

**Imagining the Multicultural  
City: Terry Pratchett's *Guards!*  
*Guards!***

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### *Introduction*

Terry Pratchett's Discworld series is one of the most successful publishing ventures of the last twenty years. The books sell in large quantities, and the associated merchandise, including maps, figurines, T-shirts and, for a time at least, a brand of beer, also does quite well. But one should not see the author as simply a purveyor of "product". A.S. Byatt, noting that his work goes unreviewed, refers to him as "the great Terry Pratchett", admiring his "metaphysical wit", his "energetic and lively secondary world", and his "amazing sentences".<sup>1</sup>

The series is set upon a distant planet, situated at so remote a point in the universe that it is upon the very edge of reality. It is a world where imagination is more powerful than physics, and where fictions become real. It is, therefore, of no surprise that the reader should often find her or himself upon very familiar ground; heroes and heroines of fairy-tale appear, as do literary creations such as Bram Stoker's vampires or Tolkien's dwarfs. And indeed, the largest metropolis of the Discworld is lifted almost directly from Fritz Leiber's Grey Mouser series, from its muddy streets to its Thieves' Guild. In fact, the Discworld series began as a lampoon of Sword and Fantasy fiction, and owes some of its comic sense of the genre to Lieber's writings – a debt that Pratchett recognizes, slipping his predecessor's two heroes into one of his own early books.

Lieber's characters are in-migrants to his big city, Lankmar, who, despite their differences, pool their resources and thrive as parasites upon the urban underworld. It is their adventures and misadventures that interest Lieber and his readers. If there is an underlying question, it is how the migrant survives the city. Pratchett, by contrast, is interested in the city itself, in how it is run, in how it adapts to the strains put upon it by its increasing power as a magnet to the rest of the Disc. He turns Lieber's question round the other way, and asks how it is that the city survives the migrant.

For Pratchett's city, Ankh-Morpork, is the multicultural centre of the Discworld. To its gates, it attracts the adventurous from far and

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<sup>1</sup> A. S. BYATT, "Harry Potter and the Childish Adult", *New York Times*, 11 July 2003.

wide. Trolls and dwarfs make their way down from the far Ramtop mountains to take advantage of its opportunities. Vampires and werewolves drift in from the forest-lands to the north, while adventurers from the south open curry-houses. How these different groups, with their differing customs, and their differing gods, can live together, and how the city can be organized in such a way as to permit them to do so, is investigated in a number of the Discworld novels that centre upon the Ankh-Morpork City Watch.

Lieber's heroes are all but criminals. If Pratchett's main characters were to encounter them, they would put them under arrest. For Pratchett is concerned with the problem of Order, and quite naturally places the police at the centre of his city-tales. The first of these, *Guards! Guards!*<sup>2</sup>, the eighth in the Discworld series, and published in 1989, actually confronts the question of whether the police serve any purpose at all. At the opening of the novel, the Watch has been reduced to three men, two of them being time-serving good-for-nothings, who see patrolling the streets as an occasion to try the doors to see if there's a chance of making off with any valuables, and the third, the nominal chief, being a notorious drunk. This state of affairs is the result of deliberate policy decisions on the part of the ruler of the city, the Patrician, who has, through his use of the Guilds, deftly depoliticized the city, which now, to all intents and purposes, runs itself. Burglars and pickpockets are dealt with by the Thieves' Guild, murderers by the Assassins' Guild, panhandlers by the Beggars' Guild and streetwalkers by the Seamstresses' Guild. There is no need for a police force.

However, the Patrician, as it will emerge, has underestimated the difficulties that the city now faces. While his schemes have provided sufficient stability to bring about a new era of prosperity, they have also set up tensions and strains that go beyond the purview of the Guilds. The influx of young and unattached males, drawn in from the rural backwaters by dreams of wealth, and the varied ethnic identities of the incomers, pose problems that the indigenous institutions cannot resolve.

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<sup>2</sup> Terry PRATCHETT, *Guards! Guards!* (1989), London: Corgi, 1990. All the quotations from *Guards! Guards!* in the article are taken from this edition of the novel.

*Machiavelli and Hobbes*

In the text there are two clear references to political philosophers. The Patrician is clearly a Machiavellian Prince. He is a politician whose understanding of the ruses of power is masterly, and who is thoroughly ruthless in his determination to ensure the smooth functioning of the machine of which he is in charge. He is a technician; success is achieved through the skilled application of light pressure upon specific points of the political body. His techniques are universal in nature; he can advise a group of beleaguered rats in their campaigns against snakes and scorpions as deftly as he runs the affairs of Ankh-Morpork.

The Patrician is, in the course of the book, thrown down from the seat of power by Leviathan itself; Hobbes' dragon is summoned in person, as part of a palace plot. The dragon makes an offer to the citizens; they either submit to its power, in which case it will ensure prosperity by the imposition of order and the prosecution of a vigorous foreign policy. The dragon shows no reluctance in using its considerable fire-power, and the Ankh-Morporkians surrender to the inevitable, while looking forward to the spoils of war.

Clearly Leviathan holds its own interests most dear and the Commonwealth that it offers is that of a collectivity of the egoistic, in which the interests of its subjects remain subordinate to its own will and desires. Vetinari, the Patrician, is a rather more enigmatic character; his regard for the city appears analogical to that of a watchmaker for a well-made watch. He believes that men are by nature evil, by which he seems to mean something more than simply that they are motivated by self-interest. Aware of the corruptions of power, which lead some of his predecessors into Sadian excess, he contents himself with such pleasures as necessity may offer – the occasional assassination, or a subtle treachery, if they contribute to the city's overall welfare, are enough to offer him some compensation.

Both are aware of the importance of the symbolism of power. The dragon insists upon a ritual meal, consisting in its public consumption, at regular intervals, of a young woman of good family. Vetinari, for his part, ostensibly refuses to occupy the throne of the ancient kings of Ankh-Morpork, perching instead upon the lowest of the steps that lead up to it. Such gestures are of particular importance in the Discworld

where, as we shall see, symbols have a life of their own, and must be treated with some respect.

However, as the city becomes a crucible of all the cultures of the Discworld, so it may be that the old emblems lose some of their charm. It is this, perhaps, that leads to Vetinari's temporary downfall, and one of the lessons of the book is that the successful city must negotiate and adapt to the concomitants of its own success.

### *Rousseau and Locke*

Less heavily marked in the text, both Rousseau and Locke leave their prints upon it. One of the central characters, a young man freshly arrived from the country-side, has much in him of the Noble Savage as he appears in Rousseau's earlier writings. Carrot, as the young man is named, is innocent and naive; he takes others on trust, and sees only the best motives in everyone. On his arrival in the city he first lodges in a brothel, but sees it as a fine establishment, treating the young women as modest maidens who are, on occasion, in need of his manly protection. Carrot has come to the city in order to take on a position in the City Watch. He looks forward with some enthusiasm to becoming a policeman, and has taken the trouble to commit to memory the Laws and Ordinances of Ankh-Morpork. It is something of a puzzle to him to discover the Commander of the Watch slumped over a bar-room table, so obviously drunk that even Carrot cannot misunderstand his condition. The Commander, Vimes, has, the reader is led to understand, taken to drink because his duties have so been reduced as to render him ineffectual. Vimes holds to a conception of natural law which is Lockean; he is himself the descendant of a regicide. Although he recognizes that Vetinari's pragmatic approach to government actually works, he is disgusted and enraged by the Patrician's underlying cynicism. And he clearly recognizes the dragon's tyranny as morally indefensible.

Carrot and Vimes between them will return Vetinari to power. They will, however, extract a price; the implicit recognition by the Patrician of a transcendent principle of order that expresses its institutional form in a properly constituted police force. As Carrot is fond of saying, the term 'policeman' means 'man of the city', who carries with him the charge of making the city a good place to live in.

This is the good that Vetinari both denies and belittles in a speech he makes to Vimes near the end of the book :

“I believe you find life such a problem because you think there are the good people and the bad people,” said the man. “You’re wrong, of course. There are, always and only, the bad people, *but some of them are on opposite sides.*”

He waved his thin hand towards the city and walked over to the window.

“A great rolling sea of evil,” he said, almost proprietorially. “Shallower in some places, of course, but deeper, oh, so much *deeper* in others ... Down there are people who will follow any dragon, worship any god, ignore any iniquity. All out of a kind of humdrum, everyday badness. Not the really high, creative loathesomeness of the great sinners, but a sort of mass-produced darkness of the soul. Sin, you might say, without a trace of originality. They accept evil not because they say *yes* but because they don’t say *no*. I’m sorry if this offends you,” he added, patting the captain’s shoulder, “but you fellows really need us ... We’re the only ones who know how to make things work ...” (391-2)

Vimes protests, but is unable to fully articulate his objection. However, he and Carrot have already demonstrated through their actions that there are times when Vetinari “really needs” them, for he would otherwise still be languishing in the dungeon to which he had been confined upon the arrival of the dragon. That there must always be those who will remind the sovereign of his duty to a higher conception of law, and who will, if nothing else will serve, overthrow him if he forgets it, emerges from the actions of the Watch rather than from constructed argumentation.

### *Narrativium*

The Discworld is subject to what Pratchett refers to as “Narrative Causality”, or – viewed as one of the constitutive elements of Discworld reality, *Narrativium*. Essentially, this ensures that events tend to follow the well-trodden paths of narrative or story. If any situation that arises can be interpreted as pertaining to one or another well-known tale, then it is likely that subsequent events will also

conform to the story-line. In several of the books, this tendency is manipulated by one or another of the characters in order to achieve some selfish goal. The stronger-minded characters tend to resist story, for, as one of them, the witch, Granny Weatherwax, opines, stories are impediments to the good life, interfering as they do with self-determination and personal responsibility. However, even those who resist are, at some level, subject to plot-line and the deep stereotypes of the folk-tale. The best that can be hoped for is that the surface of the story may be disrupted, while the underlying mechanisms work their way into the world unnoticed by the protagonists even as they obey their logic.

In *Guards! Guards!* the story that is invoked by the villain and side-stepped by the main characters is that of the hidden heir to the throne. The Patrician's secretary, a sly and ambitious fellow named Wonse, has determined to oust his master and take his place – a story-line which is, in itself, so predictable that Vetinari himself expects it. Wonse, however, has imagined a ploy which takes the Patrician by surprise; stealing a book of spells from the city's Unseen University, which is devoted to the study of Magic and to the training of wizards, he summons up a dragon. After allowing the dragon to terrorize the city for a few days, he arranges for it to be publicly slain by a young man with a large and showy sword who, as narrative obliges, is then proclaimed king by the delighted burgers.

Wonse's attempt to use this story-line is fatally flawed. It is not that the people of Ankh-Morpork are reluctant to play along with it; on the contrary, much to Vimes' properly republican disgust, they appear delighted with the idea of seeing a crowned head of state upon the throne of Ankh-Morpork. It is because Wonse has only a superficial understanding of the forces that he is playing with. Narrativium is as dangerous to manipulate as uranium, and chain-reactions that take the story beyond immediate human control are common. In the present case, Wonse has summoned a powerful creature, the dragon, without taking any care to enquire into its nature, despite the clear warning given him by the stolen grimoire. In the book from which he gleaned the summoning spell, he will have read the last scribblings of its author :

Vimes squinted at the crabbed writing.

*Yet dragons are not liken unicornes, I willen. They dwelleth in some Realm defined by thee Fancie of the Wille and, thus, it myte bee that whomsoever calleth upon them, and giveth them theyre pathway unto thys worlde, calleth theyre Owne dragon of the Mind.*

*Yette, I trow, the Pure in Harte maye still call a Draggon of Power as a Forse for Good in thee worlde, and this ane nighte the Grate Worke will commense. All hathe been prepared. I hath laboured most mytily to be a Worthie Vessle ....*

Vimes read it through again, and then looked at the following pages.

There weren't many. The rest of the book was a charred mass. (395)

In the Discworld as on Earth: anthropologists know that the most powerful of black magical forces is envy. Wonse has envied the power of the Patrician, and has called upon similar motivations in his little band of conspirators. The dragon is a concentrated mass of covetousness and lust for power. It has tasted the thrill of exercising power through terror, and will not let it go. It seeks out the pathway that Wonse has opened up for it, and returns to interrupt the coronation, incinerate the new king and, taking Wonse with it to serve as vizier, settles down into the castle.

Vimes, whose years in service to the Patrician have rendered cynical, is not at all surprised to find that the people of Ankh-Morpork, once recovered from the first shock, are not averse to serving the new monarch. The dragon offers a contract which appeals to the Hobbesian egoist that dwells in the soul of every human being. All Commonwealths have their costs, and the dragon's demands may seem quite modest when compared to those extracted by other rulers in other times. Vimes, the policeman, remains immune; it is not and cannot be right to eat people.

Vimes is, from the start, suspicious of the dragon. It cannot, he reasons, be real; nothing as large and heavy as this beast is could really fly. His scepticism is a rare quality on the Discworld, for reality is continually threatened by the works of imagination. If enough belief is invested in something, it comes into being: Gods owe their existence to their congregations, the Tooth Fairy responds to children's faith in her existence by clambering up a ladder to place

gifts upon their pillows, and Death, a large skeletal figure in a black cowl makes several appearances in each novel. The appearance of a dragon arouses no doubts in the breasts of most Ankh-Morpokians.

Vimes is different, however. As one of his fellow guardsmen puts it, the head of the Watch drinks because he is, in fact, unnaturally sober, and lives too close to reality. It is only through the absorption of alcohol that he manages to see the world in the way his fellows see it. Sober, Vimes is a thoroughgoing empiricist, and will have none of the gods of the marketplace. Determined to investigate the dragon, he turns to the one person whose area of expertise is liable to help him.

Carrot shares his chief's distaste for the dragon, but not his scepticism in the face of narrativium. Reasoning that legend teaches that every dragon must have a vulnerable spot, he rallies the other members of the watch, persuading one of them, who claims to have been an excellent archer in his youth, to attempt to bring the beast down as it flies over the city. The attempt fails; it is Vimes' scepticism that will set in motion the forces that eventually rid the city of the new monarch, although more the result of natural accident than of human design.

### *Culture or Cultures*

At the heart of the social sciences lies the question of difference and similarity. From one society to another, from one time to another, human beings have adopted widely different beliefs, customs, and ways of being. For many centuries, history has been multiple, and the institutions that men have collectively constructed to enable them to live together have varied in consequence. For some four or five centuries now, the disparate communities of the globe have been subjected to a process of globalization which has brought the savage and the civilized, the cannibal and the christian face to face. As we stare into each other's eyes, it has been difficult to determine whether what we see there is a recognizable reflection or an image of absolute Otherness. As globalization proceeds, so the Other moves and disperses, both symbolically and corporeally. The encounters, struggles and compromises that these displacements lead to are the stuff of sociology, anthropology and political science. But before the social sciences, the novel had already offered a privileged space in

which to arrive at an understanding of the new world. Today the novel still fulfils this function; Pratchett brings blood and flesh to the philosophers' models. He also brings storytelling.

In the stories that novelists tell, simply to embody principle is rarely satisfying. Carrot may well be the Noble Savage, but he is other things as well. To the city of Ankh-Morpork and its inhabitants, whether indigenous or migrant, he is the Other. But he is also the core of the city's identity, for the city belongs to him and he to it in a way that is of greater authenticity than crowns or elections may bestow.

Carrot is, culturally speaking, a dwarf. He was raised in a dwarf mine in the Ramtop mountains, son of a dwarf King. He speaks dwarfish as his mother tongue, and firmly believed himself to be a dwarf until puberty struck and he fell in love with a young dwarffess. Innocently, he courted her, and was surprised to find that her parents were not overly favourable to his suit. Then it was that his father announced to him that he had, in fact, been adopted. The only survivor of a brigands' attack on a coach party, the baby had aroused the pity of King and Queen, and they had taken him in. Now, the King tells him, it is time for him to return to his own people. So it is that he arranges for his adopted son to be employed as a City Guard, a profession that seems to be an honourable one.

When Carrot goes to the city, he takes with him the one gift his human father left him. It is a sword.

He is also bearing a sword presented to him in mysterious circumstances. Very mysterious circumstances. Surprisingly, therefore, there is something very unexpected about this sword. It isn't magical. It hasn't got a name. When you wield it, you don't get a feeling of power, you just get blisters; you could believe it was a sword that had been used so much that it had ceased to be anything other than a quintessential sword, a long piece of metal with very sharp edges. And it hasn't got destiny written all over it.

It's practically unique, in fact. (32)

Carrot also carries with him "The Laws and Ordinances of Ankh-Morpork", little knowing that this ageing text has been abandoned by the authorities of the city for which he is heading. For dwarfs, the

written word is sacred; they are, in the Discworld, fundamentalists. Carrot regards the “Laws and Ordinances” as a founding text, to be applied without fear or favour. It is the text that authors his being as a Watchman; on learning that there is a place – the Thieves’ Guild – where criminals foregather, he does not hesitate, but marches over to it, and arrests the head. When the Patrician comes over to see what he has been up to, Carrot’s reaction is to arrest him for parking on a double yellow line, a *faux pas* from which he is saved in extremis by the quick thinking of his superior officer, Sergeant Colon.

It is, in part, through his espousal of the “Laws and Ordinances” that Carrot avoids the destiny that narrative causality would make his. Despite his possession of a sword that is so unmagical that it is magical (Vetinari recognizes it for what it is), and of a birth-mark in the shape of a crown, he never claims the throne. However, he cannot entirely ignore the narrative of which he is the embodiment; without it, he would be unthinkable. So he rescues a damsel in distress, a young woman who is, in fact, a prostitute. And he is instrumental in what, according to the script, should be the *mise-à-mort* of the dragon. As the beast lies helpless at his feet, Carrot wields not his sword, but:

It was quite a large and heavy roof timber and it scythed quite slowly through the air, but when it hit people they rolled backwards and stayed hit. “Now *look*,” said Carrot, hauling it in and pushing back his helmet, “I don’t want to have to tell anyone again, right?”

“I must warn you,” Carrot went on, “that interfering with an officer in the execution of his duty is a serious offence. And I shall come down like a ton of bricks on the very next person who throws a stone.”

Carrot half-raised his club in a threatening gesture as Vimes clambered up the rubble pile.

“Oh, hello, Captain Vimes,” he said, lowering it. “I have to report that I have arrested this --”

“Yes, I can see,” said Vimes. “Did you have any suggestions about what we do next?”

“Oh, yes, sir. I have to read it its rights, sir.” (372-3)

Carrot’s Otherness is manifest in his difficulties with the habitus of the city. He reads the rules, and expects them to be applied to the letter. He is constantly bewildered by the odd behaviour of his

comrades at arms, and they are themselves caught wrong-footed by his reactions. His dwarfish literal-mindedness is a marker for those misunderstandings that encounters with the Other inevitably entail. But it is to be noted that it is exercised upon a text that is a thoroughly home-grown production. Carrot is both Other and Self, but a strange Self, from a former time seen through a distorting mirror.

Natural Law is, by definition, universal. If there is hope for the multicultural city, then this is one of the fountains of this hope. But Carrot's errors, his literalness, point to a weakness. However, Carrot's place in the narrative suggests a remedy.

### *Utopian Fictions*

Sword and Sorcery novels, such as the ones that Pratchett set out to guy, are related to the Science Fiction genre. Indeed, it is commonly acknowledged that the difference between science and magic in these fictions is, for the most part, one of perspective; the conventions of science fiction allow liberties to be taken with reality that are often as gross as those taken by those who follow in Tolkien's tracks.

Science fiction is, in turn, closely linked to the utopian genre. As Frederick Jameson has remarked, science fiction offers a mode in which the utopian may be tested and its failures examined. Pratchett's series has something of the utopian; although his city, Ankh-Morpork, is a disorderly and insalubrious mess, it is a pot which may be put to the fire, a salad bowl in which to mix and season the most unlikely ingredients, and taste the resulting concoction. It is an experiment in multicultural living.

Hobbesian kingship fails because it is anchored in self-interest, and this alone will not serve. The king's interest cannot – as we shall see – be guaranteed to coincide with that of his subjects and, in any case, the monarch is as subject to natural law as any man. Vimes and Carrot may be among the firmest in their allegiance to a transcendent morality, but they are not alone; although Ankh-Morpork's citizens are ready to accept the benefits the dragon may bring, they are reluctant to embrace it. Vetinari's Machiavellian approach, although more subtle, allowing the city dwellers much of the substance of liberty as well as a good part of illusion, is also founded upon too dark a vision of

humankind to survive all challenges; this he acknowledges when he reinstates the Watch. But neither will the law in and of itself serve the purpose, for it is either too general to be applied as is, or too finicky and particular, as in Carrot's literal readings. Vimes, at the end of the tale, asks the University librarian to take the Laws and Ordinances and stash them away in some lost corner of the library.

What brings ruler, law and citizen together in a workable form is narrativium. As we have seen, narrativium is a dangerous element; it is also a necessary one. However, for a story to work, it must be either well-rooted in the soil which gave rise to it, or, if it is to appeal to the universal, must sink beneath the surface of appearance and offer a deep bedrock upon which to build.

Wonse's attempt to harness story fails because it is too superficial; it is neither here nor there. He is a careless artist who simply throws the elements together anyhow and expects them to work. His prince is no prince, but simply a vain young man who looks good on a horse – a likely contestant for Pop Idol, perhaps, but no king in the making. The dragon is used but not imagined; Wonse has no idea of the true power of the imagination and treats it with too little reverence. Even were he to have made more of an effort, it is likely that the time for kings has passed. Ankh-Morpork is full of men and women from elsewhere, who may well have their own kings and queens back there in their homelands, and who may wonder why they should bow to this crown that is alien to their own traditions.

Carrot's insertion in the storyline is different. All who meet him recognize him for who he is, including Vetinari, who examines his sword with great attention, before passing it back to him and telling him to look after it. Carrot is the man of the city, but will never wear a crown. He is worthy of the crown, but his worth is in part manifest in his refusal to make the claim. The best stories are to be read allegorically; they point to realities rather than enunciating them. They work themselves out in ways that are both surprising and inevitable.

The story that puts an end to the dragon's reign is at least as old as the one of the uncrowned king. Boy meets girl, and the dragon, who is a queen rather than a king, takes off upon her nuptial flight, and pursues her own inner promptings over the rim of the Discworld, to trouble Ankh-Morpork no more.

**Conclusion**

Pratchett's city is, in each episode of his story, upon the verge of breakdown. Its tensions are those of our own cities; under its fake-medieval coating of mud, it is on a par with *Blade Runner's* Los Angeles/Tokyo or with the London of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Rioters take to the streets, juvenile delinquents and feral dogs waylay the traveller, self-appointed ethnic leaders challenge the legitimacy of the city government; some kind of balance is restored through the machinations of the Patrician, the Watch's rough and ready enforcement of the law, and through the collective recognition of the rightness of the law itself, which is evoked through narrative.

The vision is optimistic. But is it founded? Is there a body of natural law, or are the rules and ways of living, that pertain in different places and at different times, in reality incommensurable? Anthropologists who have sought to understand the ways of the peoples of Papua New Guinea, of Australia or of the Americas have sometimes found that these are virtually untranslatable, although others hold out the hope that the codes can be cracked. Do stories cut across cultures? Versions of Cinderella have been found from Western Europe right across the land-mass to China. But there are stories from Australia, such as that of the Wawilak Sisters, that are so embedded in the land which gave rise to them that they are incomprehensible to the outsider without considerable glossing. There are tales from Sub-Saharan Africa that work in ways that cannot but puzzle the European. It may be that globalized culture can offer but the superficial tale that might, for a time, satisfy Womse, but risks releasing unaccountable dragons that, in the end, will not go away.

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