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# Not Cruel, Blessed, or Merciful: Pratchett, Gaiman, and the Personification of Death

Kiki V. Canon

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NOT CRUEL, BLESSED, OR MERCIFUL:  
PRATCHETT, GAIMAN, AND THE PERSONIFICATION OF DEATH

by

KIKI CANON

(Under the Direction of Joe Pellegrino)

ABSTRACT

Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman helped to change the cultural view of Death personified through their work with the Discworld novels and *Sandman* comics. Despite taking seemingly different paths in portraying Death, these two authors presented a cohesive view of mortality that encourages readers to re-consider the long-held Western cultural notions of Death as a frightening figure to be tricked or avoided at all cost. Despite meeting Barthes' criteria of the work of "bliss" that changes the mythology of the culture, academic circles frequently overlook the importance of "pop culture" writers, especially when dealing with underrepresented genres such as fantasy, horror, and media such as comics. A thorough look at how Pratchett and Gaiman subverted or skewed well known tropes in their Deaths, and the greater philosophy of mortality their works suggest, aims to explore not only the impact made on the larger culture but also why their works merit much-needed academic study.

INDEX WORDS: Death, Death personified, Personification of Death, Death in popular culture, Terry Pratchett, Neil Gaiman, Discworld, Sandman, Gender of Death

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PRATCHETT, GAIMAN, AND THE PERSONIFICATION OF DEATH

by

KIKI CANON

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PRATCHETT, GAIMAN, AND THE PERSONIFICATION OF DEATH

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KIKI CANON

Major Professor: Joe Pellegrino  
Committee: Dustin Anderson  
Caren Town

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## DEDICATION

To those who have traveled beyond the Sunless Lands of Death's Domain in the hopes that they met a kindly friend to lead the way. May we long speak their names, and may their ripples never cease. GNU Terry Pratchett

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Never-ending thanks to all who helped me on this dark journey into the minds of Death.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

How a culture views death is reflective of the culture itself. Beginning in the Middle Ages, Western Europe's view of death was represented by the Grim Reaper. Dressed in a cloak and carrying a scythe, this Death was the great equalizer. He—the Reaper was typically male—came for kings and serfs, rich and poor, believer and unbeliever without prejudice. This Death was somber and macabre as befitting a time when death was a frequent fact of life in a time of high infant mortality, primitive medical practices, plagues, wars, famines, and countless other ways for life to end.

This view of Death carried on largely unchanged into the modern culture of Europe and North America, having found its way via European settlers to the New World as well. Even though a few personifications strayed from this dark view—as in the film *Death Takes A Holiday*, where Death can be said to be the romantic lead, and young Robert Redford as a handsome, charming Death in *Twilight Zone*—the Grim Reaper's mythos held firm. Thanks to the cultural grip of Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, the modern version of Death in the post-war western world was a pale man with a penchant for chess. Personifications of death in media continued to show up sporadically, but as Lindsay Ellis explains in her video essay on the topic, “Sometimes, Death—him or herself—gets a character arc, but for the most part stories with Death the character aren't about Death, but who is confronting them.”

However, this perception of Death began to change in the 1980s. Possibly spurred by events such as the Cold War, the AIDS epidemic, the Satanic Panic, and the news media's focus on kidnapped and murdered children, artists across many genres began to focus on Death as a fully realized character. Suddenly, Death was everywhere as a wave of postmodern

deconstruction overtook the character. Comedic parodies of Bergman's Death were rife, appearing in Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*, *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*, and the children's cartoon *Animaniacs*. More than just parody shaped the modern view of Death, however, as fiction began to explore the motivations and feelings of Death. Also, a trend emerged of seeing Death as a job filled with drudgery and bureaucracy, possibly due to the growing practice of outsourcing death care to funeral homes and an increasingly capitalist death industry.

The critical conversations surrounding "literary" works and their place in the social milieu are comfortable with analyzing how objects of "high" culture influence the popular culture of the day. In order to offer a thorough analysis, these conversations are usually delayed for a period of time, so that they may address both the objects/causes that occasion changes in the culture, and the effects generated by those objects/causes. New works with popular appeal are often dismissed as ephemera, with fleeting effects on the culture, and may be ignored until they have stood the test of at least half a century. The same can be said of fantasy or horror, unless one invokes the likes of Tolkien or Stoker. But Roland Barthes calls this one-way exchange into question. He takes great pains to point out in *Mythologies*, popular culture—from films to professional wrestling—is built on the myths of old. Consumers of these myths have the option of receiving them passively or actively engaging with them as the building blocks of contemporary culture. However, Barthes claims, "[I]f I focus on the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form, I receive an ambiguous signification: I respond to the constituting mechanism of myth, to its own dynamics, I become a reader of myths" (*Mythologies* 127). This means Barthes sees a way for even the most banal text—commercials or

striptease, for example—to hold deeper importance if it causes the audience to question the very assumptions it is based upon.

Barthes calls texts that evoke such deep mental connection “writerly” works: “Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (*S/Z* 4). A true writerly work worthy of literary study will, for Barthes, spark a sort of deep pondering of our own myths and cultural norms. This thought process is culturally and historically conditioned; it is informed by the culture of its time as much as it is informed by a sense of historical continuity. When readers are caught in the grip of this sort of textual interaction, Barthes describes it as “bliss”: “[T]he text of bliss is merely the logical, organic, historical development of the text of pleasure; the avant-garde is never anything but the progressive, emancipated form of the past culture: today emerges from yesterday” (*The Pleasure of the Text* 20). Therefore, Barthes theorizes that the true writerly texts of bliss are found most often in the fringes of the culture that push the boundaries of what can be done.

Historically, works in the fantasy genre, as well as comics and graphic novels, have been academically marginalized. They may be popular, and they may truly be pleasurable texts, but the strictures of the academy may exclude them from near-contemporary study. But, according to Barthes, it is within these more peripheral genres that the progressive, emancipated form of the past culture is recombined and presented anew. Such a consideration directly addresses the representations of many of the signifiers that have been passed down from culture to culture, and Death is no exception. In those tumultuous 1980s, perhaps the earliest and most influential people to take on this deconstruction of Death as a fully-realized character were British authors Terry Pratchett (1948-2015) and Neil Gaiman (b. 1960).

Terry Pratchett began his Discworld series in 1983. The Discworld itself is a satire of Earth (aka the Roundworld) but is a flat planet supported by four large elephants who, in turn, ride through space on the shell of a giant turtle named Great A'Tuin. The societies of the Disc are satires of many Earth cultures, mostly at a medieval level of technology, which continually experiences great leaps thanks to the Discworld's abundant magic. The entire world is often described in the novels themselves as running on Narrative Causality, which means that whatever makes the best story is what will happen, no matter how unlikely it may be. Pratchett was well-beloved in his home country and received a Knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II in 2009. After his death, the BBC noted, "At the turn of the century, he was Britain's second most-read author, beaten only by JK Rowling" ("Sir Terry Pratchett"). The Discworld canon consists of 41 novels, as well as numerous short stories and tie-in projects. Death is the most frequently occurring character, appearing in thirty-nine of the novels and having a crucial role in five of them.

Gaiman first came to prominence as the author of *The Sandman* comics series, which initially ran from 1989-1996 and has been revisited for numerous sequels and standalone graphic novels. *Sandman* tells the story of Dream, a member of a group of personifications known as the Endless, along with his siblings Death, Destiny, Desire, Delirium (formerly Delight), Despair, and Destruction. *Sandman* was part of the 1980s wave of darker, edgier comics that also gave rise to the likes of Frank Miller and Alan Moore. Following his success with comics, Gaiman transitioned to horror and fantasy novels, many of which are for children or young adults. His books have been adapted into films, television, and radio plays to great acclaim. However, Gaiman's first published novel was *Good Omens*, written in collaboration with his friend Terry

Pratchett. Despite all his subsequent success and accolades, Death is still the first character many bring up when speaking of the impact Gaiman has had on the culture.

In many respects, we can say that Gaiman has an advantage over Pratchett. He's using a form that may have been historically maligned, but he can present material in a manner that is fundamentally more sensate than Pratchett's. Scott McCloud, in his seminal *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, explains it thus:

Comics is a sight-based medium. The whole world of visual iconography is at the disposal of comics creators, including the full range of pictorial styles—from realistic representational art to the simplest cartoons to the totally abstract—and the invisible world of symbols and language. Throughout its history, comics has harnessed the power of cartoons to command viewer involvement and identification, and realism to capture the beauty and complexity of the visible world. (202-04)

Pratchett relies on the power of his words to move the reader's imagination. And different readers interpret words differently. But Gaiman can offer more specificity; he can literally give his readers a picture of Death, created with both words and images. His ideas about the person, and the personhood, of Death can be cemented and presented through multiple media.

And yet, even with this combination, there can be slippage in the communication of an author's vision. Addressing the mixed media of comics, McCloud recognizes that "The comics I 'see' in my mind will *never* be seen in their entirety by anyone else, no matter how hard I try" (196). This must occasion in us the question of Pratchett's "disadvantage": if this communicative gap exists in the combination of words and art, how much less of the author's vision can be communicated by words alone? Perhaps the recognition of this gap is what caused Pratchett to form his close bond with illustrator Paul Kidby, who created iconic portraits for almost every

Discworld character and location. Together, they could communicate more about the Discworld than either could using only images or words.

In defending the fantasy genre from its many detractors, Pratchett said, “Fantasy isn’t just about wizards and silly wands. It’s about seeing the world from new directions” (“Pratchett wins”). When asked to see the world from the perspective of the other, we gain the ability to challenge ourselves and our culture. So it is with Pratchett’s and Gaiman’s personifications of Death. Through their characters and worlds, readers are asked to ponder not only questions of mortality but justice, family, gender, duty, and all that our lives can mean. Although their characters appear very different on the surface, it is clear with a close reading of their works that these two friends were presenting similar philosophies of life and death.

## CHAPTER 2

### DEATH AND GENDER

If we are to deal with death as something beyond the flat representation that a Grim Reaper or a skeleton might provide, and move toward a more complicated characterization of death, then we must start with one of the most basic identifiers humans have created to classify ourselves—gender. How we define our own gender, and how we choose to perform it in accordance with or defiance of its socially prescribed norms, is one of the building blocks of human personality and identity. Death, when personified, is no exception. How an author or a culture chooses to gender Death says much about their view of how the world (real or constructed) works. Both Pratchett’s and Gaiman’s choices in gendering Death are not devoid of cultural and historical influences, socially and personally conditioned by the intellectual zeitgeist of the time.

Perhaps the most significant and lasting of all considerations of gender that gestated during the late 1980s is Judith Butler’s influential “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” Butler begins with speech-act theory’s understanding that social reality is not a given, but is continually created as an illusion “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign” (519). In the act of performing the conventions of reality, by embodying these actions, we make those conventions appear to be natural and necessary, and they have real consequences. Nevertheless, they remain socially constructed and artificial. Although “various political interests create the social phenomena of gender itself,” (530), “gender acts” lead to actual material changes in our existence and even in our bodily selves: “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body



and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well" (521).

Pratchett and Gaiman, knowingly or unknowingly, fight against the historically and socially conditioned notions of gender. Pratchett's belated and grudging acceptance of the linguistic realities of translation forced him to abandon his original notion of a genderless Death, and Gaiman's delineation of Death as a teen girl shows him pushing against the norms of his day. They seem to conclude, as Butler does, that

Genders, then, can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent. And yet, one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable. In effect, gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control.

Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. (528)

A closer look at how Pratchett and Gaiman chose to gender their respective Deaths can tell us much about their philosophies as well as the worlds these Deaths inhabit.

These Deaths step into a multi-faceted world, historically populated by a number of Deaths, personified at various times and throughout various cultures as gendered male, gendered female, or genderless. Karl S. Guthke's *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* offers a manageable introduction to the forms personified Death has taken within Western culture. Of course, something exhaustive on this topic would eclipse even the twelve

volumes of Frazer's *Golden Bough*.<sup>1</sup> But Guthke limits his considerations far more than Frazer does, and presents contemporary anthropological studies that link current imaginative personifications of death to sources as disparate as the nature of a society (agricultural vs. hunting and warring), psychoclinical observations of the dying (who are presented as welcoming death as a lover), or the medieval Dances of Death, where the female death figures mock the men who die and serve as a type of grotesque mirror of life.

Despite the advent of first- and second-wave feminisms that would have moved intellectual currents of the time, readers in the 1980s would not have been surprised by the forces of the universe being personified in masculine forms. This is why Gaiman's Death of the Endless comes across as so groundbreaking. In this character, Gaiman creates a female personification of death that is thoroughly grounded in modern Western culture. Instead of the Grim Reaper, Gaiman presents Death of the Endless as a female. This alone is enough to make his *Sandman* notable. However, Death of the Endless' performance of her gender is put together to consciously keep challenging the readers' expectations of the character.

Gaiman says that traditional representations of Death are mostly "scary, humorless, implacable people" (Bender 238). However, the main character of the series, Dream, already had most of those traits in look and personality. "I knew that readers expected Death to be just like the Sandman, only more so—larger, darker, very male" (Bender 238-9). Rather than playing into these expectations, Gaiman chose to subvert them at every turn. Death of the Endless appears as a young woman dressed in the style of the modern Goth subculture which was at its peak when the series was being released (Fig. 1). Goth fashions feature pale skin, bold eyeliner, dark hair,

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<sup>1</sup> A few excellent sources on Death personified are Bennett's *Bodies*, Noys' *The Culture of Death*, Hallam's essay "Death and the Transformation of Gender in Image and Text," Blanco & Vidal's *The Power of Death*, Smith's *Death-Drive*, Davies' *A Brief History of Death*, Laderman's *Rest in Peace*, Piven's *The Psychology of Death in Fantasy and History*, and Bradbury's *Representations of Death*.

and black clothes; Death of the Endless follows all these trends. However, there tends to be an expectation that the owners of such dark fashion will have an equally dark personality. Rather than the humorless, brooding manner expected of one in her role, Death of the Endless greets the world and the souls in her charge with an unrelentingly upbeat, perky personality.

This incongruity is not lost on the humans who find themselves face-to-face with Death of the Endless. When Death of the Endless, in her mortal guise of Didi—the diminutive name itself reinforcing her youthful, feminine appearance—reveals herself as Death to her human companion, Sexton, he rejects her claim. He does so because he thinks that Death is a “tall guy with a bone face, like a skeletal monk with a scythe and an hourglass and a big white horse and a penchant for playing chess with Scandinavians” if it even exists as a persona at all (“High Cost” 89). The most important thing about Death of the Endless’ appearance, however, is that it would seem she chose it for herself. As Lanette Cadle puts it:

Beginning with that appearance though, one assumes that Death could appear in any form she pleases, so this one must please her and either assists in her job or runs contrary to occupational function while lending a sort of ironic, comic pleasure by its incongruity. One thing it could never be is random. The beauty of visual rhetoric involving the body is that the rhetor makes choices even when she (or he) denies making a choice. That too is a choice and one that adds to the allure of visual rhetoric, in this case a constructed identity.

(35)

Out of all the forms available to her, Death of the Endless chose this form. There must, then, be some advantage to this appearance, to this identity that she has constructed.

When we first meet Death of the Endless, it is through the eyes of her brother, Dream. One of the first things a reader might notice beyond her physical appearance is her speech. He

finds it a shame that humanity fears death, as Death of the Endless is far kinder than he.

Dreams—and their personification—can be at least as confusing and terrifying as pondering one’s own mortality, but humans avoid the latter while embracing the former. As Death of the Endless says of humanity and their relationship to Dream/dreams, “Mostly they aren’t too keen to see me. They fear the Sunless Lands. But they enter your realm each night without fear” (“Sound” 26). This observation by Dream echoes Hesiod’s *Theogony* which reads:

That is where the children of dark Night have their houses, Sleep and Death, terrible gods; never does the bright Sun look upon them with his rays when he goes up into the sky nor when he comes back down from the sky. One of them passes gently over the earth and the broad back of the sea and is soothing for human beings. But the other one's temper is of iron, and the bronze heart in his chest is pitiless: once he takes hold of any human, he owns him; and he is hateful even for the immortal gods. (758-66).

Gaiman is drawing on ancient ideas of the gods of Dream/Sleep and Death, although he does his best to subvert them as often as he can. They remain siblings, as in the myths of old, but this time Death wears a female form and is the one who is kindly to humans, while Dream is cruel, pitiless, and cold-hearted. Gaiman’s inversion of the traditional gender conventions, and the idea underneath it, that such conventions can be put on, cast off, or performed at will, is an obvious manifestation of Butler’s notion of the performativity of gender.

People fear death, but few would fear a thin, young woman with a kind smile and a sunny attitude. It would seem that Death of the Endless took a form that would allow her to disarm the pervading human fear of death—not to mention the frequent shock or sadness at discovering one’s life has ended—by appearing in a body that holds, culturally speaking, no threat. Humans tend to respond positively to youth, to sincere smiles, and to optimistic personalities. We are also

trained to see young women as alluring rather than threatening. Therefore, Death of the Endless' appearance is a form of kindness to her charges. It is her way of offering some small comfort at the end of it all. Additionally, the Goth appearance would have been a very familiar and even welcoming sight to Gaiman's target audience of comic-reading outcasts in the late 1980s & early 1990s, many of whom would have been very familiar with the subculture if not participants themselves.

These choices made Death seem more like a friend to the initial readers of the *Sandman* series. Unlike the other Endless, who all speak in strangely-shaped bubbles featuring odd fonts or unique colors, Death of the Endless' speech bubbles seem indistinguishable from that of the mortal humans in the series (Fig. 2). Of all the Endless, she is the most like us. Gaiman stated that Death of the Endless was "a Death who I personally wouldn't mind encountering when my time comes" (Bender 239). Like the titular "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" of Keats, this Death is, initially, a familiar, approachable figure. But Gaiman mitigates the misogyny apparent in Keats' personification of death, because Death of the Endless never becomes the seductive siren that La Belle Dame is. She brings not destruction, but peace. Cadle says that Death of the Endless' form "means that others are comfortable talking with her, which results in a heightened ability to use her allure to romance them into a sensual (through the senses), consensual agreement" (36). Unlike La Belle Dame, Death of the Endless does not use her form to entrap souls. Rather, her openness and familiarity comforts them, so they willingly accept her and consent to leave this world for whatever may come after.

If Death of the Endless is concerned with subverting expectations, then Death of the Discworld is overly concerned with giving people exactly what they expect. Personifications, gods, and similar beings on the Disc are all governed by the force of belief. Therefore, Death of

the Discworld exists as a personification because the beings of the Disc understand they can/will die, and they have decided there must be someone or something who does the job of separating the living from the dead and sending them on their journey to whatever may come after this life. Due to the Disc's rules of belief, Death of the Discworld now appears as people believe he will appear. Since the Disc is modeled after our own world, with its stereotypes, preconceptions, and tendency toward culturally-based gender hegemony, Death of the Discworld appears as our modern perception of the Grim Reaper. He is a seven-foot-tall skeleton with blue glowing eyes and a deep voice who wears a black, hooded robe and carries a scythe (Fig. 3). He speaks only in SMALL CAPS that, generally, are not enclosed with quotation marks. As one would expect, he is male.

In addressing gender, Guthke points to a far more mundane linguistic reason for variations in the cultural portrayal of Death: "the grammatical gender of the word for death in a given language" (22). While this may seem self-evident, Guthke's work deals with the many problems inherent in depending solely on this stance, and reaches beyond it for a more nuanced understanding of this gender dichotomy. He sees the grammatical connection as unreliable, or tenuous at best. His evidence comes from multiple points in the English, American, French, German, and Spanish literary canons. Even though Guthke's instincts are correct when he declines to put the issue entirely in the linguistic realm, language differences are directly responsible, in part, for the gender of Discworld's Death. Pratchett originally wrote Death of the Discworld as completely without gender, preferring the pronoun "it" when referring to the character. Unfortunately, this caused numerous translation problems with languages which require nouns to have a grammatical gender, leading Death of the Discworld to be labeled as male or female according to the language being used.

Despite his eventual decision to directly gender Death of the Discworld, Pratchett and folklorist Jacqueline Simpson note that referring to Death as either gender would not change his form as “it takes a calm, well-trained eye to tell a male from a female skeleton, and black hooded robes are unisex attire” (481). Pratchett finally began to use masculine pronouns to refer to Death of the Discworld starting with the fourth Discworld novel, *Mort*, and unambiguously confirmed his gender in *Reaper Man* (the eleventh novel in the series, and the second to star Death). It is important to note that Pratchett finally used gendered pronouns in the first Discworld novel that focused on Death of the Discworld as a character. Death of the Discworld was literally becoming his own man.

In fact, the Auditors of Reality—beings concerned with the ordered functioning of the universe who serve as Death of the Discworld’s most frequent adversaries—bring up Death of the Discworld’s gender as a specific complaint against his continued existence in *Reaper Man*. When the Auditors first propose to replace Death of the Discworld with a more orderly, less individually-minded force, their conversation includes the following argument: “One said, That is the point. The word is *him*. Becoming a personality *is* inefficient. We don’t want it to spread. Supposing gravity developed a personality? Supposing it decided to *like* people?” (*Reaper Man* 3) To the Auditors, personalities are messy, undesirable things. The initial step for a force becoming a personification is using personal pronouns, especially gendered ones. Identifying as masculine, or any gender, is Exhibit A in the Auditors’ case against Death of the Discworld.

However, it seems unfair of the Auditors to blame Death of the Discworld for this development. If his form is shaped by the expectations of those who believe in him, then he has very little choice in the body he inhabits. His only real choice in his presentation seems to be his choice to ride a living white horse because the skeletal horse kept falling apart and the fiery steed

kept setting the barn on fire (*Mort* 34, *Reaper Man* 16). To the inhabitants of the Disc, Death of the Discworld is undeniably masculine in presentation. While his form may have been dictated, what he wasn't given was his personality. It is through the choices that he makes concerning his personality that Death of the Discworld is able to assert his own individuality.

Death of the Discworld knows that his job is that of an “anthropomorphic personification” (*Mort* 34). Personifications must, by definition, have a personality. However, when we imagine death personified, we tend to imagine its form, but not deeper motivations, likes, dislikes, hobbies, etc. It seems that the beings of the Discworld are no different. However, while our expectations of Death of the Endless are undermined primarily in her appearance and demeanor, the subversive nature of Death of the Discworld goes far deeper. His exterior may be imposing and masculine, but his internal nature is far softer, informed by traditional ideas of the feminine.

Gender expectations in Western culture are not confined to the clothes we wear or the pronouns we use. There are also numerous behavioral and emotional stereotypes attached to gender. Death of the Discworld subverts many of the masculine behaviors his external form would suggest. He has an adopted daughter for whom he acts as a single parent. When Pratchett introduced this concept in the 1980s, the culturally-accepted model for a single parent was decidedly female, unless the father was a widower. This caregiver role later extends to his granddaughter, Susan, who he watches over—albeit from afar—after he is forced to harvest her parents. His domain is tastefully decorated—if all black—and contains beautiful (black) gardens as well as innumerable living cats Death of the Discworld has rescued from various harsh fates. Gardens and multiple cats tend to be associated with women to many Western minds and are a subversion of the ultra-masculine presentation of Death of the Discworld. Although his



demeanor may be stoic and inscrutable to those characters with whom he interacts, readers are privy to his thoughts know that he is far more emotional than he seems. He is saddened by the finality and injustice of the abstract concept of the cessation of life, arguably more than Death of the Endless seems to be, and is somewhat upset by the knowledge that he can save more lives than he does but that his duty forbids him to do so with any regularity. Explaining this to Susan he says, “*SOME THINGS END. I KNOW THIS. SOMETIMES I HAVE THOUGHT OTHERWISE. BUT... WITHOUT DUTY, WHAT AM I? THERE HAS TO BE A LAW*” (*Soul Music* 341). He does seem to take any opportunity he can to save and nurture life within the constraints of his duty, however, including more than one occasion where he can be said to have preserved the very existence of the Disc itself against the meddling of the Auditors, who are intent on removing all life from the universe. In this way, he becomes not only a masculine protector, but also a feminine caregiver to the entire world.

Both Deaths share similar, caring personality traits that read as feminine despite their seemingly opposite gendered appearances. Beyond gendered concerns, the defining trait for both could be said to be duty. They understand that death is the natural conclusion of life and that the responsibility of ensuring death is given equally to all falls to them. They both have decided to do that by being the steady, but kind, presence at the end of it all. Death of the Endless’ appearance is a form of this kindness. Death of the Discworld shows his own form of compassion by ensuring the blades of his scythe and sword have the sharpest edge possible so the separation of body from soul is instantaneous and painless (*Mort* 55). It is important to note that the shadowy desert lands souls are guided through by both Deaths are *not* the final destination for the soul. What lies beyond seems to be a mystery for all, even the Deaths themselves. However, as a mother births a child into a world of unknown destiny, the Deaths

perform a sort of birth ritual of their own, sending their charges to meet their destinies in whatever waits on the other side.

This birth-into-death image asks readers to completely reconsider their ideas about death and an afterlife. Although religious institutions construct a life beyond this one, to which death is a doorway, humanists like Pratchett and Gaiman offer the possibility of a changed existence (one that Death itself cannot enter). Death is not a doorway, or a reaper, or any other manifestation that signifies an ending. Rather, it is a person, and those who meet it enter into a relationship. They are not acted upon by any process, or in any way completed. Instead, they are birthed into a new existence, and guided toward the possibility of moving “beyond the horizon” to a place where Death cannot go. This immediate choice to either move onward or move in some other direction cannot be made by a being whose self has been erased through the process of dying; Death reminds the dead of who they are, and leaves them free to choose their own future. Pratchett and Gaiman give us, for lack of a better term, a kinder, gentler, Death.

## CHAPTER 3

### DEATH AS MORTAL

Personifying natural processes is one of the earliest tools humans used to try to understand our world. Imagining that a very human mind controlled time, or weather, or, of course, death, gave us a framework to begin to contextualize our relationship to the otherwise unknowable. There is, however, an insurmountable problem with this tactic. If a human mind can't comprehend death, then how can Death see the world in anything approximating a human level of understanding? Perhaps, then, the answer lies in bringing the personification even farther down to our level. What if Death had to see the world through our eyes? What if Death were mortal? Like John Donne with *Death, be not proud* centuries before them, both Pratchett and Gaiman explored this scenario with their Deaths by positing conditions where Death can or does die. By exploring what, if anything, mortality could teach these immortal beings, readers of the *Sandman* and Discworld series are forced to deal with all the feelings that arise confronted with the certainty of our own mortality.

Death of the Endless wasn't always the perky goth girl we become familiar with in the majority of *Sandman*. In "The Winter's Tale" she tells us that she used to resent her position since she considered her job to be the most difficult of all the Endless. Death of the Endless became sad that most people greeted her "as if dying were some kind of admission of failure," so one day, "long before this world," she refused to do her job any longer ("Winter's Tale" 61). Unfortunately, this led to "chaos and pain," as nothing was allowed to die ("Winter's Tale" 62). Death of the Endless resumed her job (after being begged by the living to return), but did so in a frigid and uncaring manner, as people once again treated her arrival with the scorn they had before. One day, a dying young girl changed Death herself with one question: "How would you

like it?” (“Winter’s Tale” 63) How would the Endless Death react to her own ending? Death of the Endless realized she had never considered what mortality might mean to the mortal and decided in that moment that she should explore how her arrival would look and feel to the dying by experiencing it through their own eyes.

At some point in the early 1990s, a (supposedly) 16-year-old goth girl named Didi tells her new-found friend Sexton, “One day in every century Death takes on mortal flesh, better to comprehend what the lives she takes must feel like, to taste the bitter tang of mortality: and this is the price she must pay for being the divider of the living from all that has gone before, all that must come after” (“High Cost” 124). Didi is this manifestation of Death of the Endless in mortal form. Thus, Didi is the continuing result of the question asked by that little girl untold centuries ago. Death of the Endless decided that she would spend one day every century as a mortal to periodically remind herself why humans react to her gift the way we do. She takes on a persona (sometimes human, but not always), like that of Didi, and spends 24 hours having all the experiences she possibly can that would be available to the type of being whose existence she is mimicking. As Didi, Death of the Endless eats food, goes to a concert, and even makes a friend in young Sexton. When Didi’s time comes to an end—and Death itself dies, fulfilling Donne’s prophecy—her fully Death nature comes to claim her mortal form. After the Didi incarnation dies, she and Death of the Endless have a moment of psychomachia by way of a brief conversation in the realm between life and afterlife. Didi is thus able to verbalize all the experiences and feelings she had as a mortal. Most importantly, she keeps repeating to Death of the Endless her wish that her mortal existence had gone on forever.

Death of the Endless, in “The Winter’s Tale,” relates what she learned the first time she came for her own mortal self. “And after the first day I was alive, when I met me, I turned to me

and I told me I was a coldhearted, stuck-up, frigid bitch – only I didn't say it anywhere near as nicely. And I got the message" ("Winter's Tale" 63). Her experiment in mortality, and the manifestation of that form, harkens back to Hesiod's description of her as cold-hearted and without empathy for her charges, and that alignment teaches her two important lessons. For Death of the Endless, the first lesson learned from mortality was that it is difficult to give up. Even if the person was suffering or chose to end their life of their own free will, the actual reality of death (and Death) will always be hard to accept. Living things want to survive. It is their primary biological urge. When survival is no longer an option, people tend to react with despair or anger. Secondly, Death of the Endless realized in that first moment of experiencing her own gift that the thing people need most at the end is a friend. Everyone must experience death alone. Not even Death of the Endless knows what lies beyond her domain of the Sunless Lands. However, she can be a comfort on that short, possibly final, journey. That one mortal day, reinforced every 100 years, showed Death of the Endless the importance of kindness and caring at the end of all things, and a sense of respect for and contentment in her designated task.

One of the more interesting dichotomies in the way Gaiman and Pratchett write their Deaths is that of choice. In general, Death of the Endless gets to choose her own existence in a way Death of the Discworld rarely does. The same goes with mortality. Death of the Endless freely chooses her centennial sabbatical in order to perform her job more professionally. However, Death of the Discworld has mortality thrust upon him by way of the Auditors of Reality. The Auditors convince Azrael—the universal Platonic Form of death from whom Discworld's Death was created—to essentially fire Death of the Discworld by making him mortal and install a new Death to take his place. Azrael agrees, and suddenly Death of the

Discworld has been relieved of his duties and has his own life timer steadily flowing sand to mark the seconds until his inevitable end.

The Auditors' main complaint is that Death of the Discworld has become an individuated personality. Personalities are inefficient and make reality messy. However, Death of the Discworld had no choice to become a personality. The beliefs of the living on the Disc gave Death of the Discworld his form, and his form, by the rules of the Disc, provided the framework for the rest of him. Death of the Discworld described the existence of non-mortal beings to his granddaughter as, "WE ARE ENVISAGED AS HUMAN BY HUMANS AND THUS, IN VARIOUS FASHIONS, WE TAKE ON SOME ASPECTS OF HUMANITY. IT CAN BE NO OTHER WAY, EVEN OUR VERY BODY SHAPE FORCES UPON OUR MINDS A CERTAIN WAY OF OBSERVING THE UNIVERSE. WE PICK UP HUMAN TRAITS..." (*Thief of Time* 102). Death of the Discworld can't help his developing personality; it was thrust upon him by his charges.

Upon learning of his own impending death in the novel *Reaper Man*, Death of the Discworld reacts in an almost human manner. His first instinct is to appeal the decision to Azrael. This is the same instinct that leads some people to challenge Death of the Discworld to some game or other in a last attempt to hold on to life. Death of the Discworld is reminded that there is no appeal. Everything mortal must die, and he is now mortal. The finality of things having been settled, Death of the Discworld accepts his fate with something akin to enthusiasm. He dismisses his manservant, Albert, saying, "I SHOULD LIKE TO LEARN BY MYSELF. I SHALL HAVE EXPERIENCES. AT LAST" (*Reaper Man* 17). Death of the Discworld, who has always had his entire existence dictated to some extent by his job and his charges, revels in the idea that he will finally get to experience the freedom of choice before his existence ends.

The main choice Death of the Discworld makes is to spend the final time left to him living under the name Bill Door and working as a farmhand on the farm of Miss Flitworth. He makes a good farmhand, already knowing how to use a scythe. His method of reaping is unusual. Although an outside observer would perceive Door's reaping as a single swing of the scythe, he actually cuts each blade of grass or wheat individually and with great precision. Death of the Discworld learns many things as he spends his remaining time on the farm and in the nearby village. He experiences sleep and dreaming for the first time. He experiences the existential terror of knowing death is unavoidable, but Miss Flitworth teaches him a typical human, and stereotypically British, coping mechanism: "The best thing to do is keep busy and act cheerful" (*Reaper Man* 150). Death of the Discworld also experiences the act of killing. As a farmhand, he must butcher a chicken and lay down poison to stop the farm's rat problem. Death of the Discworld had never before felt like a murderer. The novel explains the difference between deciding when life will end and taking lives at their end as a job as the "difference between theft and stealing by finding" (*Reaper Man* 153).

As a mortal, Bill Door must face the oblivion of his reaping job in the same way Death of the Discworld's job was also being replaced. The newest technological invention on the Disc is a Combination Harvester that is a metaphorical stand-in for the New Death of the humanoids on the Disc. "In both cases he fights back against the anti-individualistic threat they pose: the harvester reaps many crops at once with a kind of impersonal behavior, much like the new Death" (Neely 236). Because at the end of it all, what his time as Bill Door teaches Death of the Discworld is that humans cannot be treated as one homogenous mass, no matter how much the Auditors wish that were the case. In life, and in death, humans should be considered as individuals worthy of individual respect. Just as Bill Door reaps every blade of grass separately,

so must Death of the Discworld tend to the reaping of each person with the same individual care and attention. When, after defeating the new Death, Death of the Discworld asks his boss, Azrael, for his job back, his final plea is not for himself but for his charges. “LORD,” he asks, “WHAT CAN THE HARVEST HOPE FOR, IF NOT FOR THE CARE OF THE REAPER MAN” (*Reaper Man* 314)? Azrael ponders Death of the Discworld’s request, and in every edition of the novel, Azrael’s reply is given its own page to show the bolded, caps locked, massive font needed to visualize the enormity of experiencing even a single word from the being that will eventually reap the soul of the very universe itself: “**YES**” (*Reaper Man* 315).

Again, we can see a similar worldview at play with both authors, although filtered through the individual styles of Gaiman and Pratchett. While Gaiman’s view seems more focused on needing consolation and friendship on the lonely journey to whatever waits past Death’s lands, Pratchett’s take seemed more concerned with understanding that each life is precious due to its individuality and thus deserves to be treated with respect and care. Death of the Discworld may not be as personable as his counterpart among the Endless, but both characters try in their own way to show care and compassion in what humans view as a terrifying moment.



## CHAPTER 4

## DEATH SAVES A LIFE

If these Deaths could learn empathy from their mortal personas, could that compassion compel them to set aside their duties and save lives instead? In the case of both Deaths (and some of their stand-ins), this urge has manifested on several occasions. Most interestingly, Death of the Discworld seems far more willing to meddle with the grand order of the universe than the seemingly more human Death of the Endless, although Death of the Discworld does remind others (and presumably himself) that, “TO TINKER WITH THE FATE OF EVEN ONE INDIVIDUAL COULD DESTROY THE WHOLE WORLD” (*Mort* 55). What makes the Deaths risk such consequences for a single life?

Death of the Discworld seems to be quite sentimental when it comes to the subject of life. One might be forgiven for thinking his penchant for saving lives started with the eighth book of the series during his mortal time as Bill Door, but the most impactful (narratively speaking) of the people saved by Death of the Discworld first appeared in the second Discworld novel, *The Light Fantastic*. Although Ysabell, daughter of Death of the Discworld, had a brief early appearance, we don't get to explore her life fully until the series' fourth book, *Mort*. Ysabell's parents died when she and they were crossing a desert when she was a small child. Instead of leaving Ysabell to die alone or personally collecting her soul himself, Death of the Discworld saved her life. She aged normally until the age of 16, when Death of the Discworld brought her to Death's Domain to live with him as his daughter in his house, Mon Repos (said to mean “my place of rest” in the Disc's Quirmian language).

Ysabell is the first person we know to have had their life saved by Death of the Discworld himself. While Death of the Discworld does have a human manservant named Albert

who is over 2000 years old, Albert's near-immortality is the result of a bargain he made with Death of the Discworld to avoid his own quickly-approaching end. Albert is allowed to stay in the timeless realm of Death's Domain in exchange for his companionship and servitude, but every time Albert returns to the Disc he is subject to the normal flow of time, and thus inches closer to his own inevitable death. Unlike Albert, Ysabell struck no bargain with Death of the Discworld. She was brought into Death's Domain by the actions of Death of the Discworld himself. She had no choice, and by the time we see her in *Mort*, Ysabell has tired of her existence after spending 35 years (by the reckoning of the Disc) trapped as an un-aging 16-year-old with only an anthropomorphic personification and an elderly manservant for company.

When Death of the Discworld takes on a young human boy, Mort (short for Mortimer), as an apprentice, Ysabell is finally afforded someone her own age (by appearance, at least) to spend time with. In explaining her situation, she tells Mort:

“He found me and brought me here. I don't know why he did it.”

“Perhaps he felt sorry for you?”

“He never feels anything. I don't mean that nastily, you understand. It's just that he's got nothing to feel with, no what'd'youcallits, no glands. He probably *thought* sorry for me”

(*Mort* 130).

At the point when Death of the Discworld chose to save Ysabell, he had never experienced mortality or emotion. Why would he choose to save and adopt a child? Pratchett never explicitly stated Death of the Discworld's motivation in this matter, but there are textual clues. Strangely, it is Death's Domain itself that may provide an explanation.

As has been previously discussed, Death of the Discworld was provided very little choice in his appearance. His form, to a great extent, was dictated by the beliefs of mortals. However,

Death's Domain seems to be created by the whims of Death of the Discworld himself. In Death's Domain, there is a house decorated with a "skull-and-bones motif" in shades of black and purple (*Mort* 28). There is also a garden where, "The grass was black. The flowers were black. Black apples gleamed among the black leaves of a black apple tree. Even the air looked inky" (*Mort* 36). Despite his lack of color sense, Death of the Discworld would seem to have a good imagination to create a home complete with stables for Binky, his horse, and a garden to stroll through. However, as Ysabell tells Mort, "Everything's a copy" of things Death of the Discworld saw in the mortal world, because, "He can't create, you see" (*Mort* 129).

Much is made throughout the Discworld series of Death of the Discworld's attempt at mimicking human existence being *almost* correct. As Erica L. Neely notes:

Being created by human imagination is not the same as being human, of course.

Nevertheless, by being amongst humans Death picks up aspects of humanity. He is a kind of imitator of humanity. His house thus contains a bedroom, despite the fact that he does not sleep. Why? Because human houses contain bedrooms. Similarly, he has silver backed hairbrushes by his bed, despite the fact that he has a skull for a head (and thus no use for such brushes.) Why? Again, because this is what humans keep in their bedrooms (234).

While Neely attributes this to simply spending time amongst humans, Gideon Haberkorn sees this imitation as a furtherance of the belief of mortals (and the reader) imposing itself on Death of the Discworld's behavior. Giving such almost-human detail to Death's Domain, "implies assumptions we all share... that if death is in fact personified as Death, he has to be some place; that if you work from home you are likely to have a study; and so on and so forth" (Haberkorn 180). Therefore, everything Death of the Discworld does is influenced by human expectation.

What is the typical Western expectation of the progress of an adult human life? It is expected that one will have some sort of employment, acquire a domicile of some type, and settle into family life.

The saving of Ysabell, therefore, can be read as Death of the Discworld attempting to fulfill the course of a typical human life. He doesn't need a servant, but people with large estates typically have servants, so he has Albert. He understands that most tradesmen in pre-industrial societies take apprentices to allow them the opportunity to vacation, so he hires Mort. However, those professional relationships do not require emotional attachments. In the Pratchett co-authored *The Folklore of Discworld*, readers are told that, "Death has often tried to act in human ways as a relief from his unremitting memory of both past and future, but he rarely gets much satisfaction from it" (487). As mentioned above, Death of the Discworld always gets the details wrong. He understands offspring in the abstract, but he doesn't have the emotions, as Ysabell laments to Mort, to feel anything for his child. He also halts her development at age 16, not understanding that perpetual puberty would be a nightmarish existence for almost any human. Death of the Discworld understands what family *looks* like, but not what one *feels* like. After Ysabell and Mort develop feelings for each other, he finally realizes that he must let them both pursue the life his realm can't give them.

During his mortal existence as Bill Door, Death of the Discworld encounters another little girl in a deadly situation. His initial reaction to her peril is to repeat his warning about tinkering with fate. However, Miss Flitworth, his boss on the farm, shows him what a real human thinks of fate versus the life of a child with a forceful slap to his skull. Finally realizing the emotional weight of such action, a mortal Bill Door walks into a burning building to rescue one child, losing a substantial number of the precious few remaining hours in his life timer to keep them

both among the living. In fact, he gives his life-timer to the rescued girl, telling her to hold it tightly and forbidding anyone from removing it from her hand, for it is the only thing keeping her alive. It is probably the events he experienced while mortal that allows Death of the Discworld years later to understand when Mort and Ysabell, after suffering a fatal carriage crash, choose to forgo his invitation to return to Death's Domain and instead meet their ends knowing that he can finally be something of a proper fatherly, or grandfatherly, figure to their daughter, Susan.

While both Deaths are seen making deals or playing games for the lives of others, intervening in an individual life with no particular agenda is a relatively rare action for both. Even though Death of the Endless seems to have a more compassionate and optimistic demeanor, we see her directly meddling in life's affairs far less. The one Death of the Endless story that deals with her specifically saving a life could be argued to contain no intent to actually do so. However, Death of the Endless is shown at many points to be omnipotent as well as omniscient. She, like Death of the Discworld, can see the entire flow of past and future. So the readers must ask themselves, how likely is it that her one day of mortality in a century would put her in the path of a suicidal teen by sheer accident?

*The High Cost of Living*, published at roughly the midpoint of the original run of *Sandman*, is a story about how Death of the Endless uses her vacation day to subtly save the life of Sexton Furnival. Sexton is a 16-year-old New Yorker who is so disconnected from life that he sees no remedy but suicide. His specific complaints about life are that he has no one to love (not that he believes in love), no one truly evil to hate, his mom's parenting has been mediocre at best, and his father left for greener pastures across the country with a new wife. He is a boy who sees no beauty in the world. We meet him as he types his suicide note and follow him to a

landfill where we presume he plans to die. Instead of his planned exit, he falls ignominiously thanks to some unstable refuse and finds himself buried under the garbage left by the lives of others.

The reader is never told how or why Didi was in the landfill, but she appears and helps Sexton from his predicament. She takes him back to her apartment, and their adventure begins. From that point, every incident that befalls the duo can be seen as a direct counter to all the things Sexton thinks his life is missing. Thanks to the backstory the universe invented to make Didi feel more real, Sexton sees what it would look like to be 16 and have no family (as hers was supposedly killed in an accident recently). He sees true love through his mom's coworker Hazel and her girlfriend Foxglove. He sees the maternal love Hazel has for her unborn child and sees that families can take many forms (loving media portrayals of lesbian couples, especially mothers, were almost unheard of in 1993). He sees true evil in the way the Eremite casually murders Sexton's classmate, Theo. He sees the beauty of the world through Didi's eyes: the juicy crunch of an apple, the chemical aftertaste of a hot dog, even the rats in the park are things of wonder to her. Sexton watches as she takes in "the good bits and the bad bits and the dull bits and the painful bits" and accepts that it is "part of the whole thing" of living ("High Cost" 137). He realizes there are things and people worth loving and living for, and maybe Didi was one of them.

Except for the very short speech on life quoted in part above, Didi says and does nothing directly to dissuade Sexton from his suicidal ideation. She simply shows him what life and death truly look like. He says himself that he'd never seen a dead body until he watched Theo die, and then he sees Didi die within hours of Theo. Seeing Didi's death so closely may have caused some sort of realization that he didn't want to follow. After Didi has died, we see a more content

Sexton. He is kinder to his mother, he notices the beauty of the world more, and he helps his paraplegic neighbor get out of the apartment more. Sexton says that:

It would be really neat if death *was* somebody, and not just nothing, or pain, or blackness. And it would be really *good* if death *could* be somebody like Didi. Somebody funny, and friendly, and nice. And maybe just a *tiny* bit crazy. And I wish I *could* see her again. I wish she *wasn't* dead. But if it means dying first... Well... I suppose I can *wait*. For a while ("High Cost" 143).

By the time Death of the Endless meets Sexton, she doesn't need to learn the importance of a single life. Unlike Death of the Discworld's time as Bill Door, Death of the Endless gets to experience mortality again and again. Perhaps Didi's day was not about learning the joy of living, but the joy of knowing you've made a positive impact on the life of another. In a way, Didi mirrors Bill Door's sacrifice when he rushed into the fire. She gives of her limited time to help another. The first lesson the Deaths must learn is how it feels to know the existential terror of mortality. The more important test in empathy is sacrificing what little time you have in order to save another.

## CHAPTER 5

## OTHERS WHO WOULD BE DEATH

While *Sandman* has a single personification of the concept of death, the Discworld series has several characters who have embodied Death. On the Disc, Death is whoever does Death's job. On a few occasions, others have been given the powers of Death either by Death of the Discworld himself or reality itself filling the position when he has left or been fired. The most notable of these usually temporary Deaths are Death of the Discworld's apprentice Mort, the New Death of *Reaper Man*, the Death of Rats, and Death of the Discworld's granddaughter Susan. Each of these stand-in Deaths give the job of Death a slightly different color and show the reader various philosophies of living and dying that provide a more nuanced appreciation of Death of the Discworld himself.

**Mort**

Mort is the first alternate Death that appears in the series. He begins as a normal human boy. Mort is considered by his father to be unfit for the family business of growing reannual grapes to turn into a highly prized wine. Reannual plants are slightly magical varieties which grow and are harvested *before* the farmer has planted the seeds. Mort's father considers him not a serious enough sort for the business nor frightening enough to even scare away birds from the fields. Therefore, Mort is sent to be apprenticed to the tall man his father believes to be an undertaker, normal mortals being unable to wrap their minds around the appearance of Death of the Discworld until it is their time.

Mort is initially employed to do menial tasks around Death's Domain (caring for Binky in the stables, for instance), but is quickly deemed suitable to accompany Death of the Discworld



on his rounds. It is through Mort's eyes that the reader discovers more about the mechanisms of Death of the Discworld's job and death and the afterlife on the Disc. Death of the Discworld first takes Mort to collect the soul of a king who meets his death by an assassin's arrow. Mort, being untethered from time while assisting Death of the Discworld, experiences the events in slow motion and attempts in vain to stop the arrow. Death of the Discworld explains that it is not the job of Death to decide who lives and dies, as that decision is in the hands of the gods. Death's job is only to separate the soul from the body at the scheduled time and guide the soul toward whatever awaits beyond (a land that Death of the Discworld himself never sees).

Death of the Discworld warns Mort that disrupting the fate of even one soul could destroy the entire world, and Mort asks if Death of the Discworld will send him home for attempting to do so. Death of the Discworld dismisses the boy's concerns, saying, "BECAUSE YOU SHOWED COMPASSION? NO. I MIGHT HAVE DONE IF YOU HAD SHOWN PLEASURE. BUT YOU MUST LEARN THE COMPASSION PROPER TO YOUR TRADE." This compassion Death of the Discworld describes as "A *SHARP* EDGE" (*Mort* 55). Even though the job of Death is to bring about the cessation of life, Death of the Discworld works diligently to ensure there is no unnecessary pain for the mortal.

Mort also helps readers understand one of the fundamental tenets of Discworld philosophy. During a conversation between Mort and Death of the Discworld we learn:

– YOU SHOULD HAVE WORKED OUT BY NOW THAT EVERYONE GETS WHAT THEY THINK IS COMING TO THEM. IT'S SO MUCH NEATER THAT WAY.

"I know, sir. But that means bad people who think they're going to some sort of paradise actually do get there. And good people who fear they're going to some kind of horrible place really suffer. It doesn't seem like justice"

WHAT IS IT I'VE SAID YOU MUST REMEMBER, WHEN YOU'RE OUT ON THE DUTY?

"Well, you —"

HMM?

Mort stuttered into silence.

THERE'S NO JUSTICE. THERE'S JUST YOU.

"Well, I—"

YOU MUST REMEMBER THAT.

"Yes, but—"

I EXPECT IT ALL WORKS OUT PROPERLY IN THE END. I HAVE NEVER MET THE CREATOR, BUT

I'M TOLD HE'S QUITE KINDLY DISPOSED TO PEOPLE. (*Mort* 123)

This passage contains a couple of Discworld's frequent themes regarding dying and the workings of any afterlife. The most important of these is the repeated phrase that there is no cosmic justice. Death of the Discworld has no grand anthropomorphic Justice counterpart. Justice is a human concept that must be decided upon and meted out by humans while they're alive. Nothing will do it for them in death. The other is that Death of the Discworld cannot tell people what is on the other side of death. The afterlife is different for each individual and is decided by their personal beliefs (belief being one of the major forces on the Disc, after all).

Although Pratchett himself was an avowed atheist, the Disc contains many gods created by the various beliefs of the beings living on it. The more powerful gods live in their realm of Dunmanifestin atop Cori Celesti, the mountain at the very center of the Disc. The gods generally spend their time playing games or plotting against each other for supremacy, and only bother with their believers when they need pawns in their games or in the *very* rare times when a mortal can convince them to intercede in events (sometimes at the insistence of Death of the Discworld,

as in *Mort*). Of course, the truth that Death of the Discworld knows is that the gods are not the creators of mortals, but the creation of them. The true Creator of the Disc appears in the novel *Eric*. The Creator has a human appearance (similar to that of Pratchett himself) and is shown to be rather scatter-brained and generally uninvolved with the daily workings of his creation. Therefore, in a world where neither the Creator or the gods are all that bothered about the goings-on of mortals, it would seem that the easiest (and laziest) way to decide which afterlife suits a person is to let each person's belief decide for them.

Mort must learn for himself that Death cannot afford to have more compassion than that of the sharp edge. Mort's decision to save a princess from an assassin (an unjust death in Mort's eyes) imperils the stability of the universe. After Death of the Discworld discovers what his apprentice has done, he strips the boy of the powers of Death and intends to reap the souls of the mortals who should have died had Mort done the job properly. Mort challenges Death of the Discworld to a duel for the souls, using the sword of Death as his weapon. When Mort loses the duel (thanks to a rather unsporting groin kick from Death of the Discworld), Ysabell defiantly slaps her father and complains that, despite all his claims to impartiality, Death of Discworld is being capricious and cruel by saving Ysabell and condemning Mort for a similar act. Death of the Discworld decides to spare not only Mort but the souls he was battling to save. Death of the Discworld petitions the gods to rearrange their plans to accommodate the saved princess becoming queen and Mort and Ysabell becoming Duke and Duchess. Thanks to their time in Death's Domain, Mort and Ysabell had a complete understanding of why death must come to all things. As Death of the Discworld tells Mort and Ysabell's daughter, Susan, after their deaths, "YOUR PARENTS KNEW THAT THINGS MUST HAPPEN. EVERYTHING MUST HAPPEN *SOMEWHERE*. DO YOU NOT THINK I SPOKE TO THEM OF THIS? BUT I CANNOT GIVE LIFE. I CAN ONLY GRANT..."

EXTENSION. CHANGELESSNESS. ONLY HUMANS CAN GIVE LIFE. AND THEY WANTED TO BE HUMAN, NOT IMMORTAL” (*Soul Music* 341).

When taken as a whole, the story of Mort’s apprenticeship is that death is not only inevitable, but in some ways, desirable. Humans, and their societies, only flourish when they are able to change and grow. If a person never had to face mortality and the ravages of time, there would be no impetus for change and no reason to value traits like kindness or bravery. Paradoxically, death is like a guiding hand that pushes us toward empathy. If death is inevitable, then compassion during life is a greater virtue. In a way, *Reaper Man* (written years later) is the story of Death of the Discworld learning the lesson that he had already taught his apprentice and daughter over the course of *Mort*.

### **New Death**

When Death of the Discworld loses his job in *Reaper Man*, he is supplanted by the New Death. New Death, having been summoned into existence by the Auditors of Reality, is created to do his job in the opposite way that Death of the Discworld does his. New Death seems to take pleasure in the ending of lives, the one reaction Death of the Discworld suggested would have disqualified Mort for the job. When he says he will enjoy ending Death of the Discworld’s life as Bill Door, New Death clarifies by saying, “*The taking of one Death is the same as achieving the end of a billion lesser lives*” (*Reaper Man* 272). Even though he denies he sees the job as a game, it is clear that New Death does see the reaping of souls as a matter of numbers, and the higher the number the better. He rejects becoming an individual, referring to himself as “we” and refusing to assume any form more specific than a hovering robe with no figure inside (much like the form the Auditors themselves take). He does allow himself a penchant for drama, which Death of the

Discworld abhors. New Death will always find a light source, preferably lightning, to appear against, and he will turn up at exactly midnight if at all possible. However, it is not New Death's enjoyment in the reaping, rejection of individuality, or even dramatic flair that most disgusts Death of the Discworld. It is the crown the New Death wears.

*A CROWN?* His voice shook with rage. I NEVER WORE A CROWN!

*You never wanted to rule.* (*Reaper Man* 273)

Death of the Discworld may be the most powerful being on the Disc. He is eternal. He is inevitable. But he is, at the end of things, merely a servant with a job to do. Death of the Discworld punctuates this in his final words to the defeated New Death: "NO CROWN. ONLY THE HARVEST" (*Reaper Man* 274).

### **Death of Rats**

Of all the alternate Deaths we meet throughout the Discworld series, the most common, but perhaps least developed, is the Death of Rats. As his name suggests, Death of Rats (AKA The Grim Squeaker) oversees the reaping of rodent (and occasional rat-like human) souls on the Disc. He appears as the skeleton of a rat and uses the same black cloak and scythe styling of Death of the Discworld. Death of Rats first appears in *Reaper Man* as one of the many species-specific Deaths that spring up to fill the occupational void when Death of the Discworld is living as Bill Door before New Death makes his bid for supremacy. Death of Rats is also the only one of these lesser Deaths to meet Bill Door during the course of his duties when he must reap the souls of poisoned rats on Miss Flitworth's farm. The two immediately have something of a rapport:

Bill Door reached out and picked it up. It didn't resist, but stood on the palm of his hand and eyed him as one professional to another.

Bill Door said: AND YOU ARE--?

The Death of Rats nodded.

SQUEAK.

I REMEMBER, said Bill Door, WHEN YOU WERE A PART OF ME.

The Death of Rats squeaked again.

Bill Door fumbled in the pockets of his overall. He'd put some of his lunch in there. Ah, yes.

I EXPECT, he said, THAT YOU COULD MURDER A PIECE OF CHEESE?

The Death of Rats took it graciously (*Reaper Man* 158-9).

Immediately we see parallels between the characters, as should be expected as Death of Rats is originally only one tiny fragment of Death of the Discworld's personality given form.

Aside from having a similar dress sense, there are parallels with their voices as Death of Rats, despite only being able to communicate via squeaks, speaks in small caps without quotation marks, just as Death of the Discworld's speech is styled. He also begins with a professional demeanor, although in the first reaping we see him undertake, it is specifically mentioned that he breaks the unfortunate news to the freshly deceased rat by laying a "not entirely unkind paw on its shoulder" (*Reaper Man* 234). Death of Rats also has Death of the Discworld's love of a certain food (here the stereotypical cheese is opposed to Death of the Discworld's penchant for curry), and Bill Door's question recall Death of the Discworld's words in *Mort* when he says to his new apprentice, "I COULD MURDER A CURRY" (*Mort* 20).

One of the main personality traits Death of Rats shares with his progenitor, however, is the will to survive. When Death of the Discworld calls all the other species' Deaths back into himself, Death of Rats specifically refuses the call by holding tight to one of the beams in the barn. At *Reaper Man*'s end, Death of Rats appears in Death's Domain and petitions to be allowed to remain his own personality. Death of the Discworld initially rejects this request saying, "I AM DEATH... ALONE" (*Reaper Man* 342). The last word gives Death of the Discworld pause, however, as he remembers both the lonely existence of his own boss, Azrael (of whom Death of the Discworld himself is but a small part), and a memory he had upon meeting Death of Rats as Bill Door:

Bill Door remembered visiting an old man once—only once—who had spent almost his entire life locked in a cell in a tower for some alleged crime or other, and had tamed little birds for company during his life sentence. They crapped on his bedding and ate his food, but he tolerated them and smiled at their flight in and out of the high barred windows. Death had wondered, at the time, why anyone would do something like that.

I WON'T DELAY YOU, he said. I EXPECT YOU'VE GOT THINGS TO DO, RATS TO SEE. I KNOW HOW IT IS.

And now he understood. (*Reaper Man* 159).

Out of a very human desire to not be lonely in his eternal existence, Death of the Discworld allows Death of Rats (and Death of Fleas, who happened to be riding on Death of Rats at the time) to remain and develop a separate personality from his own.

Death of Rats, as a character, does develop differently from Death of the Discworld. He appears to have more of a sense of humor, for starters, laughing more easily than Death of the Discworld does. He has a rather playfully antagonistic relationship with the numerous cats that

reside in Death's Domain. He has an almost symbiotic relationship with a raven named Quoth who serves as a steed and occasional interpreter when Death of Rats needs to communicate precisely with a human (usually Susan). However, as a character, the Death of Rats mainly exists to serve as a side-kick in the stories of others. He merely observes their journeys, sometimes pushing them along with a helpful paw.

In fact, one of the greatest uses of the concept of Death of Rats in the entire Discworld series has the character hardly appear at all. In the first Discworld children's novel, *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents*, Pratchett tackled the difficult task of attempting to explain the Big Questions of Life to a young audience. *Amazing Maurice* is Pratchett's off-kilter retelling of the story of the Pied Piper. The titular Maurice is a cat who gained sentience thanks to the spare magic emanating from Unseen University, the Disc's wizard school. Shortly after realizing his new ability to think and talk, he befriends a group of rats--the Clan, who took their individual names from containers littering the trash pile they lived on--who had all recently gained sentience in the same manner. Seeking a better life for them all, Maurice masterminds a Piper-esque scam in which he sends the rats into a town to "infest" it. After the rats have the townsfolk in a suitably desperate state, a human boy (Keith) appears with his flute and his unassuming pet cat offering to lure the rats away. The townspeople are never aware that the cat and rats are all sentient and the boy is just their front man in the scheme.

What makes *Amazing Maurice* such a groundbreaking children's book, though, is its use of the newly-sentient rats of the Clan to explore deep philosophical themes that his intended audience will have just started pondering themselves. The greatest moment of the book comes when the rats stand over the corpse of Fresh, one of the Clan who had been killed by a trap. They begin to wonder what happens to a rat after it dies. The discussion starts with the observable fact



that your body will just lie there and rot, unless it is eaten by a predator (or another rat). Then one rat asks the most important question in the book: What happens to the part of you that experiences events while you're dreaming?

The rats of the Clan, much like human children, have no better frame of reference for consciousness or the concept of a soul than to think of it as the part of you that does stuff like "being chased by dogs or flying or whatever" in dreams (*Amazing Maurice* 74). Normally, the Clan leaves the deep thinking to the smartest rat among them, named Dangerous Beans, but he isn't present for this particular conversation. The rats argue about the invisible dreaming bit inside everyone when:

Another one said, "Did you hear about the Bone Rat? It comes and gets you when you're dead, they say."

"They say, they say," muttered a rat. "They say there's Big Rat Deep Under the Ground who made everything, they say. So it made humans, too? Must be really keen on us, to go and make humans too! Huh?"

"How do I know? Maybe they were made by a Big Human?"

"Oh, now you're just being silly," said the doubting rat, who was called Tomato.

"Okay, okay, but you've got to admit that everything couldn't have just well, turned up, could it? There's got to be a reason. And when Dangerous Beans says there's things we should do 'cos they're *right*, well, who works out what's right? Where does 'right' and 'wrong' come from? They say if you've been a good rat, maybe the Big Rat has got this tunnel full of good eating that the Bone Rat will take you to—"

"But Fresh is still here. And I ain't seen a bony rat!" said doubting Tomato.

"Ah, but they say you only see it if it's coming for you." (*Amazing Maurice* 74-5)

Just like in the Discworld books aimed at adults, Pratchett uses the specter of mortality to get the audience thinking of questions not only related the processes of death and the possibility of the afterlife, but also theology, theodicy, morality, faith, and skepticism. That he is able to do so in language that is accessible to a young audience without underestimating them is no small feat.

*Amazing Maurice* yet again highlights the compassionate nature of Death of the Discworld and Death of Rats at the story's end. After a climactic battle with other rats, Maurice and Dangerous Beans find themselves very unfortunately dead. Maurice, not realizing immediately that he has died, sees Death of Rats coming for Dangerous Beans' soul and pounces on the small skeletal rat in hopes of forcing him to make a deal. However, since Maurice is actually dead as well, Death of the Discworld himself appears—Death of the Discworld has a fondness for cats as it is, and a sentient cat is a rare specimen—and says he has come to claim Maurice. However, on the Disc, it turns out that cats literally have nine lives. Maurice has four of his lives remaining. In a move that Death of the Discworld describes as “VERY UNCATLIKE,” Maurice offers two of his lives if Death of the Discworld will restore both himself and Dangerous Beans to life (*Amazing Maurice* 197). Death of the Discworld relents and allows the trade, considering two lifespans a reasonable balance, no matter whose lifespans they are.

Even though they are still figuring out theology, the rats of the Clan are shown to have a holy book of sorts they follow: a Discworld children's story titled *Mr. Bunnsy Has an Adventure*. Dangerous Beans believes the book shows a utopian world to be found somewhere on the Disc where all animals wear clothes, speak, live together in peace with each other and humans, and all are treated as equals. The rats do not understand that their holy book is really a fairy tale written to placate children considered too young to be capable of grasping the difficult nature of the real world. As Maurice says, the danger with telling children fairy tales is “when someone dies... it's

just a word” (*Amazing Maurice* 72). Pratchett is dealing with the modern idea of fairy tales, though far removed from their older, Grimm roots here. Fairy tales, once tools for teaching the hard lessons, have been rendered toothless by generations who consider kids too fragile to face the business of living. Pratchett fights against this by reclaiming the Pied Piper story and returning its bite. While he keeps an arguably happy ending in which the evil is defeated and the rats do get a version of their co-existent utopia, Pratchett leaves no room for doubt in children’s minds that battling evil takes bravery and sacrifice, and that building a fair and free society is a matter of determination, goodwill, and hard work. Most of all, death is not just a word to be brushed aside... unless you are a sentient cat. Even though the deaths of various rats (along with the Death of Rats) only play a minor point in the plot, it is not difficult to see this story as an investigation into the only other species on the Disc with their own personification of Death to ponder.

The discussions of death, morality, faith, etc. in *Amazing Maurice* highlight a subtler thread in Pratchett’s writing. Several characters throughout the series express the opinion that children should not be shielded from the harsh truths of the world and that adults do them a disservice by treating them, well... like children. Foremost amongst the Disc’s inhabitants who champion this pragmatic method of child-rearing are Death of the Discworld and, most notably, his granddaughter, Susan Sto Helit.

### **Susan Sto Helit**

When Susan Sto Helit first appears in the Discworld novels, she is a girl of 16 being educated at Quirm College for Young Ladies, a prestigious boarding school. She has forgotten her grandfather, Death of the Discworld, as Mort and Ysabell had only brought her to Death’s

Domain a couple of times in her childhood before deciding their daughter should have a chance at a normal life. However, Susan is not exactly a normal girl. Her teachers have noticed that she sometimes answers questions before they are asked. She also has the peculiar habit of disappearing during conversations she no longer wishes to take part in, although the headmistress thinks, “It wasn’t invisibility, she told herself. She just makes herself inconspicuous” (*Soul Music* 7). Susan also had a tendency as a young child to draw only using shades of black and told fanciful stories about her grandfather who had a white horse and an all-black garden (*Soul Music* 3).

When Mort and Ysabell die and choose to refuse Death of the Discworld’s offer of remaining eternally in their final moment in his Domain, Death of the Discworld finally experiences something akin to human grief. Despite all his power, he still lost his daughter and son-in-law to death. Unsure how to deal with the memory of their deaths, Death of the Discworld abandons his job to do what he thinks a human would do; he takes up drinking and joins the Klatchian Foreign Legion. As seen in *Reaper Man*, Death of the Discworld cannot cease his duty without consequences. This is how Susan suddenly finds herself learning her true family lineage and is forced to fill in for her absent grandfather.

As Albert tells Susan when she is finally brought to Death’s Domain by Death of Rats, her parents were worried about more than her picking up odd tendencies as a child.

“Your mum and dad thought it best if you forgot,” said Albert. “Hah! It’s in the bone!

They was afraid it was going to happen and it has! You’ve *inherited*.” (*Soul Music* 87).

This is the true reason Susan can see the future and fade from people’s minds into invisibility. She has inherited many of the powers of Death of the Discworld himself. As Pratchett admits when discussing Susan in *The Art of Discworld*, “Ordinary genetics should not allow any

supernatural traits to be passed on, but things are different when there's a Death in the family (n.p.).

Although *Soul Music* introduces Susan, she struggles to really claim the hero status she would later gain. For the most part, she spends much of the novel as little more than a confused teen learning the exact same lesson her father needed to be taught during his brief turn as Death. She, like her father, makes the mistake of saving a life she was assigned to reap and must learn the consequences that come with disturbing the natural order. However, Mort's journey was about learning to make the hard choices that would later enable him to be a duke and peacemaking leader to a troubled region. Susan's story, and Death of the Discworld's as well, is about learning which things can be changed and which things must sadly be accepted, as it is with the deaths of her parents. She learns that on the Disc, "Belief makes a hollow place. Something has to roll in to fill it" (*Soul Music* 72). Additionally, she learns how to use her inherited powers and discovers that if Death of the Discworld is again unable to do his job, she will be forced by whatever powers may be to take up the family business. As Albert explains, "You're old enough now. There's a hole and it thinks you're the right shape" (*Soul Music* 88). In the end, though, Susan's first story is that of a girl's first real experience with the meaning of mortality.

Twice more in Susan's life she would be called on to assist her grandfather, but with far greater stakes than she faced in *Soul Music*. Instead of just filling in by reaping souls, Susan must defend the entire Disc against her grandfather's old nemeses, The Auditors of Reality. Her first brush with the Auditors occurs in not only Susan's most important adventure as far as her character development is concerned, but one of the most beloved Discworld novels by the fans, *Hogfather*. The Auditors return to the Disc to target not Death of the Discworld, but the titular

Hogfather, a personification of holiday gift-giving who serves as Discworld's version of Santa Claus. The Hogfather comes to each house during the winter festival of Hogswatch and gifts children with presents, sausages, and ham. The Auditors have a similar complaint about the Hogfather's existence as they did to that of Death of the Discworld. He is a manifestation of human belief that has developed a personality and does not fit in with the Auditors' orderly view of the universe.

In order to bring about the death of the Hogfather, the Auditors approach the head of the Assassin's Guild, Lord Downey, and ask to hire an assassin to kill the Hogfather. Lord Downey, like any sensible adult, does not believe in the Hogfather's existence, but takes the commission both for the large amount of gold offered by the Auditors as well as to occupy one of his more troublesome assassins, Mr. Teatime, an orphan who had been raised to adulthood by the Guild. Teatime—"It's pronounced Teh-ah-tim-eh, sir,"—has proven to be a disturbingly over-effective assassin (*Hogfather* 19). He takes far too much pleasure in the execution of his job, even going so far as to end the lives of people and animals he was not paid to inhume (the Guild's term for murder) and perpetrating horrifyingly gruesome assassinations as opposed to the elegant poisoning, strangulation, or single stab wound the Guild prefers. In a way, Teatime's relish for ending life is similar to that of the New Death of *Reaper Man*. Rather than laughing off the assignment, Teatime accepts it with gusto as he informs Lord Downey that he has spent many years developing ways to inhume many of the personifications that inhabit the Discworld as an intellectual exercise, and is excited to have the chance to see if one of his plans would actually work. Teatime informs Downey that he even has a plan to inhume Death of the Discworld himself, should the opportunity arise.

Death of the Discworld quickly becomes aware of “a discord in the symphony of the world” and determines both the source and cause of the problem as well as the fact that he can’t directly interfere as the Auditors have chosen to use a mortal as their weapon and Death of the Discworld is supposed to remain separate from influencing mortals (*Hogfather* 42). However, Death of Rats and Quoth just happen to pay an unexpected visit to Susan and give her enough clues to cause her curiosity to spur her to action.

Susan has, since the events of *Soul Music*, graduated and taken a job as a governess, forgoing a privileged life as the Duchess of Sto Helit. She doesn’t take the job for money: “Not that the wages were important, of course. What was important was that she was being her Own Person and holding down a Real Job” (*Hogfather* 4). Susan is 18 now and her life has “been nearly normal for two years now, making her own way in the real world, never remembering the future at all...” (*Hogfather* 9). Susan’s approach to rearing and educating children is aggressively no-nonsense and as devoid of comforting lies or flights of childish fantasy as possible. Speaking of Susan, Pratchett said, “It seemed to me that when you find out that Death is a relative and you have some talent for doing his job you can either go totally mad or completely sane, which can be more frightening” (*Art*, n.p.). Readers get a sense of Susan’s complete sanity regarding fairy tales early in the novel when she reads a modified bedtime story to her young charges, Twyla and Gawain:

... and then Jack chopped down the beanstalk, adding murder and ecological vandalism to the theft, enticement and trespass charges already mentioned, but he got away with it and lived happily ever after without so much as a guilty twinge about what he had done. Which proves that you can be excused just about anything if you’re a hero, because no one asks inconvenient questions. (*Hogfather* 28)

Susan seems to share Pratchett's disdain for the usual cute and coddled fantasies with which adults fill the heads of children. Susan is adamantly against such foolishness.

The only bit of perceived childhood imagination that Susan does not try to remove from the children is the idea that monsters exist. Susan, thanks to her supernatural lineage, knows very well that monsters exist and dutifully drives various bogeymen away from the children's closets or from under the bed with a trusty fireplace poker that she has told the children will kill monsters.

"C'n I have the poker in my room for the night?"

"All right."

"It only kills monsters, doesn't it...?" the child said sleepily, as Susan carried her upstairs.

"That's right," Susan said. "All kinds." (*Hogfather* 8)

Although, the children's parents (as well as some holiday party guests who witness Susan on her way to kill a monster with her poker) consider it a fun fiction she has concocted to placate the children, her poker is serious business. Susan is committed to making sure the children in her care have a good sense of the world they live in and how to deal with whatever challenges may arise. Her ability to see creatures typically unseen by skeptical adults is the one supernatural gift she allows herself as governess.

Susan's choice of profession typically draws comparisons to another famous supernatural governess, and Pratchett himself admitted, "She's ending up, via that unconscious evolution that dogs my characters as a kind of Goth Mary Poppins" (*Art*, n.p.). However, unlike Poppins, Susan sees no need to encourage the playfulness and whimsy that comes naturally to children. She seems to feel that since children will spend most of their lives as adults, they should learn to be



good at that as soon as possible. However, *Hogfather* shows a flaw in her view of which fantasies children need.

Teatime proves a more formidable opponent than he appears to readers at first, as his assassination of the Hogfather works. His plan involved stealing the teeth of all the children on the Disc from the network of Tooth Fairies that collect them and then using the teeth as the core of a magical spell that stops children from believing in the Hogfather. While Susan's plot centers on her attempt to physically track down Teatime, Death of the Discworld devotes his energy to trying to rekindle belief in the Hogfather in the minds of kids in an attempt to reconjure the personification into reality. His solution to the lack of belief is to do the job of the Hogfather himself, as Death of the Discworld is possibly the only being whose powers can mimic the Hogfather's ability to be in multiple places at once and deliver presents to every house on the Disc in the span of one night.

In possibly the most famous moment from the novel, Death of the Discworld finds himself filling in as the Disc's equivalent of a mall Santa along with Albert posing as the Hogfather's faithful, if curmudgeonly, pixie helper. Death of the Discworld is dutifully asking children their wish lists since that is what is expected of him. A small girl asks for a sword, and Death of the Discworld sees no reason not to gift her exactly what she wants:

It was four feet long and glinted along the blade.

The mother took a deep breath.

"You can't give her that!" she screamed. "It's not safe!"

IT'S A SWORD, said the Hogfather. THEY'RE NOT *MEANT* TO BE SAFE.

"She's a child!" shouted Crumley.

IT'S EDUCATIONAL.

“What if she cuts herself?”

THAT WILL BE AN IMPORTANT LESSON. (*Hogfather* 122)

It is obvious that Susan, despite all her efforts at normalcy, perhaps inherited her overly-pragmatic worldview from her grandfather when it comes to the education of children.

By the end of the novel, Susan and Death of the Discworld have managed to succeed in their two-pronged plan to save the Hogfather from the Auditors and Teatime. Teatime, not taking defeat well, tracks Death of the Discworld and Susan back to the house of her employment and, catching them in a moment of unguarded family conversation, manages to steal Death of the Discworld’s sword, which he believes is a weapon capable of killing Death itself. After realizing there are children in the home, Teatime commands Susan to call them into the room to witness what happens next. Susan replies:

“Certainly not!”

“It will be instructive,” said Teatime. “Educational. And when your adversary is Death, you cannot help but be the good guy.” (*Hogfather* 386)

Obviously, Teatime has similar ideas about the coddling of children and their education.

*Hogfather* subtly positions Susan and Teatime as two outcomes of similar situations. They are both orphans, given elite boarding school educations but considered strange by others, who find themselves drawn into the world of the supernatural. Both are calculated, serious individuals. However, where Susan took the completely sane option posited by Pratchett, Teatime is quite insane. He delights in all the things Death of the Discworld and his family abhor. He is cruel, power-hungry, and completely without empathy where death is concerned. Also, like the Jack of Susan’s bedtime story, he believes he will win because he sees himself as the brave hero who will vanquish the evil of Death.

Children are not as easily fooled as most adults assume and immediately see who the real evil in the room is. They declare Teatime “creepy” while Death of the Discworld is deemed “not very creepy” because he’s “just bones” and bones are more fascinating to children than a sign of their impending mortality (*Hogfather* 387-8). As Teatime raises the sword to strike a killing blow on Death of the Discworld, Susan lifts her fireplace poker and throws it at Teatime. Unfortunately, Death of the Discworld is standing directly in the poker’s path.

It hit Death’s robe and vanished.

[...]

Teatime looked down at the poker in his chest as he folded up.

“Oh, no,” he said. “It couldn’t have gone through you. There are so many ribs and things!”

There was another pop as Twyla extracted her thumb and said, “It only kills monsters.”

(*Hogfather* 388)

Twyla’s declaration is repetition of Pratchett’s main theme when dealing with Death of the Discworld as a character. Death of the Discworld is not evil, nor is he an adversary to be defeated by a dashing hero. He simply *is*. He’s just the personification of a neutral biological process. He can even be thought of as a friend... at least provided he takes his time coming to visit.

However, *Hogfather* is Susan’s story, and there is a different lesson Susan herself must learn. She spent her life trying to be normal amid abnormal circumstances. She does her best to reject her connection to her grandfather and the inheritance she has received from him. After the Auditors are driven away yet again Susan questions why Death of the Discworld would bother with something as trivial as saving the Hogfather. Her question is a valid one. On the surface,

this encounter seems far less important to the fate of the Disc than the one seen in *Reaper Man*. Maintaining the balance of life and death is one thing, but what is so crucial about a childish belief in a gift-giving holiday personification? Death of the Discworld replies that if humans had lost belief,

THE SUN WOULD NOT HAVE RISEN.

“Really? Then what would have happened, pray?”

A MERE BALL OF FLAMING GAS WOULD HAVE ILLUMINATED THE WORLD.

[...]

“All right,” said Susan. “I’m not stupid. You’re saying humans need... *fantasies* to make life bearable.”

REALLY? AS IF IT WAS SOME KIND OF PINK PILL? NO. HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE.

“Tooth fairies? Hogfathers? Little—”

YES. AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING TO BELIEVE THE *LITTLE LIES*.

“So we can believe the big ones?”

YES. JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING.

“They’re not the same at all!”

YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN *SHOW ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET—Death waved a hand. AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME... SOME RIGHTNESS IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.*

“Yes, but people have *got* to believe that, or what’s the *point*—”

MY POINT EXACTLY. (*Hogfather* 380-1)

In the end, the big lie that Death of the Discworld says humans must believe is not all that dissimilar from that of the Auditors. Both want to believe in an orderly universe and assume that order will give life meaning. Death of the Discworld's speech suggests the Auditors do not realize that the universe is an inherently chaotic place. Without human life, there would still be supernovas, colliding galaxies, and all manner of arguably unjust deaths (albeit on a cosmic level). He says that the only thing imposing meaning on any of it is the audacious human belief that there *can* be some form of greater reason to it all. The only thing keeping the chaos from consuming the universe is a planet full of beings willing things like compassion and morality into existence.

Susan only appears as the main character of one other novel, *Thief of Time*. Again, she must foil the Auditors, this time against a plan that involves a perfect clock that will stop time as opposed to keeping it. Here, we finally see Susan as a fully realized and fully at peace character. She's still not overjoyed when family duty calls, but she no longer fights who she is. She even uses her supernatural abilities to full effect in her new job as a teacher. Knowing that any tales the children tell their parents will be dismissed as childhood imagination, Susan takes her class on adventures across the Disc and even through history. She's become less Goth Mary Poppins and more a stern, Victorian-era version of *The Magic School Bus*' Ms. Frizzle. She's still serious and logical, but her edges have softened. The ending of the book even suggests that Susan may eventually find her romantic match with the Disc's personification of Time.

Given her status as a woman who crosses between the human world and the Domain of Death, Pratchett positions Susan alongside the Greek goddess Persephone. As with Persephone, Susan did not initially go willingly into the realm of Death nor do his bidding without complaint.

Where Persephone was compelled to spend part of her time in the Underworld due to her consumption of pomegranate seeds, Susan is compelled by familial obligation to continue returning to a world she initially wants to escape. Much like Persephone's dual nature as a goddess of both Spring and the Underworld, Susan eventually becomes at home both as a caretaker of children (and thus the new life we imagine coming with Spring) and as the wielder of the powers of Death. Just as Gaiman subverts and retells Greek myths with *Death of the Endless*, so too does Pratchett mold the myth of Persephone to his own ends to create a new mythos suited to a modern audience.

Taken as a whole, the various characters who take on the duty of Death on the Disc tell the repeating story in which all humans take part. We all start ignorant of both the grand questions of life and the fact that life must someday end. We will all want to do our best to prolong both our lives and the lives around us, and this is a noble sign of compassion. However, the stories of these temporary Deaths teach us that sometimes true empathy is not forcing life to linger where it shouldn't, that we are the only ones who can deliver justice and mercy to the world, and that death need not be a source of fear. They also teach us that children can, and even must, handle the realities of the world, and that we do them no favors by trying to sweeten bitter reality with inane fantasies... just so long as we remember to hold on to the important fantasies.

## CHAPTER 6

*GOOD OMENS*

Pratchett and Gaiman became good friends after Gaiman asked to interview Pratchett for a magazine in 1985, and their friendship resulted in co-authoring the novel *Good Omens* in 1988 (*Good Omens* 403-5). The novel details the events surrounding a comical brush with the apocalypse. The plots of several characters weave in and out of the narrative, but mostly center on the exploits of an angel and demon who have been on Earth since humans were expelled from Eden. The duo has decided they quite like Earth, and so they set about to prevent its looming destruction. Joining them is a pre-teen Antichrist who has decided he does not want the job. Naturally, they face the Four Horsemen, because no self-respecting apocalypse could leave them out—the current Horsemen being Death, War (who poses as female reporter with a knack for covering conflict zones), Famine (who spreads hunger via a trendy, but deadly, diet), and Pollution (who took over for Pestilence after the advent of antibiotics).

The novel is filled with allusions to characters and events in other works—large chunks of the plot directly parody Richard Donner’s film *The Omen*—and the personification of death is no different. Death in *Good Omens* will look quite familiar to fans of Discworld. Fans have speculated that he is simply the Death of Discworld visiting the Roundworld for a spell. However, neither author ever confirmed his canonicity, so it seems likely to be a simple nod to Pratchett’s creation, although Gaiman is credited with creating the Four Horsemen for the novel (*Good Omens* 400). Death in this novel speaks in similar all-caps styling that eschews quotation marks and shows a familiar rapport with those he comes to reap, even making jokes to a messenger he visits at the start of the book. In another tie to the Death of Discworld, the personification shown in *Good Omens* describes himself thusly: “I AM AZRAEL, CREATED

TO BE CREATION'S SHADOW" (356). Azrael is also the name of the larger Platonic death personification seen in *Reaper Man*. However, this Death is far more callous and seems to take a slight amount more joy in his work than we see on the Discworld. While it might seem as if a Pratchett-Gaiman collaboration would produce more fodder for a distinct personification of death, the timing of their work together (*Good Omens* was written before Death appeared in Gaiman's *Sandman* series and published before the public had seen much of her) means that only Pratchett's previous construction of Death informed their joint effort.



## CHAPTER 7

## CONCLUSION

Roland Barthes put forward many standards for evaluating culturally important works. His most consistent theory is that, when it comes to a text, the reader's response is more important than the author's intent. Furthermore, he thinks a text has truly proven its merit if it challenges the reader's cultural views so much that the reader cannot help reevaluating the myths of old and become a producer of a new myth changed by the experience. The prevalence of the Deaths of *Sandman* and *Discworld* meet these criteria and then some.

Death is easily one of the most popular characters in *Discworld*, spawning lots of merchandise, but also impacting the way readers of the book dealt with grief and the idea of their own mortality. In *The Art of Discworld*, Pratchett says, "Sometimes I get nice letters from people who know they're due to meet him soon, and hope I've got him right. Those are the kind of letters that cause me to stare at the wall for some time..." (n.p.) Gaiman's Death also became the breakout star of her series and has had several appearances in the main DC Comics universe. Eagle-eyed fans can catch her image in other comics, such as long-running webcomic *Sluggy Freelance*, and on posters decorating walls in the sitcom *Roseanne*. *Sandman*'s Death is the inspiration for countless costumes worn by fans at any comic convention. Both *Discworld* and *Sandman* have spawned detailed fanfictions that turn readers of these texts into literal writers that add to the collective mythos of the Deaths' stories despite not having the weight of canonicity behind them.

An interesting, if bittersweet, development in the myths of these Deaths can be found in how fans reacted to the real-life deaths of two people involved in their creations. In January 2018, Cinamon Hadley—the woman who inspired the look of Death of the Endless—died after a

long battle with cancer. Fans took to multiple outlets to express their grief with many echoing the sentiment in Glenn Hauman's wish: "We hope she's well met by someone who looks a lot like her."

Even more elaborate are the ways in which Pratchett's creation was used to inform the world of his passing from Alzheimer's in 2015. The Death of the author was not kept from his poems, but rather welcomed him to what comes next. Pratchett's assistant used the official Twitter account to post the announcement of his death via three tweets that combined to form the following message:

AT LAST, SIR TERRY, WE MUST WALK TOGETHER.

Terry took Death's arm and followed him through the doors and on to the black desert under the endless night.

The End. ("How did Terry")

After hearing the news, fans took to social media to console themselves and each other through using images of Discworld's Death as their profile pictures, sharing short fanfiction expanding on the vignette posted to Twitter, and even starting an online petition begging Death to return the author because, in the words of one fan, "Terry Pratchett turned Death from a figure of hate into a much loved and sometimes welcomed character. No-one else cared about you Death. You owe him!" ("Petition asks Death")

Although they took different paths, Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman presented the world with a view of Death who was more caretaker than inscrutable reaper, Deaths that we would not fear even as we would not necessarily invite their presence. As he was facing his own imminent death, Pratchett said in a Channel 4 interview: "I think a wise man thinks of Death as a friend... if that death comes later [in life], rather than on the first day." This joint philosophy of Death as a

something neither to be feared nor escaped influenced the writing of later fantasy, horror, and young adult authors including no less a name than J.K. Rowling (who bested Pratchett to become Britain's most-read author).

Unlike the old fairytales which scared children into correct moral action using the threat of death, Rowling follows Pratchett and Gaiman's example to present an almost identical philosophy. In the Harry Potter series, many characters are shown choosing to greet their deaths with acceptance rather than fear. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Harry is told that Nicholas Flammel has chosen to accept death after a magically-prolonged existence via the titular stone after Dumbledore tells the man that it is like "going to bed after a very, very long day" (297). In the final book, Harry is told "The Tale of the Three Brothers," an old wizarding fairytale. The story recounts three wizard brothers who attempt to cheat Death. Two of the brothers mock Death and are met with horrible ends due to their hubris. But one brother was humble and sought only to live peacefully into old age and, having had a long (but natural) lifespan, he "greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life" (*Deathly Hallows*, 409). Rowling carried on the tradition of presenting death to readers (especially the young ones) as simply the natural end of life. Death is nothing to rush into, and may be tragic when met too soon, but should be greeted as a friend if possible.

By giving a generation a more nuanced view of mortality without the fear and macabre nature common in previous works, Pratchett and Gaiman managed to be at the forefront of a growing trend of "death positivity." Death Positive is a movement that seeks to remove the secrecy and mystery surrounding death in Western cultures. It is championed by mortician and author Caitlin Doughty and her Order of the Good Death. The movement encourages people to learn more about death, dying, burial options, the commercial death care industry, and local

laws, in order to empower those in the West who are used to outsourcing the care of their loved ones to strangers. There are eight ideals central to the Death Positive movement; the first three mesh wonderfully with the philosophies of *Sandman* and *Discworld*:

1. I believe that by hiding death and dying behind closed doors we do more harm than good to our society.
2. I believe that the culture of silence around death should be broken through discussion, gatherings, art, innovation, and scholarship.
3. I believe that talking about and engaging with my inevitable death is not morbid, but displays a natural curiosity about the human condition. (“Death Positive”)

Neither Pratchett nor Gaiman have ever shied away from the topic of death and dying in their art. Pratchett especially wanted to break the cultural silence by sparking a discussion about end-of-life care when he publicly lobbied for the right of terminally-ill patients to die on their own terms. He made a BBC documentary on his plans to travel outside the UK to die by doctor-assisted suicide if he decided his Alzheimer’s had progressed to the point that he could no longer function as himself. Despite these plans, he was reported to have died of natural causes in his home at Broad Chalke, outside Salisbury.

These two trailblazing authors gave their audiences, both young and old, a new way to approach the very old problem of the fear of death. By fully exploring our own mortality through their works, readers can explore their own beliefs surrounding gender, theology, family, justice, empathy, child-rearing, and every issue of life and death in between. As further academic study delves into the works of Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, we will surely find new and even deeper facets to their creations.

## FIGURES



307

Chris Bachalo

Figure 1: Death of the Endless

She is shown in an iconic portrait by artist Chris Bachalo (*Death 307*).

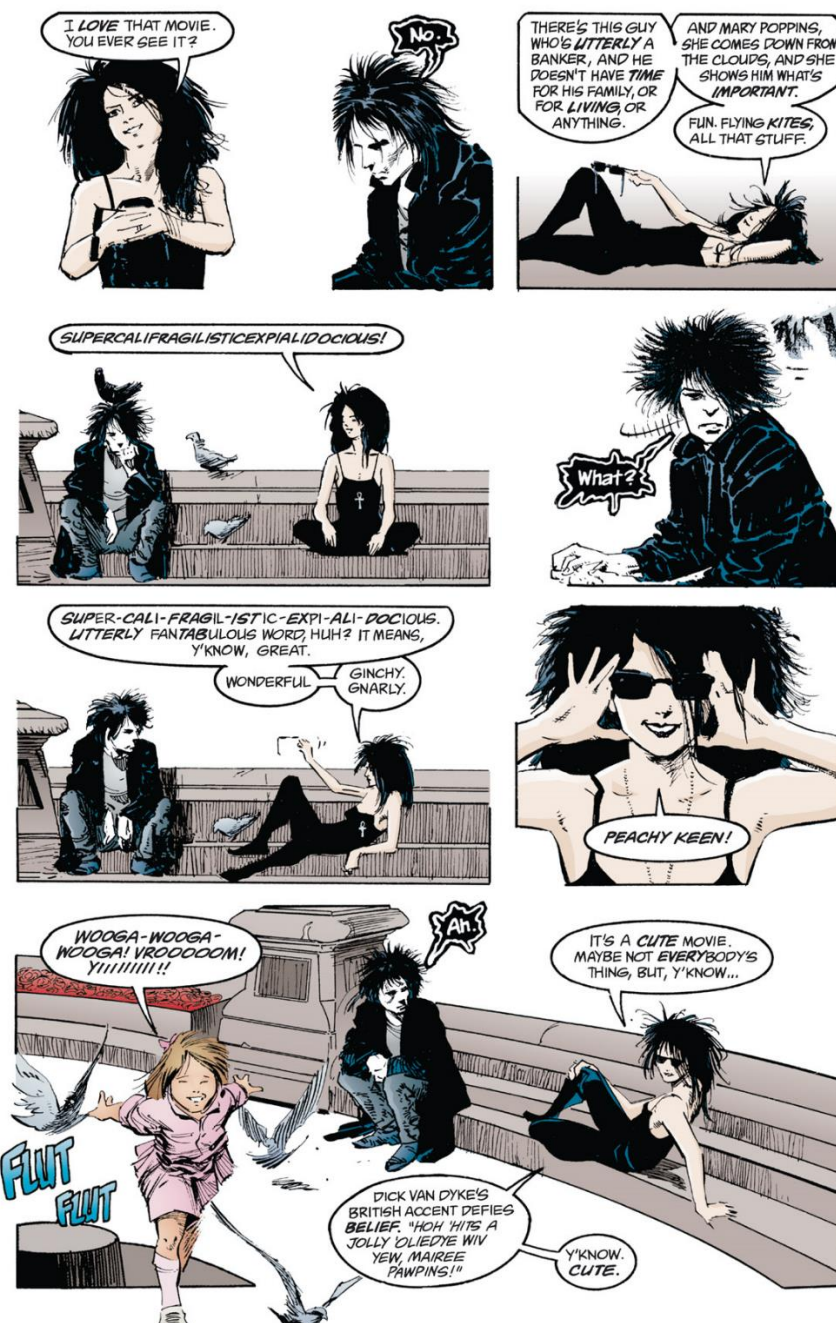


Figure 2: Death of the Endless' Speech

In the final panel, note how Death's speech bubble resembles that of the mortal child, as opposed to the stylized bubble of Dream.

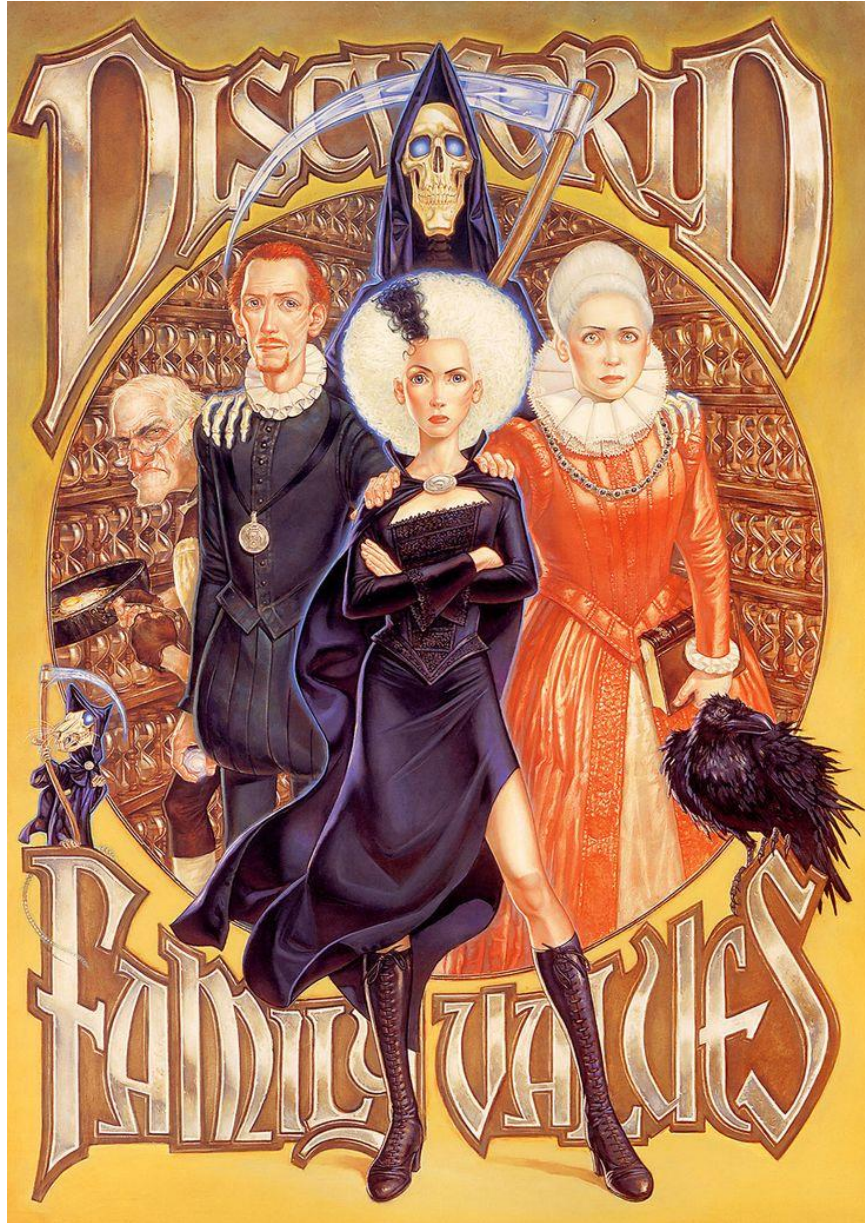


Figure 3: “Discworld Family Values” by Paul Kidby.

The characters (from L to R): Death of Rats, Albert, Mort, Susan (front), Death of Discworld (back), Ysabell, Quoth the Raven. Mort and Ysabell portrayed aged at their time of death. Susan portrayed as in *Hogfather*. (Art n.p.)

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