

**The Auditors, the Tooth Fairy, and Death:
Utopian Delusions in Terry Pratchett's *Hogfather***

by Kathryn Hinds

SOMEWHERE, THERE IS A WORLD WHERE EVERYONE MADE THE RIGHT CHOICE, THE MORAL CHOICE, THE CHOICE THAT MAXIMISED THE HAPPINESS OF THEIR FELLOW CREATURES[;] OF COURSE, THAT ALSO MEANS THAT SOMEWHERE ELSE IS THE SMOKING REMNANT OF THE WORLD WHERE THEY DID NOT.

--Terry Pratchett, "Death and What Comes Next"

Terry Pratchett's series of novels about Discworld—a flat world held up by four elephants carried through space on the back of a vast turtle—began in 1983 with a parody of the conventions of fantasy fiction but developed into a satirical, yet eminently humane, examination of modern social conventions, assumptions, and foibles. *Hogfather*, the twentieth book in the series, explores (among other things) the longing for order, for a utopia in which all the "messiness" of being human no longer disturbs the calm process of the universe. To this ordered vision, the novel counterposes a series of constructed realities, belief-created places that express aspects of that same human messiness, ultimately revealing that in fact a tidy utopia is no good place at all.

Discworld itself, of course, is a constructed reality. It is, says Pratchett, "a world and mirror of worlds" (qtd. in Langford 8). For instance, rather than nuclear waste, the people of Discworld must deal with toxic magical waste (Langford 8); there are no

psychotherapists, but there are witches who practice “headology”; affirmative action policies demand that the city watch include not only humans but also dwarfs, trolls, werewolves, and vampires; golems man a fire brigade, and a zombie is head of the lawyers’ guild. Despite the fantastical details, Pratchett has said that

what Discworld is, more than anything else, is . . . logical. Relentlessly, solidly logical. The reason it is fantasy is that it is logical about the wrong things, about those parts of human experience where, by tactic [sic] agreement, we don’t use logic because it doesn’t work properly. On Discworld all metaphors are potentially real, all figures of speech have a way of becoming more than words. (“Imaginary Worlds, Real Stories” 160)

Among the figures of speech that become more than words on Discworld are personifications, especially anthropomorphic ones. At one point in *Hogfather* the “thinking engine” at the wizards’ university explains this concept: “Humans Have Always Ascribed Random, Seasonal, Natural Or Inexplicable Actions To Human-Shaped Entities. Such Examples Are Jack Frost, The Hogfather, The Tooth Fairy, and Death.” To this the university’s archchancellor replies, “Oh, *them*. Yes, but they exist. . . . Met a couple of ’em myself” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 176-177).

Many Discworld characters have met Death. A seven-foot skeleton in a hooded black cloak who carries a scythe, rides a white horse (named Binky), and always speaks in capital letters, Death has an abiding fascination with humans. Through long association with them, he has “picked up . . . humanity. Not the real thing, but something that might

pass for it until you examined it closely” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 90). It is perhaps this aspect of Death that has earned him the implacable enmity of the Auditors of Reality, who represent the ultimate forces of order: “THEY RUN THE UNIVERSE. THEY SEE TO IT THAT GRAVITY WORKS AND THE ATOMS SPIN, OR WHATEVER IT IS ATOMS DO. AND THEY HATE LIFE. . . . IT IS . . . IRREGULAR. IT WAS NEVER SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN. THEY LIKE STONES, MOVING IN CURVES. AND THEY HATE HUMANS MOST OF ALL” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 324).

The Auditors are convinced they have “a duty to rid the universe of sloppy thinking” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 88)—and from their standpoint, no thinking is sloppier than that of humans, with its imprecision, its randomness, and, in particular, its capacity for imagination and belief. As Death remarks to his adopted granddaughter, “IT IS THE THINGS YOU BELIEVE WHICH MAKE YOU HUMAN” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 324). The Auditors, however, do not believe “in anything, except possibly immortality. And the way to be immortal, they knew, was to avoid living. Most of all they did not believe in personality. To be a personality was to be a creature with a beginning and an end” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 45-46). Eschewing individuation and first-person singular pronouns, the Auditors appear as empty gray robes: “if monotonous drabness could take on a shape, this would be the shape it would choose” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 10).

In their loathing for imagination, the Auditors are opposed not only to Death but also to other anthropomorphic personifications reified by human belief, especially the Hogfather, who embodies the spirit of Hogswatch, the Discworld version of Christmas—“when humans are really human” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 74). The Hogfather is such a prime symbol of humanity’s predilection for what Death calls “wistful lying” (Pratchett,

Hogfather 289) that the Auditors determine to do away with him as the first salvo in their battle “to eradicate the ideas that make us human” (Hanes 184), and to thereby destroy humanity.

As the plot unfolds in *Hogfather*, the Auditors hire an assassin, Mr. Teatime, who appears to succeed in putting an end to the personified spirit of Hogswatch. Because the powers of belief that accrete around this figure are essential to the continuance of human life on the Disc, Death steps in to carry out the Hogfather’s duties, driving his pig-drawn sleigh and distributing presents in an effort to ensure that belief in him is maintained. Meanwhile, Teatime makes his headquarters in the palace of the Tooth Fairy, and Death’s granddaughter, Susan, sets out to find a way to put things right again. To do so she must travel to Death’s house, the Hogfather’s castle, and the Tooth Fairy’s country. All three of these places are extensions of their owners and are therefore constructed out of the bricks and mortar of human belief. They are also utopias of a kind—the location of the Hogfather’s castle “is not on any map” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 13); Death’s country and the Tooth Fairy’s likewise are “not really geography” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 249).

Utopia is a pun, of course, simultaneously meaning “no place” and “a good place.” The word itself seems to ask whether a perfect world can ever be realized (British Library Board). In *Hogfather*, the Auditors are convinced that they can indeed achieve their vision of perfection, remaking the Discworld in their own image of order. But already, the Discworld contains alternative perfect realms, ordered according to different visions. They are perfect in the original sense: thoroughly realized, completed and complete in themselves. Are any of these “no places” good places? And if they are

good—for whom? Susan seems to contemplate these questions as she sets out on her quest:

Between every rational moment were a billion irrational ones. Somewhere behind the hours there was a place where the Hogfather rode, the tooth fairies climbed their ladders, Jack Frost drew his pictures, the Soul Cake Duck laid her chocolate eggs. In the endless spaces between the clumsy seconds Death moved like a witch dancing through raindrops, never getting wet. . . . No, humans couldn't *live* here, no. . . . Humans could *exist* here, though. (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 86)

Susan's first stop is Death's house, which is thoroughly decorated with skulls and bones. It is surrounded by "black gardens. Black bushes, black grass, black trees. Skeletal fish cruising in the black waters of a pool, under black water lilies. . . . [Everything] was basically black, under a black sky" (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 215). Death's country is a dark and somber land because that is how people have imagined it, just as Death himself "has achieved incarnation as a seven-foot skeleton in a black robe because that's how humans see him in their heads" (Cockrell).

The Hogfather's palace, the Castle of Bones, is a similar construct, lying at the center of the Disc. By the time Susan reaches it, however, it is deserted:

The pillars at the entrance were hundreds of feet high. Each of the steps leading up was taller than a man. They were the grey-green of old ice. *Ice*. Not bone.

There were faintly familiar shapes to the pillars, possibly a suggestion of femur or

skull, but it was made of ice. . . . It was supposed to be a blaze of light and abuzz with activity, but it looked like a giant mausoleum. (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 126)

As belief in the Hogfather dwindles, the Castle of Bones shatters and collapses, leaving behind nothing but drifted snow. In fact, Susan realizes, “the Hogfather’s castle wasn’t *simply* not there any more. No . . . it had never been there” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 133).

The nonexistence of the Castle of Bones, and of the Hogfather himself, is due to the assassin Teatime’s activities in the Tooth Fairy’s palace. He has piled into a circle of power all the millions of teeth the Tooth Fairy has collected from children over the ages, enabling him to influence not only what they believe but what they have always believed. As Susan explains, “It’s such old magic it isn’t even magic any more. . . . If you’ve got a piece of someone’s hair, or a nail clipping, or a tooth—you can control them” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 272). This, in fact, is why the Tooth Fairy originally began collecting the teeth: to protect children from being magically manipulated (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 311).

In the Tooth Fairy’s country, as it happens, children’s own imaginations are in control. Here the sun is yellow, the sky blue, and the grass green—“springtime colors, and not the springtime of the world. They were the colors of the springtime of the eye” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 248). The trees look like lollipops, brown sticks topped by big green blobs full of red, red apples.

There were no bushes. But there were flowers, each with a couple of green leaves. They grew individually, dotted around the rolling green. . . . [T]here, by a bend in the river, was the house.

It didn't look very big. There were four windows and a door. Corkscrew smoke curled out of the chimney. (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 249)

Susan, who is a governess in normal life, recognizes where she is: inside a child's painting. Recalling that all the children she has ever known (including her own younger self) have painted houses exactly like this, regardless of where they actually lived, she asks herself whether "kids' paintings are all of this place? It's in our heads?" (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 250).

This being an archetypal children's place, "the rules are what children believe," and Death cannot come here, since the concept of death is one that young children cannot grasp; anything that dies just goes away to somewhere else (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 274). That does not, however, mean that this is a good or safe place. As one of the hardened criminals hired by Mr. Teatime comments, "I've seen some bad places in my time, but this takes the serious biscuit" (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 121). Another of the assassin's hirelings tries to comfort himself with Teatime's assurance that there is nothing dangerous here that they haven't brought with them (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 272). Unfortunately, they have brought with them all of their childhood fears—of the dark, of wardrobes that look like they have evil eyes, of the Scissorman who cuts off the thumbs of thumb suckers, of bullies and abusive parents—and in the Tooth Fairy's palace, belief brings these fears literally to life. Many adults may idealize childhood and look back on their own early years with fond nostalgia. The truth of the Tooth Fairy's realm, though, is one that every child knows: monsters are real, and childhood is no utopia.

As Susan deals with Teatime and comes to terms with the Tooth Fairy, Death continues to make the Hogfather's rounds, and he ponders the chasm between the holiday's utopian ideals and the unfair realities of life: "He'd thought that Hogswatch was all . . . plum pudding and brandy and ho ho ho, and he didn't have the kind of mind that could ignore all the other stuff. . . . IT IS HOGSWATCH, said Death, AND PEOPLE DIE ON THE STREETS. PEOPLE FEAST BEHIND LIGHTED WINDOWS AND OTHER PEOPLE HAVE NO HOMES. IS THIS FAIR?" (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 222). In this questioning, Death—the ultimate reality shared by all human beings—demonstrates how fully he has identified with humanity. The depth of his insight comes through in this conversation with Susan near the end of *Hogfather*, after the Auditors have been defeated and the Hogfather has been restored:

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 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. (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 336)

Belief is the key to what makes humans human, and on Discworld, "belief is an energy woven through the world like an electrical charge" (Hanes 179). Consequently, Discworld is the perfect place to show us that fantasy is not mere escapism to help make

our lives bearable. Fantasy is in fact what *makes* our lives, what makes us human; as Death says, “YOU NEED TO BELIEVE IN THINGS THAT AREN’T TRUE. HOW ELSE CAN THEY *BECOME?*” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 337).

In contrast, for the Auditors, utopia—the good place, the desired world—is an ordered reality scoured of imagination and devoid of change. Here there would be no Death, but also no Hogfather—and therefore no life. Existence might continue, but it would be stripped of meaning, resonance, belief . . . humanity. *Hogfather*’s alternative “no places,” created and maintained by belief, may not be “good places” when taken individually. As parts of a whole, however, they affirm Death’s contention that “HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 336): we need to start off imagining small things, such as tooth fairies and Hogfathers, to give us practice at imagining the big things—justice, mercy, duty, and so on. It is through our capacity for belief that we ultimately create *ourselves* as the locus of true utopia, “THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE” (Pratchett, *Hogfather* 336).

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