



A review of
**The Shepherd's
Crown**

Jane Carroll

The *Shepherd's Crown* is the final book in the Discworld series and the last novel Terry Pratchett completed before his death in March 2015. These facts weigh the book with a significance and a gravity that most fantasy novels for young readers never have to deal with. This book, for better or for worse, would be Pratchett's last word on the Discworld.

We wanted a lot from this book.

I think we got it in spades.

In many ways, *The Shepherd's Crown* is business as usual for Pratchett. As with all of his writing, it's funny and warm and thought-provoking and wise. Pratchett returns not only to favourite characters but to favourite themes that, like the fossil that gives the book its title, are turned over and smoothed and made familiar by handling. But, as ever with Pratchett, there is a kernel of flint at the heart of *The Shepherd's Crown*, a sharp core that occasionally pricks the reader, preventing the book from ever seeming sentimental.

The Shepherd's Crown is about death.

Death has been a key motif in the Tiffany Aching books – the series begins with Tiffany's grief in the wake of Granny Aching's death and the later books are full of references to the work that the witches do with the dying and the dead: easing pain, preparing bodies for burial, sorting out the old clothes, and dealing with the impact of death on the communities. Death comes to the fore when, 35 pages in, Granny Weatherwax dies.

For Granny, death is merely an inconvenience. Like all witches, she foresees her death and uses her last day on earth to put things in order, setting the house to rights and scrubbing the privy. But for the reader, the event comes as a blow. While I and many other readers have always half-anticipated Granny's death (indeed, she's met Death many times over the years), I'm not ashamed to say I sobbed when Granny died. Losing her felt like losing an old friend. But Death, ever the gentleman, consoles Granny (and the reader), saying that YOU HAVE LEFT THE WORLD MUCH

Gramarye: The Journal of the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy,
Winter 2015, Issue 8

BETTER THAN YOU FOUND IT, AND IF YOU ASK ME, said Death, NOBODY COULD DO ANY BETTER THAN THAT ...

The Shepherd's Crown is packed with moments like this when Pratchett seems to impart advice to his readers. It's certainly not a didactic text but there is a wealth of wisdom in here – advice about caring for the elderly, about the comforts of family and friends, about managing communities, about the value of making things with your own hands. And about the value of asking for help. The Discworld books are very often about a lone hero (or lone loser in the case of Rincewind) and the individual's quest to make order out of chaos. Tiffany is a defiantly independent character and the earlier books in the series were all about her squaring up to enemies – the Queen of the Elves, the Hiver, the Wintersmith, and the Faceless Man – alone. The hardest thing Tiffany has to do, harder even than accepting Granny Weatherwax's death, is learning to acknowledge her own weaknesses. She needs the help of the other witches and the wider community if she is to face up to the elves. *The Shepherd's Crown* highlights the value of the community and the importance of asking for and accepting help.

This is truly a crossover novel: the book strikes a fine balance between Pratchett's work for adults and his work for younger readers. On the one hand, the book is mature in its themes and content. Tiffany Aching has grown into a brilliant witch who feels the earth through her boots. She is a young woman who has come to an 'understanding' with her young man, Preston. But this is not a simple romance. They are in love with their work as much as they are with each other and their relationship resonates with echoes of Mustrum Ridcully's complex relationship with Granny Weatherwax. Loss – past, present and future losses – haunts this book. On the other hand, *The Shepherd's Crown* is not as sharp or as satirical as Pratchett's work for adults. As with the other books in the Tiffany Aching series, the young reader seems firmly in mind throughout. It is warmly funny and there are many real laugh-out-loud moments to counterbalance the moments of genuine sadness. Pratchett indulges in unusual words (like 'littoral' and 'alacrity') and in-jokes that may seem a little worn (like calling the black goat Mephistopheles) which will no doubt delight a young reader with a healthy curiosity and a search engine. While the elves seem reassuringly wicked, Pratchett is too clever to resort to stark lines of good and bad and allows us glimpses at what the world might be like if people were a little less selfish and a little more kind.

It's a topical book too, up to date on its cultural references and politics. The 'Man Shed' craze that has gripped Roundworld is sweeping the Discworld and older men everywhere are relishing the delights of having 'a shed of one's own'. The book also

playfully engages with contemporary gender issues. Pratchett is no stranger to challenging assumed gender roles – *Equal Rites* was published nearly 30 years ago and books like *Monstrous Regiment* and even *Reaper Man* glory in the possibilities of gender performance and gender play – but it's nevertheless important for child readers to see characters like Geoffrey and Maggie who show that gender is no limitation to ambition.

The Shepherd's Crown is not perfect. As Rob Wilkins makes clear in the endnote, it is not a finished book. The 'embuggerance' of posterior cortical atrophy interfered before the book was quite done. It lacks the polish and finesse of Pratchett's greatest writing. There are some clunky sentences and odd, jarring phrases which are particularly noticeable in the first half of the text. And there are some elements – like the railways and the new social status of the Goblins – that won't make proper sense to a young reader who hasn't read *Snuff* and *Raising Steam*. On the other hand, these inclusions mean that the book serves as a conclusion to the Discworld books as a whole as well as to the Tiffany Aching series. On the whole, I feel that these glitches don't detract from the overall impact of the book. I believe it to be stronger than some of Pratchett's other late writings. I think, as much as is possible, it is a fitting end to the Tiffany Aching stories and to Pratchett's career. It is a remarkable book: human, wise, sad, funny, potent, and elegiac. Read it and weep.

Author: Terry Pratchett.
DoubleDay Childrens (2015), 352pp.

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