



Paul Kidby, cover illustration for *The Folklore of the Discworld*.

# Terry Pratchett: A Vast Consumer of Folklore

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I have been asked to talk about Terry Pratchett's use of folklore, and about our collaboration in writing *The Folklore of Discworld*. It is hard to know where to begin, since there are 39 Discworld books by now, all of which have at least a few scraps of folklore in them and many are crammed full of it. So maybe the best thing is to begin with a little autobiography.

In 1988 I read a review of *Wyrd Sisters* and thought it sounded clever and fun, so I got it from the library, collapsed in laughter by the end of the first paragraph, and became a Discworld addict for life. In 1997 Terry came to Worthing for a book-signing, and I joined the massive queue; rather cheekily, I also gave him a book of my own on Scandinavian folktales, since I had noticed how much he uses folklore themes in his work. 'So you're a folklorist,' said he. 'Tell me *everything* you know about magpie rhymes.' He was asking many in the queue the same thing, checking up in preparation for *Carpe Jugulum*. I did the best I could on the spur of the moment – he now swears I told him I knew 19 versions, but that is creative imagination – I may have recited four. I also promised him photocopies of more, and sent them off.

I told my colleagues at the Folklore Society about this encounter, and they said I should invite Terry to give our Katharine Briggs Memorial Lecture in 1999. To my amazement, busy though he always is, he agreed. He called his talk 'Imaginary Worlds, Real Stories'; it is printed in *Folklore* 111 (2000) pp. 159-68, and a shortened version appeared on pp. 23-8 of the *Discworld Convention 2008 Programme Book*. Terry began thus:

I am not a folklorist, but I am a vast consumer of folklore – an end user, if you like. I think about folklore in the same way as a carpenter thinks about trees, although a good carpenter works with the grain of the wood and should endeavour to make a table which will leave the tree glad that it became timber.

After that, I was installed as his 'occasional consultant on matters of folklore'. From time to time I would get phone calls from him asking me if I knew the whole of a rhyme he partially remembered; was there a reliable book on such-and-such, and so on. Then one day in (I think) 2004 he rang up to ask if I thought there would be material for a book on the folklore of

Discworld, like the *Science of Discworld* books, for he was appalled and depressed that so much which was taken for granted fifty years ago was fast being forgotten. He had made the same point in his lecture, saying:

I recall getting one letter from someone in their late teens asking 'how did you come up with the idea of three witches and making one a crabby old lady, one a motherly type, and one very young and silly?' and I thought, how do I begin to explain? Maybe I should send him a reading list? I run across practising pagans who haven't heard of Graves' *The White Goddess*, and young adults who, although having apparently had some kind of religious instruction at their school, don't know the connotations of the name Methuselah. . . . People say, How did you get the idea for this? And this? And I say – it's really true, people really believed this, this really was an old custom. It's terribly tempting to say I made it all up . . . but it's a shame to see all the old stuff lost.

I agreed enthusiastically that there would be plenty to say and that it needed saying, whereupon the voice on the phone said 'Right. We'll do it together, you and I!' And so we did, though it was a little while before we got started, both having other commitments. Our *The Folklore of Discworld* came out in 2008.

The way it worked was this: I systematically reread all the Discworld books, with pen and paper at hand, jotting down every allusion to a traditional motif. Some books have far more than others, of course, notably the Lancre and Chalk series which are steeped in folklore throughout, but there is always *something* to be found. *Moving Pictures*, for example, is largely built round cinematic references, but central to the plot is the idea of a lost city which sank beneath the sea one stormy night because of 'some unspeakable crime . . . against the very nature of the universe itself'. The bells of its drowned temples can be heard ringing underwater; and a giant warrior sleeps among its ruins. This draws on legends about drowned cities and sunken lands in our own culture – the Atlantis myth as told by Plato in the ancient world; Cornish, Welsh and Breton tales in more recent times – plus the story of the Sleeping King, which in Britain is generally told of Arthur. Having spotted a parallel, I would hunt up any Earthly texts that would illustrate it, which in this case would be a paragraph from Plato's *Critias* and a Breton ballad about the drowning of the magnificent city Kêr-Is, plus some of the British local legends about sunken lands. It didn't matter precisely where Terry had picked up an idea – I didn't ask him 'Were you thinking of Kêr-Is or of the Cornish Lyonesse or of one of the Welsh stories?' He would most likely have replied that he had known about lost cities all his life – and in any case our whole aim was to show how widespread and deep-rooted 'the old stuff' is.

Then I would draft a section on a particular topic, whichever happened to catch my fancy. This usually meant drawing together information from several books. The first section I did, I remember, was on vampires, which covered the Magpyr clan in *Carpe Jugulum*, Maledicta in *Monstrous Regiment*, and Otto Chriek in *The Truth*. I would email the draft to Terry, and eventually it would return, embellished with jokes, quirky comments, and the occasional footnote; perhaps he might request more detail on some aspect, or point out something I had forgotten to mention, e.g. that there was yet another vampire to consider, namely Count Notfaroutoe in *Reaper Man*.

One strict rule, carefully applied throughout the whole book, was to treat both the Disc and the Earth as equally valid realities. Our book must not become a conventional literary study of an author's use of certain sources. We must never, ever even hint that Disc vampires are as they are because Terry has read *Dracula* and watched numerous horror films. No, all such similarities are purely and simply presented as due to the force of narrativium, the power of stories. This sweeps perpetually through the multiverse carrying powerful story-patterns in the form of particles of inspiration, enabling them to replicate themselves spontaneously in any world by infiltrating receptive minds. Thus something which is only remembered as myth, legend or superstition on Earth can be something absolutely real on the Disc.

As the sections piled up, a problem became obvious: how should all this be organised into a coherent book? I toyed with the notion of a narrative framework involving a lady folklorist from Ankh-Morpork tactlessly cross-examining possible informants – you will find the inspiration for this idea in Terry's *A Tourist Guide to Lancre*. But we decided it would take up too much space. Then Terry suggested doing it geographically, kingdom by kingdom, but I said that this wouldn't work because there would be so much overlap between, say, Lancre and Uberwald, or Lancre and the Chalk, not to mention the fact that almost all the folkloric races sooner or later turn up in Ankh-Morpork. And so the solution was to do thematic chapters. But in what order? Well, one should probably begin with the cosmos and the gods, and quite obviously one must end with Death, and the in-between chapters could sort themselves out as they liked.

There have been no letters of complaints from fans, so presumably nothing vital has been left out. However, one or two things very nearly did slip through the net. Once, at a very late stage in the proceedings, when the script was already with the publishers and had been paginated and proof-read, I woke up in the night thinking 'Omigod, we've neither of us remembered to say anything about the Black School!' Now, that was quite an important point, because naïve readers have sometimes accused Terry of copying the idea of an Unseen University for wizards from J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts, regardless of the fact that it first featured in *The Colour of Magic* many years before Harry Potter was thought of, and that Ursula Le Guin and others had already used similar ideas. The truth is that, as Terry puts it, all fantasy writers use the same basic toolkit, where many of the tools are very old. This is one of the old ones. In the Middle Ages, there was a widespread legend about a secret college called the Black School

where one could learn all the occult arts. It was deep underground, windowless, and pitch dark. Nobody ever saw the Teacher, for that was the Devil himself. And where was it? Usually it was said to be in one of the great medieval universities, but not of course in one's own country. Some said it was in Córdoba in Spain, others in Paris, Padua, Salamanca, Prague, or Wittenburg. In Romania, folk tradition tells of an underground academy called Scholomance, near Sibiu in the mountains of Transylvania (Bram Stoker mentions this). So I hurriedly wrote two or three paragraphs about this and asked the publishers, very hesitantly, if they would insert them in the section on wizardry, though it would mean repaginating the last 90 pages. No problem, said they. It's unheard-of for publishers to be so accommodating, so I deduce that the name of Pratchett works serious magic.

For Terry, much mythology and folklore is 'one of those things you grow up knowing without any apparent source' rather than something you consciously set out to learn. But sometimes he does know where he got something from: when he was a small boy his mother used to tell him tales from Greek mythology as she walked him to school; an elderly neighbour 'with a nose looking like two squashed strawberries colliding' taught him something about hares which is crucial to his latest book, *I Shall Wear Midnight*. And Treacle Mine Road in Ankh-Morpork echoes the many treacle mines on Earth, for, as he told us in the Folklore Society lecture:

I can remember my father telling me about the treacle mines at Bisham, near Marlow, when I was about eight. I used to watch closely from the back of the car when we passed through the village, in case I saw the treacle lorries. I recall considering the matter in much the same way as small children think about Father Christmas and we think about world peace – the deep suspicion that it can't possibly be real is almost overwhelmed by a fervent hope that it might be true.

At the age of twelve he bought a copy of *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* and read it end to end. Then he discovered the folklore and myth section in his public library and 'went through it like a chainsaw'. He found 'a whole lot of those rather trite tourist-oriented folklore books', but he also found the Opies and Graves and Frazer, and George Ewart Evans, and a book on Irish fairy-lore which impressed him deeply, Dermot MacManus's *The Middle Kingdom*. Folklore also reached him through present-day culture, one important moment being when he walked into a room to find his parents watching Bergman's *Seventh Seal* on the TV, at the very scene where Death and the Knight are playing chess; the image scared him witless, but was eventually transmuted into the amiable Death figure which his readers know so well. And so when he came to invent Lancre, with its witches and elves and standing stones and

blacksmiths and Morris Men, he did not have to work hard at it – 'It was like picking apples from a low tree. Twenty years of assiduous reading just overflowed.'

So much for the 'tree' of folklore, as the young Terry observed it. What kind of 'table' has Pratchett the carpenter crafted from it?

One could of course talk at length about his humour, but just as fundamental to a Discworld book are realism, practicality, and naturalistic characterisation. In the 1960s too many fantasies were inferior imitations of Tolkien's themes and style, written in high-flown archaic language, and full of implausible glamour. Disliking this fashion, Terry went back to authentic popular stories and beliefs, and handled them with careful realism and logic, for both comic and serious effects. For generations, fantasy writers have been doing misty mountains, sinister temples and gorgeous castles, but I doubt whether anyone can equal Terry in the detailed creation of a whole city whose normal, everyday life would actually *work* – its roads, its sewers, its trade, its food-supply, its rich areas and its poor areas, its post-office and banks, guilds, brothels, and police. Welcome to wonderful Ankh-Morpork!

In a recent interview in the *Independent Magazine* he said that whenever young people ask him what they should do to become good fantasy writers, he replies: 'Stop reading fantasy right now. Read history, but not queens and kings history – social history. The history of the privy, the history of cod, the history of the frozen water trade in North America. The closest other world we've got is the past.' Some things he knows first-hand. He used to be a journalist. He has kept bees and goats, and nowadays keeps chickens. He can make good cheese. He has slept in a shepherd's hut. He has done weaving on a hand-loom. So when these things turn up in the Discworld, they are 100 per cent real.

He takes great pains to get even the weird things right, in the sense that if they did exist this is *how* they would exist – for instance, his ideas on how heredity works in werewolf families, and the likely effects of a werewolf marrying a human, were checked out with his friend the biologist Jack Cohen. He likes exploring practical consequences of traditional fantastic features. Thus in *The Truth* the hero disables the werewolf policewoman Angua by smashing a bottle of stinking oils of aniseed, camphor and scallatine in front of her while she is in wolf-form. Her delicate nose 'just shuts down', and she has to spend two hours inhaling steam with a towel over her head before she is fit again. In the same book the vampire Otto, who has become a press photographer, crumbles to dust whenever he has to use flash.

A deeper level of realism, and one which is vitally important to the power of the series, is psychological realism. Discworld is a fantasy world, with all the usual inhabitants – gods, trolls, heroes, dwarfs, werewolves, dragons, vampires and so forth – but almost all these inhabitants are taken seriously as people who interact with one another, and face their various problems and perils, in recognisably human ways. The major exceptions to this are the elves, who are purely evil. This is a deliberate selection from the mass of traditional folklore about elves (or fairies) throughout Britain and Europe, which is complex and contradictory. Tolkien chose to

build upon one strand of belief which presents them as beautiful and benevolent, but Terry (like Susanna Clarke and Sylvia Townsend Warner) follows the far more widespread belief that their beauty is a sinister illusion and their nature heartless, even cruel. In a foreword to a pamphlet I wrote for the Discworld Convention of 2010 (*Elves: Nasty or Nice?*) he wrote:

I don't know why, but for as long as I can remember I have disliked elves. Possibly because they are tall and have their own hair. My sympathies were more for trolls, who seemed to have got the dirty end of the stick of life.

Similarly, the human characters are almost always drawn in realistic depth. Admittedly, the two villains in *The Amazing Maurice* are simply gangster stereotypes, for this is a book aimed at younger readers, but their counterparts Mr Tulip and Mr Pin in *The Truth* are more complex, and in Tulip's case ultimately pathetic, exemplifying an important moral issue. The heroes are never just stereotypes of noble warriors and wise wizards, but believable individuals exhibiting normal everyday behaviour. Take Captain Vimes and his City Watch, trying to cope with a dragon in *Guards! Guards!* They are a long, long way from the calm heroism of Beowulf or Siegfried, but not so very far from the desperate but brave behaviour of fire-fighters in the Blitz. The wizards, of course, are old-style Oxbridge dons. The witches, as Terry himself puts it in *The Art of Discworld*, are:

Good solid witches with mud on their boots. They'd be witches that look on the full moon as little more than a great saving on candles, and are far less superstitious than the people who *believe* in witches. ... Their main function is to be the local midwife, nurse, herbalist, and the spiritual equivalent of a coal mine canary. ... They have an ability to get to the bottom of things, a total refusal to be awed by circumstances, and real common sense. ...

Granny Weatherwax, whatever else she is, is a crabby old woman. She's sharp, sulky, cunning, a natural and shameless cheat with a huge ego that eats away at itself from the inside. She's a good witch because she's too proud to be any other kind, but that doesn't mean she has to be nice about it.

Because of this realism, non-human characters can be made the vehicle for serious investigation of social and moral issues. Dwarfs, for instance, can be found in myth, folklore, Arthurian romance and innumerable works of fantasy, but nowhere do they have the complexity they acquire in Discworld. As we trace the developing picture of dwarf society and individual dwarfs through the Guards series (especially *Men at Arms*, *Feet of Clay*, *The Fifth*

*Elephant and Thud!*) we are led to consider various matters only too relevant to our own world. There is sexist discrimination, and a long-standing unthinking ethnic hatred between dwarfs and trolls, but we are also shown how, with care and good luck, it can slowly be overcome. There is the social conservatism of dwarfs, which has good features in that it sustains those who have emigrated to human cities far from their homeland, but which can also breed the rigid intolerance and blinkered fundamentalism exemplified by the grags in *Fifth Elephant and Thud!*. Unlike certain romantic folklorists of past generations, Terry is too shrewd to think that age-old traditional beliefs and attitudes are necessarily healthy for society.

He is also well aware that folklore is not static, nor is it necessarily rural, but takes different forms in different social contexts. In the poorer parts of Ankh-Morpork, children play brutal and unhygienic street games, hallowed by long tradition – Dead Rat Conkers and Tiddley-Rat, and a variety of hopscotch in which you kick the least popular kid from one square to another, singing 'William Scuggins is a bastard'. In *Hogfather*, Susan finds that in wealthy city homes nannies and governesses control children by supernatural threats:

There was always something waiting to eat or carry off bad boys  
and girls for crimes like stuttering or defiantly and aggressively  
persisting in writing with their left hand. There was always a Scissor  
Man waiting for a little girl who sucked her thumb, always a  
bogeyman in the cellar.

In *Unseen Academicals* we are shown how Vetinari and the wizards struggle to transform ferocious street football into something vaguely resembling an organised game. And then there are the traditions of the Unseen University itself, for instance the Beating of the Bounds every 22 Grune. This involves a choir, all able-bodied members of staff, and a gaggle of students retracing the exact route of the boundaries of the University, as originally laid down centuries ago. They walk through or if necessary climb over any buildings that have since been built across the route, while ceremonially striking members of the public with live ferrets (in memory, for reasons unknown, of a long-ago Archchancellor Buckleby). Any red-headed men encountered are seized by several strong young men and given a 'plunking'. Afterwards everyone heads back to the Great Hall for a huge breakfast at which duck must be served. The Earthly counterpart to this can be observed in two parishes in Oxford every Ascension Day, where the vicar leads a procession round various boundary markers, beating them with white rods. As Steve Roud writes in *The English Year* (2006, pp. 182-3), 'The markers can be set into walls, high or low, or even into the floor, and can be down narrow alleyways, in basements, and behind or inside buildings. The routes take in the college buildings within the parish as well as shops and pubs, much to the surprise of people they meet on the way.' But I am sorry to say no one is struck with a ferret, or plunked. The Discworld is always just that little bit richer than Earth.

Scattered through the books are comments on the nature of folklore in general, rather than particular examples of it. As regards customs, for instance, we are reminded that their origins and meaning are almost always unknown, but that searching for them is futile, since folklore is by its very nature unaccountable:

Very few people do know how Tradition is supposed to go. There's a certain mysterious ridiculousness about it by its very nature – **once** there was a reason why you had to carry a posy of primroses on Soul Cake Tuesday, but **now** you did it because that's what was Done.

*Jingo*

And:

The ceremony still carries on, of course. If you left off traditions because you didn't know why they started you'd be no better than a foreigner.

*Hogfather*

There are some sharp observations on those who attempt, from the outside, to revive, transform or exploit folklore. We hear about the Ankh-Morpork Folk Dance and Song Society, for instance. One member is the unnamed bossy lady who demanded that Nanny Ogg should tell her about folk customs and fertility rituals, 'because I am writing a book and I will give you this handsome silver dollar, my good woman' (*A Guide to Lancre*). Another is Mrs Anaglypta Huggs, who revived midwinter wassail songs in Ankh-Morpork, as is told in *Hogfather*. These songs had gone so far down in the world that only Foul Ol' Ron the beggar and his Canting Crew bawled them in the street, to an accompaniment of tin cans, in the hope that people would give them money to shut up and go away. But Mrs Huggs had discovered them and turned them into genteel part-songs, for her choir to perform in marvellous harmony. Moreover, she:

had taken care to rewrite them where necessary to avoid, as she put it, 'offending those of a refined disposition with unwarranted coarseness'. Much to her surprise, people often couldn't spot the unwarranted coarseness until it had been pointed out to them.

*Hogfather*

This is an all-too-accurate reference to one phase in the history of folksong collection in Britain, when Victorians and Edwardians enthused over the songs they were finding among the poor (so old, so unspoilt!) – and then carefully smoothed out the tunes and cleaned up the words to

make them acceptable for middle-class audiences. The type of folklorist Terry is mocking here is, I am glad to say, quite extinct in Britain. But there are plenty of present-day parallels to young witches such as Magrat, Diamanda, and Annagramma who rely on wands, robes, crystals, grimoires and occult jewellery.

There is huge fun to be had from spotting the allusions lurking in a Discworld book, but it is not essential – the episodes are so skillfully written that they work perfectly well even for readers who have no suspicion that there is anything below the surface. (I have checked up on this by a few tactful enquiries among friends.) For example, near the beginning of *Unseen Academicals* there is a scene where the senior wizards carry out a ceremony which only occurs once in every hundred years. Carried piggy-back by sturdy bowler-hatted porters, they thunder through the corridors shouting ‘Oho, the megapode!’ They are in hot pursuit of one of their number who flees before them, wearing a special headdress involving a huge yellow and red beak, and uttering doleful quacks. The explanation (in so far as there is one) is given by Ponder Stibbons, Master of the Traditions:

‘The original Megapode was found in the under-butler’s pantry. It escaped in the middle of dinner and caused what my predecessor eleven hundred years ago called...’ he referred to the book, ‘a veritable heyhoe-rumbelow as all the Fellows pursued it through the college buildings with much mirth and good spirits.’

This is irresistibly comic in itself. But delight is multiplied if one recognises that it is modeled on a real ceremony, the Hunting of the Mallard at All Souls College, Oxford. It began (probably in Tudor times) as an annual custom, but later was reduced to just once in a hundred years, being held in 1801, 1901, and 2001. According to legend, workmen discovered this mallard in a drain while the foundations of the College were being laid in 1437, but it escaped them and flew off – and so 14 January was declared to be Mallard Night. Then at midnight, after a long and lavish dinner, the Fellows set out in procession, carrying lanterns and torches, to search every nook and cranny of the building in the hope of finding their lost bird, represented by a man who originally carried a live duck, but in 1901 a stuffed one, and in 2001 a wooden decoy duck. The hunt ranges from cellar to attic, and up until 1901 even went out onto the roof. As they go, the Fellows sing the Mallard Song, of which the chorus runs:

Ho, the Blood of King Edward!  
By the Blood of King Edward!  
It was a swapping, swapping Mallard!

This last detail is something which, for once in a way, Terry did not know, and so there is no song for his wizards to sing. When I told him about it he enquired 'Which King Edward? And what on earth have kings to do with it anyway?' I answered that nobody knows. 'Ah,' said he, 'if nobody knows, that's a proper tradition.'

But I must not give the impression that Terry only draws on folklore to create humorous effects. There is eerie drama in the scenes in *Carpe Jugulum* where Granny Weatherwax comes to the fringes of a moor:

The furze and heather stretched away for a mile between the mountains, unbroken by any path. It was matted, thorny stuff that would tear unprotected flesh to ribbons. She sat down on a rock and stared at the unbroken expanse for a while. Then she reached into her sack and took out a thick pair of socks. And set off, onwards and upwards.

Then she reached a little stream which ran in a narrow, shallow bed, with a broad slab of stone as a bridge.

She looked at it for a while and then reached into her sack. She took out a long piece of black material and blindfolded herself. Then she walked out across the stone, taking tiny steps with her arms flung wide for balance. Halfway across she fell onto her hands and knees and stayed there, panting, for several minutes. Then she crawled forward again, by inches.

This is Gnarly Ground, where space distorts if you look at it in a certain way, so that a smallish moor seems endless, a mere stream is a torrent in a deep gorge, a stone slab the most flimsy and unstable of bridges. These images are taken from a strange funeral chant known as 'The Lyke-Wake Dirge', which Yorkshire women sang in the sixteenth century as they kept watch over a corpse. It tells of the dead soul's perilous journey over Whinny Muir (wilderness of gorse and thorns), over the Bridge of Dread, and through Purgatory fire. Those who in life showed charity to the poor can pass these dangers safely, but those who did not are tormented. For Granny Weatherwax, too, the journey is a spiritual ordeal, and a theme of death and escape from death underlies the whole structure of the book.

Death has always been a powerful theme in Terry's work. I would like to conclude with one of my favourite passages, from *Reaper Man*, about the Dark Morris. In Lancre there is one village in the Ramtops where they really do know what they are doing, where

the Morris Men dance twice, and twice only, in every year. The first time is at dawn on the first day of spring, and everyone is welcome to watch. But the second time is in autumn, and it's private:

On a certain day when the nights are drawing in, the dancers leave work early and take from attics and cupboards the other costume, the black one, and the other bells. And they go by separate ways to a valley among the leafless trees. They don't speak. There is no music. It's very hard to imagine what kind there could be.

The bells don't ring. They're made of octiron, a magic metal. But they're not, precisely, silent bells. Silence is merely the absence of noise. They make the opposite of noise, a sort of heavily textured silence.

And in the cold afternoon, as the light drains from the sky, among the frosty leaves and the damp air, they dance the other Morris. Because of the balance of things.

You've got to dance both, they say. Otherwise you can't dance either.

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Professor Jacqueline Simpson