

Ansible



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HELLO AUSTRALIA! Owing to difficulties in publishing news while on the far side of the world from the mighty *Ansible* office, this isn't a regular issue but a huge Thank You to the generous fans who brought me to Aussiecon 3—especially 'Auld Lang Fund' organizers Justin Ackroyd, Carey Handfield, Eve & John Harvey and Marc Ortlieb, and the hospitable Aussiecon committee. As we sophisticates say, 'Gosh wow!'

Ye Olde Con Reporte

(Written Sept 1998 for *Odyssey* magazine, which folded before using it.)

For this long weekend in September, Terry Pratchett is lord of all he surveys at the Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool—site of the second Discworld Convention. He's bemusedly showing off a recent gift: a suavely polished black ash walking-stick whose heavy metal handle is the cowed skull-head of Death. 'If I were young, black and poor, this would be an offensive weapon,' he observes. 'Good thing I'm old, white and rich.'

Even for Terry it's still boggling to stand in the convention dealer's room and see the endless vistas of Discworld merchandise. Maps, companions, artwork, role-playing and computer games, a quizbook (I can't complain; I wrote it), tapes, CDs, videos, badges, jewellery and t-shirts are only the beginning. You can light your home with Discworld candles (but what fan would ever put a match to one?), play chess with Discworld pieces, cover your mantelpiece with Discworld figurines and the £50 Terry Pratchett Toby Jug, impress the neighbours with academic qualifications from Unseen University (*Doctorum Adamus cum Flabello Dulci*), and replace those flying ducks on your living-room wall with countless ornamental Discworld plaques and plates.

Terry has a certain grim sense of personal responsibility: 'The thing is, when the tip drops off your *Star Wars* light-sabre, George Lucas never hears about it. But if a candle's the wrong colour, it's me that gets the bloody e-mails.' It's almost a relief to find limits to Discworld's relentless commerciality: Clarecraft are pushing the very last chance to buy their Teppic the Assassin figure, which is just about to be 'retired'. Teppic hasn't much following, but Death sells like crazy.... Meanwhile, the biggest model on display is Bernard and Isobel Pearson's multi-part set of Unseen University buildings, which would look spiffy on the coffee table if you don't mind having no room for coffee-cups.

Bernard (subtitled 'The Cunning Artificer') and Isobel are here as convention guests. So are other toilers in the mighty edifice of Pratchett PLC: artists Josh Kirby, Paul Kidby, Stephen Player and Graham Higgins, obscure editorial-feedback person Langford ... and Stephen Briggs, that encyclopedic cartoon-drawing thespian playwright who has an unfair advantage when playing the unscrupulous Patrician of Ankh-Morpork since he actually looks the part. The principal guest is of course Terry. There's a supporting cast of publishers: Jo Fletcher from Gollancz, Patrick Janson-Smith from Transworld, and Colin Smythe—Terry's literary agent—who originally published *The Colour of Magic*. All one big happy family, not entirely unlike the Addams Family.

Among the 800-odd people gathered in the Adelphi are a few who've attended more traditional sf events, and find themselves saying—not in any unfriendly way—'It's a convention, Jim, but not as we know it.' The Discworld community, only two years after the first of these gatherings, still has a kind of innocence which in mainstream sf fandom has dwindled over 61 years of con-going. This weekend the Adelphi is filled with the sparkly sense of wonder exuded by those twenty enthusiasts who in January 1937 converged on the Leeds Theosophical Hall for the world's first-ever sf convention. So in 1998 the Discworld con programme is very heavily attended indeed, to the bemusement of hardened sf fans who cherry-pick interesting items and skip the rest in favour of socializing. For one whole afternoon I shamefully find myself alone in the main bar with Andy Sawyer of the SF Foundation. O brave new world.

Jo Fletcher, Colin Smythe and I are grateful for this enthusiasm when there's a good turnout for our 'Meet the Publishers' panel at the ungodly hour of 10am. As usual, the professionals' insights into writing as a business are terminally gloomy and boil down to the message: 'If you're not Terry Pratchett, then forget it. Slit your wrists now and save

time.' Even Terry, to remind himself of mortality, keeps a photo of the W.H.Smith warehouse's industrial-size book shredder by his computer. I horrify our audience by mentioning that I recently, with slow deliberate malice, put a copy of *The Last Continent* through my own shredder. The explanation that this was an early draft print-out, not for public consumption, only increases the moans of despair.

Terry himself pervades the con, omnipresent and pantheistic: walking the halls, giving a late-night reading, pressing the flesh at 'Kaffee Klatches', being grilled in a showcase interview, and undergoing three gruelling two-hour signing sessions—one rather cruelly billed as 'Terry does what he does best ...' But there is much else. In 'Luggage Wars', robot versions of Discworld's unstoppable Luggage—that trunk with lots of little legs—contend in an ad-hoc arena. The most sinister entry, which advances implacably while gnashing its lid, is unfortunately the only one not radio-controlled, and the rest literally run rings around it. One notably agile Luggage has a secret weapon: it squirts derisive jets of water at opponents from its keyhole. What would Freud have said?

My own solo programme spot—again gratifyingly crowded—is the *Libe Thog's Mastetclass* presentation, drawing on the department of *Ansible* where 'differently good' prose gets pilloried. Unfortunately Terry offers few hostages to Thog and the best I can manage is an anatomical slip-up in *Lords and Ladies*: 'The bat burped. Granny genteelly covered her hand with her mouth.' But Thog's 'Flowers of Rhetoric' category contains this finely crafted allusion to a famous Discworld librarian, from David Gerrold's 'Chess with a Dragon'—'The argument was a peripatetic orang-utan, bouncing off the walls of their separate frustrations like a ping-pong ball in a wind tunnel.'

(Andy Sawyer, himself a librarian, considers that Terry has greatly served the profession by creating Unseen University's orangutan Librarian. At last, a tough yet caring role-model who loves books and can effortlessly bounce book-defacers upside down on the floor....)

Big set-piece events include a charity auction where money flows like helium-II, the Maskerade Parade with its vast turn-out of exotic Discworld costumes, and the Patrician's Maskerade Dinner, where even awkward sods like me must grudgingly wear a mask or face the scorpion pit. With a white-suited Terry at his side, the Patrician—Stephen Briggs in black robes and skullcap—watches critically over the cowering feasters, while strange and only locally audible bits of Discworld street theatre happen around the tables and culminate with a prolonged, ding-dong sword fight between 'Captain Carrot' and an Assassin. One lady fan is mightily offended when the actor playing itinerant vendor Cut-My-Own-Throat Dibbler offers her some herbal lotion hastily and obviously relabelled as Viagra. Elaborately designed Ankh-Morpork dollar bills, with Terry's face and mottoes like *Pecunia Fecit Revolvere Discum*, are provided at each table for buyers. They think of everything.

In charge of all this forethought is organizer Paul Rood, who as the weekend progresses looks increasingly doom-laden ... owing to what's already an immemorial Discworld Con tradition. At the end of the first event, his loyal committee rewarded his years of hard labour by publicly bathing him in custard. This year, it's tapioca. The centrepiece of the main Adelphi lounge is a plastic paddling-pool in which well-wishers deposit scores of ominous cans, growing inexorably into a majestic construction known as Tapioca Henge. To look upon it, at any rate if you're a convention organizer, is to know the meaning of fear.

Terry—we guess it must be Terry—intervenes in this plan. Just as he monitors Discworld merchandise (after all, he's the one who gets the bloody e-mails), so he keeps a careful eye on this event into which he's thrown himself so whole-heartedly. By the finale his wrist must be aching desperately from those long bouts of autographing, whose immense queues wind and coil around the Adelphi even on the last afternoon. During one session, the heat is so oppressive—the hotel's swimming-pool thermostat has gone barmy, making the place a humid hothouse—that our hero is forced to strip to the waist, revealing a hirsuteness that leads to many obvious orangutan gags. Photographs are taken.

'I've got a special treat for you, Terry,' I say ingratiatingly when the

last autographing is over. 'I'm going to ask you *not* to sign a book.' His signing arm twitches convulsively: 'No, no! I must sign things! I'm suffering from *signatus interruptus* ...' Admiring fans offer their bodies.

As the closing ceremony reaches its ominous end, Terry takes the stage. 'It's been such a pleasure to see your little faces ... it makes all the money worth while.' Does Paul Rood deserve mercy in the light of his announcement that the event has raised £6,000 for the Macmillan Cancer Relief Appeal and, of course, the Orangutan Foundation? Our author presides over what follows with the high seriousness of a Masonic Wizard, recalling the spoof rituals in *Guards! Guards!* and indeed the frieze of Masonic emblems in the Adelphi's breakfast-room. Paul Rood kneels in the paddling pool, now renamed the Pit, while grinning committee members hover over vast stockpiles of tapioca. Then Terry decrees that the proposed misuse of so much food is ... wasteful. The tapioca mountain shall go to feed the homeless! Paul: 'Yeeesssss!!!!'

'But there are *limits to our mercy* ...' A sufficiency of white sogginess—just three cans—is hieratically tipped over the hapless Mr Rood and rubbed well in. Terry raises a ritual jar and adds the blob of jam without which no traditional school bowl of tapioca is complete. Mercy is tempered with justice. The crowd goes wild. You had to be there.

And that, children, was the second Discworld Convention.

Infinitely Improbable

Cloud Chamber is my *APAZINE*, here shamelessly pillaged for oddments. ● **On the Harry Potter book boom:** (in the real UK bestseller lists, those that don't exclude children's novels, J.K. Rowling's new Potter epic instantly displaced *Hannibal* from the #1 spot): 'I liked the highly characteristic reaction of *The Spectator*, which found itself unable to recognize the existence of mere children's books without adding a doomy political spin. After handing out general praise and making the reasonable point that the bits about horrible relatives and exotic sweets seem to have been lifted from Roald Dahl, *Specy* columnist Philip Hensher performs a feat of selective analysis worthy of *The Pooch Perplex*, emerging with the warning that Old Labour and Tory parents should be wary of exposing their kids to these books, for they *inculcate Blairite values*. As distinct, I suppose, from the traditional Conservative stance of *Hannibal Lecter*.' ● **Holiday nostalgia:** 'How well I remember that dread, repeated cry during family holidays of yore: "DAVID! STOP READING THAT BOOK! YOU'RE HERE TO ENJOY YOURSELF!"' ● **At the antiques market:** 'Hazel was transfixed by the paralysing sight of real Roman coins, while I had an Edward Gorey experience on finding that the quintessential Gorey creepy-crawly (cf. *The Insect God*) actually exists and was on sale, mounted in a foot-long glass case. It was captioned 'Malaysian Tree Nymph'; the stallholder's price tag preferred 'Boxed Bug' (she had also carefully labelled numerous items of jewellery as 'Broach'). / The pale-green beastie was about seven inches long and two across at its fattest point, with stubby wings and wing-cases, plus craggy legs extending it by further inches, and I realized we *needed* this for the spare bedroom. Hanging the case on the wall there would subtly deter visitors from overstaying their welcome. If it had insufficient effect, then one morning we could escalate matters (like all those Wodehouse squires leaving Bradshaw's timetable by the bedside or breakfast plate with the 9:30am heavily underlined: 'Excellent train. Highly recommended.') by substituting an identical case with the glass artistically broken and nothing inside. / Alas, Hazel nervously wouldn't let me buy the Malaysian Tree Nymph. She spent twelve quid on a 2nd-century sesterce of the Emperor Hadrian instead. There's no justice.' ● **Or, a tasteful computer game:** '... *Blood*, a *Doom/Quake* imitation in which you shoot up hordes of axe-wielding zombies (igniting these with rounds from a flare pistol is curiously satisfying. Hazel: "You ... *male person*, you." Me: "Wait till I show you the napalm projector!") and mad monks toting sawn-off shotguns, tommy-guns and sticks of dynamite. Blood spurts copiously, random limbs and organs litter the ground, the health-restoring medical packs of *Doom* are replaced by former foes' pulsating hearts, etc. A certain black humour emerges as you progress through a moderately disgusting graveyard and crematorium (trying the door of a promising-looking adjacent tomb merely brings a hollow voice from inside, saying "Stop it.") via railway sidings into the echoing halls of Miskatonic Station (characteristically, the canteen kitchen contains a swarm of rats), leading to mayhem on the speeding Phantom Express (characteristically, the only way to end this episode is to override the engine's safety controls for a spectacular boiler explosion), and thence into the kind of sinisterly booby-trapped carnival where Batman so often hunts the Joker, amid unsafe rides like the Happy-Go-Pukey....' ● **Commonplace Book.** 'He had even incurred the deadly suspicion of

classicism by differing from his young friends the Punctuist Poets, when they produced versification consisting exclusively of commas and colons.' (G.K. Chesterton, 'The Trees of Pride') 'Glad I was to sit with another man after supper, listening to the technique of jam-making, from the delicate carving of the raspberry pip to the care of acres of turnips.' (Lord Dunsany, *The Travel Tales of Mr Joseph Jorkens*) ● **On James Barclay's fantasy *Dawnthief*:** 'Dawnthief is the ultimate doomsday spell, the only thing that can deal with the very bad guys who've just escaped from their immemorial confinement, and to deploy the spell—stop me if you've heard this one before—you need to get hold of the dragon-guarded amulet that reveals the key to the dead wizard's hidden workshop that houses the dimensional portal leading to the demonic defender of the piece of parchment inscribed with the spell itself, whose activation proves to require no fewer than three "catalyst" talismans (not talismen, though the author believes the plural of shaman to be shamen) which are concealed in widely separated and deeply unhealthy corners of the map, after which you merely have to fight through the entire Evil Army in order to detonate Dawnthief within the equivalent of Barad-dûr itself....' ● **Imaginary collaborations:** "He was one hundred and seventy days dying and not yet dead. He fought for survival with the passion of a beast in a trap. He was delirious and rotting, coming downstairs now, bump bump bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin." Yes, it's *Tigger! Tigger!* by Alfred Bester and A.A. Milne. The US title is of course *The Stairs My Destination*.' ● **On Mark Lawson's *The Battle for Room Service*:** 'a practising coward's enjoyably sub-Bryson essays on travel to "activity-challenged" spots, confronting the terrors of narcolepsy in e.g. Milton Keynes, Luxembourg, Peoria, Winnipeg, and—where I have heard of this city before?—Melbourne.' ● **Tales of musical cyborgs:** 'the blurb for Kevin J. Anderson's *Resurrection Inc* describes the reanimation of the dead for slave labour: "All it took was a microprocessor brain, a synthetic heart and blood and viola!" As my informant noted, there is no detail on where the stringed instrument is to be inserted. In recent fantasy, it is of course totally unreasonable of me to think of J.V. Jones's *The Barbed Coil* in terms of user-hostile contraceptives, or to look at Chaz Brenchley's *Tower of the King's Daughter* and imagine this rather burly court official hauling with some difficulty on a silken rope.' ● **God's Hooks:** 'When I was at college Ken Bulmer (writing as Tully Zetford) began an sf potboiler series about rebarbative semi-superhero Hook the Boosted Man. I boggled at futuristic endearments in book 1, *Whirlpool of Stars*: "I've said you're a chancroid, Hook, and a burst ulcer, and a candidate for advanced pustular syphiloderma, and I'll go on telling you you're a *Pasteurella pestis*—" My short parody "Cesspool of Stars", featuring Lynan Sinker, more or less wrote itself: naughtily I sent it to *New Writings in SF*, then edited by Ken Bulmer. Next year came Hook #3, *Virility Gene*, with walk-ons by the inept, amateur secret agents Line and Synker, who worried aloud about missing their tutorials and swore in epithets stolen straight from my spoof, such as "eczema-sniffing spirochaete" and "leprous carcinoma-sucker". I had learned that Editors Always Have The Last Word.' ● **On Freeman Dyson:** '... best known in sf for identifying that phobia whose symptom is irrational dread that a shell of matter may suddenly enclose one's sun: Dyson's Fear.' ● **Tom Holt** supplies an untimely quotation: 'A sick feeling of repugnance and apprehension grows in me as I near Australia.' (Sir Robert Menzies, Prime Minister of Australia, diary, 23 May 1941)

Chog's Masterclass, Dept of Classics: 'She threw her face over her apron.' (Charles Reade, *The Cloister and the Hearth*, first edition 1861) '[George] Meredith had an unbounded enthusiasm for French letters. "He lost his sense of proportion in that matter," said Henry James to Alice Meynell.' (Anonymous Nonesuch Press editor of Meredith's letters to Meynell) ● **Dept of Bodding:** 'There are sinister, dark powers at work, dark powers that are older than time itself, and unless we can get there with the minimum of delay I have the nasty feeling that things are going to turn out very badly indeed for our client. I feel that she is surrounded by an awful power older than times, a very sinister dark power, sinister because of its darkness, and sinister because of its age; unless we can get to her pretty rapidly and break that power, and dispel the clouds of darkness that surround her, then not only her mortal future, but her very immortal future itself may be in the gravest jeopardy. I don't like the sound of this dark stranger that she described to us. He sounds formidable, and incredibly evil. The very thought of him conjures up dark images in my mind.' Sinister images too, I'll bet. ('Karl Zeigfreid' [Lionel Fanthorpe], *Gods of Darkness*, 1962)