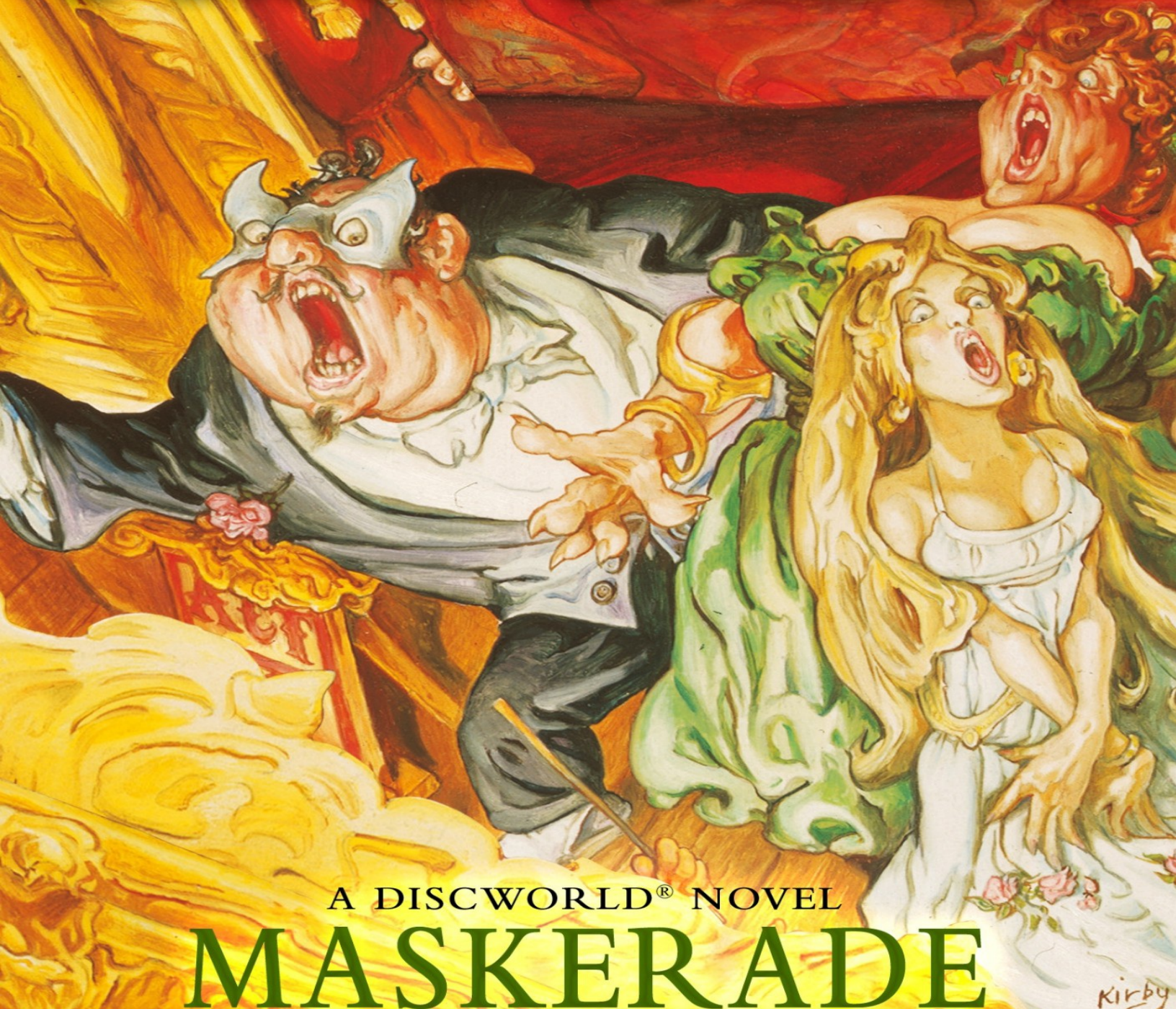


TERRY PRATCHETT



A DISCWORLD® NOVEL

MASKERADE

About the Book

'I thought: opera, how hard can it be? Songs. Pretty girls dancing. Nice scenery. Lots of people handing over cash. Got to be better than the cut-throat world of yoghurt, I thought. Now everywhere I go there's...'

Death, to be precise. And plenty of it. In unpleasant variations. This isn't real life. This isn't even cheesemongering. It's opera. Where the music matters and where an opera house is being terrorised by a man in evening dress with a white mask, lurking in the shadows, occasionally killing people, and most worryingly, sending little notes, writing maniacal laughter with five exclamation marks. Opera can do that to a man. In such circumstances, life has obviously reached that desperate point where the wrong thing to do **has** to be the right thing to do...

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Maskerade

Footnotes

About the Author

Also by Terry Pratchett

Copyright

Terry Pratchett

MASKERADE

A DISCWORLD® NOVEL

DEDICATION

My thanks to the people who showed me
that opera was stranger than I could
imagine. I can best repay their kindness by
not mentioning their names here.

THE WIND HOWLED. The storm crackled on the mountains. Lightning prodded the crags like an old man trying to get an elusive blackberry pip out of his false teeth.

Among the hissing furze bushes a fire blazed, the flames driven this way and that by the gusts.

An eldritch voice shrieked: 'When shall we ... two ... meet again?'

Thunder rolled.

A rather more ordinary voice said: 'What'd you go and shout that for? You made me drop my toast in the fire.'

Nanny Ogg sat down again.

'Sorry, Esme. I was just doing it for ... you know ... old time's sake ... Doesn't roll off the tongue, though.'

'I'd just got it nice and brown, too.'

'Sorry.'

'Anyway, you didn't have to shout.'

'Sorry.'

'I mean, I ain't deaf. You could've just asked me in a normal voice. And I'd have said, "Next Wednesday."''

'Sorry, Esme.'

'Just you cut me another slice.'

Nanny Ogg nodded, and turned her head. 'Magrat, cut Granny ano ... oh. Mind wandering there for a minute. I'll do it myself, shall I?'

'Hah!' said Granny Weatherwax, staring into the fire.

There was no sound for a while but the roar of the wind and the sound of Nanny Ogg cutting bread, which she did with about as much efficiency as a man trying to chainsaw a mattress.

'I thought it'd cheer you up, coming up here,' she said after a while.

'Really.' It wasn't a question.

'Take you out of yourself, sort of thing ...' Nanny went on, watching her

friend carefully.

‘Mm?’ said Granny, still staring moodily at the fire.

Oh dear, thought Nanny. I shouldn’t’ve said *that*.

The point was ... well, the point was that Nanny Ogg was worried. Very worried. She wasn’t at all sure that her friend wasn’t ... well ... going ... well, sort of ... in a manner of speaking ... well ... black ...

She knew it happened, with the really powerful ones. And Granny Weatherwax was pretty damn’ powerful. She was probably an even more accomplished witch now than the infamous Black Aliss, and everyone knew what had happened to *her* at the finish. Pushed into her own stove by a couple of kids, and everyone said it was a damn’ good thing, even if it took a whole week to clean the oven.

But Aliss, up until that terrible day, had terrorized the Ramtops. She’d become so good at magic that there wasn’t room in her head for anything else.

They said weapons couldn’t pierce her. Swords bounced off her skin. They said you could hear her mad laughter a mile off, and of course, while mad laughter was always part of a witch’s stock-in-trade in necessary circumstances, this was *insane* mad laughter, the worst kind. And she turned people into gingerbread and had a house made of frogs. It had been very nasty, towards the end. It always was, when a witch went bad.

Sometimes, of course, they didn’t go bad. They just went ... somewhere.

Granny’s intellect needed something to *do*. She did not take kindly to boredom. She’d take to her bed instead and send her mind out Borrowing, inside the head of some forest creature, listening with its ears, seeing with its eyes. That was all very well for general purposes, but she was too good at it. She could stay away longer than anyone Nanny Ogg had ever heard of.

One day, almost certainly, she wouldn’t bother to come back ... and this was the worst time of the year, with the geese honking and rushing across the sky every night, and the autumn air crisp and inviting. There was something terribly tempting about that.

Nanny Ogg reckoned she knew what the cause of the problem was.

She coughed.

‘Saw Magrat the other day,’ she ventured, looking sidelong at Granny.

There was no reaction.

‘She’s looking well. Queening suits her.’

‘Hmm?’

Nanny groaned inwardly. If Granny couldn’t even be bothered to make a nasty remark, then she was *really* missing Magrat.

Nanny Ogg had never believed it at the start, but Magrat Garlick, wet as a sponge though she was half the time, had been dead right about one thing.

Three was a natural number for witches.

And they’d lost one. Well, not lost, exactly. Magrat was queen now, and queens were hard to mislay. But ... that meant that there were only two of them instead of three.

When you had three, you had one to run around getting people to make up when there’d been a row. Magrat had been good for that. Without Magrat, Nanny Ogg and Granny Weatherwax got on one another’s nerves. With her, all three had been able to get on the nerves of absolutely everyone else in the whole world, which had been a lot more fun.

And there was no having Magrat back ... at least, to be precise about it, there was no having Magrat back *yet*.

Because, while three was a good number for witches ... it had to be the *right* sort of three. The right sort of ... *types*.

Nanny Ogg found herself embarrassed even to think about this, and this was unusual because embarrassment normally came as naturally to Nanny as altruism comes to a cat.

As a witch, she naturally didn’t believe in any occult nonsense of any sort. But there were one or two truths down below the bedrock of the soul which had to be faced, and right in among them was this business of, well, of the maiden, the mother and the ... other one.

There. She’d put words around it.

Of course, it was nothing but an old superstition and belonged to the unenlightened days when ‘maiden’ or ‘mother’ or ... the other one ... encompassed every woman over the age of twelve or so, except maybe for nine months of her life. These days, any girl bright enough to count and

sensible enough to take Nanny's advice could put off being at least one of them for quite some time.

Even so ... it was an *old* superstition – older than books, older than writing – and beliefs like that were heavy weights on the rubber sheet of human experience, tending to pull people into their orbit.

And Magrat had been married for three months. That ought to mean she was out of the first category. At least – Nanny twitched her train of thought on to a branch line – she *probably* was. Oh, *surely*. Young Verence had sent off for a helpful manual. It had pictures in it, and numbered parts. Nanny knew this because she had sneaked into the royal bedroom while visiting one day, and had spent an instructive ten minutes drawing moustaches and spectacles on some of the figures. Surely even Magrat and Verence could hardly fail to ... No, they must have worked it out, even though Nanny had heard that Verence had been seen enquiring of people where he might buy a couple of false moustaches. It'd not be long before Magrat was eligible for the second category, even if they were both slow readers.

Of course, Granny Weatherwax made a great play of her independence and self-reliance. But the point about that kind of stuff was that you needed someone around to be proudly independent and self-reliant *at*. People who didn't need people needed people around to know that they were the kind of people who didn't need people.

It was like hermits. There was no point freezing your nadgers off on top of some mountain while communing with the Infinite unless you could rely on a lot of impressionable young women to come along occasionally and say 'Gosh'.

... They needed to be three again. Things got exciting, when there were three of you. There were rows, and adventures, and things for Granny to get angry about, and she was only happy when she was angry. In fact, it seemed to Nanny, she was only Granny Weatherwax when she was angry.

Yes. They needed to be three.

Or else ... it was going to be grey wings in the night, or the clang of the oven door ...

The manuscript fell apart as soon as Mr Goatberger picked it up.

It wasn't even on proper paper. It had been written on old sugar bags, and the backs of envelopes, and bits of out-of-date calendar.

He grunted, and grabbed a handful of the musty pages to throw them on the fire.

A word caught his eye.

He read it, and his eye was dragged to the end of the sentence.

Then he read to the end of the page, doubling back a few times because he hadn't quite believed what he'd just read.

He turned the page. And then he turned back. And then he read on. At one point he took a ruler out of his drawer and looked at it thoughtfully.

He opened his drinks cabinet. The bottle tinkled cheerfully on the edge of the glass as he tried to pour himself a drink.

Then he stared out of the window at the Opera House on the other side of the road. A small figure was brushing the steps.

And then he said, 'Oh, my.'

Finally he went to the door and said, 'Could you come in here, Mr Cropper?'

His chief printer entered, clutching a sheaf of proofs. 'We're going to have to get Mr Cripslock to engrave page 11 again,' he said mournfully. 'He's spelled "famine" with seven letters—'

'Read this,' said Goatberger.

'I was just off to lunch—'

'Read this.'

'Guild agreement says—'

'Read this and see if you still have an appetite.'

Mr Cropper sat down with bad grace and glanced at the first page.

Then he turned to the second page.

After a while he opened the desk drawer and pulled out a ruler, which he looked at thoughtfully.

'You've just read about Bananana Soup Surprise?' said Goatberger.

'Yes!'