tiffany Aching* series "might educate [young readers] to be critical thinkers, by exposing them to Tiffany's very grown-up mind" (Haberhorn and Reinhardt 58), whereas Stroud's abject hero Nathaniel experiences a slower, more convoluted process of personal growth. Pratchett takes a rather straightforward path of providing readers with a formidable yet relatable role model, while Stroud's trilogy focuses on the dangers of *failing* to reflect on one's actions and take responsibility: Instead of coming into his own, Nathaniel loses himself and actively supports a political system built on oppression. His moral shortcomings encourage readers to question whether they themselves might unthinkingly perpetuate oppressive cultural systems in their lives—and if so, Stroud suggests, then thinking critically and facing the consequences of one's actions are the first steps needed to move forward.

Pratchett and Stroud's oppositional systems of magic and magical education directly shape the visions of adulthood presented in the books. Because they take on responsibility and question their surroundings, Pratchett's witches are by default more mature than the average person. Meanwhile, the

fact that Stroud's magicians avoid accountability and never question the system that they (and only they) profit from not only renders them immature, but makes them bad people. The suggestion for young readers here is that they should *not* unthinkingly trust the adults they are surrounded by to model moral behaviour, that they should *not* take everything they are told at face value: taking on responsibility and thinking critically are not just markers of adulthood, but markers of being a decent person.

What is it, then, that Tiffany and Nathaniel gain from growing up, taking responsibility, and thinking critically—aside from the moral high ground? Thinking critically frees them up to make their own choices independently, thereby granting them agency, and then taking responsibility for these choices in turn grants them a sense of self-assurance and the respect of their peers (or in Nathaniel's case, the respect of those he has previously wronged). For Nathaniel, it also means redemption, suggesting that it is never too late to take responsibility for one's mistakes, apologize, and try to set things right. Critical thinking in particular also allows both Nathaniel and Tiffany to break with the stifling conventions they have grown up with, empowering them to make real change. In short, there are no material rewards to be had for becoming an adult (or a good person). Instead, readers are encouraged to be active members of their community, to question the things they take for granted, and are thereby enabled to effect real-world change: to become an adult—that is to accept the burdens of responsibility and independent thinking—may not be easy, but it is inherently empowering.

The two YA fantasy series discussed here are excellent examples of how fantasy as a genre may offer its readers an escape from their everyday lives, but not at the exclusion of reflecting and engaging with actual-world problems. Instead, it encourages “the exploration of issues that may be so deeply engrained in our daily lives as to be nearly invisible” (Croft, “Education” 140). Pratchett and Stroud present deliberate engagements with the question of what it means to come of age—they just happen to do so against a backdrop of flying broomsticks and magic carpets. More than anything, these books show young readers that the hard work of taking responsibility and thinking critically is not just essential to coming of age, but that it is, quite simply, the right thing to do and therefore constitutes an act of everyday heroism.

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