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TERRY PRATCHETT

A DISCWORLD NOVEL

SOUL MUSIC



Terry Pratchett

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A Novel of Discworld®

 HarperCollins e-books

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THE HISTORY

This is a story about memory. And this much can be remembered...

...that the Death of the Discworld, for reasons of his own, once rescued a baby girl and took her to his home between the dimensions. He let her grow to become sixteen because he believed that older children were easier to deal with than younger children, and this shows that you can be an immortal anthropomorphic personification and still get things, as it were, dead wrong...

...that he later hired an apprentice called Mortimer, or Mort for short. Between Mort and Ysabell there was an instant dislike, and everyone knows what that means in the long term. As a substitute for the Grim Reaper, Mort was a spectacular failure, causing problems that led to a wobbling of Reality and a fight between him and Death which Mort lost...

...and that, for reasons of his own, Death spared his life and sent him and Ysabell back into the world.

No one knows why Death started to take a practical interest in the human beings he had worked with for so long. It was probably just curiosity. Even the most efficient ratcatcher will sooner or later take an interest in rats. They might watch rats live and die, and record every detail of rat existence, although they may never themselves actually know what it is like to run the maze.

But if it is true that the act of observing changes the thing which is observed,* it's even more true that it changes the observer.

Mort and Ysabell got married.

They had a child.

This is also a story about sex and drugs and Music With Rocks In.

Well...

...one out of three ain't bad.

Actually, it's only thirty-three percent, but it could be worse.*

Begin Reading

Where to finish?

A dark, stormy night. A coach, horses gone, plunging through the rickety, useless fence and dropping, tumbling into the gorge below. It doesn't even strike an outcrop of rock before it hits the dried riverbed far below, and erupts into fragments.

Miss Butts shuffled the paperwork nervously.

Here was one from the girl aged six:

'What We Did On our Holidays: What I did On my holiday I staid with grandad he has a big White horse and a garden it is all Black. We had Eggs and chips.'

Then the oil from the coach lamps ignites and there is a second explosion, out of which rolls—because there are certain conventions, even in tragedy—a burning wheel.

And another paper, a drawing done at age seven. All in black. Miss Butts sniffed. It wasn't as though the gel had only a black crayon. It was a fact that the Quirm College for Young Ladies had quite expensive crayons of all colors.

And then, after the last of the ember spits and crackles, there is silence.

And the watcher.

Who turns, and says to someone in the darkness:

YES. I COULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING.

And rides away.

Miss Butts shuffled paper again. She was feeling distracted and nervous, a feeling common to anyone who had much to do with the gel. Paper usually made her feel better. It was more dependable.

Then there had been the matter of...the accident.

Miss Butts had broken such news before. It was an occasional hazard when you ran a large boarding school. The parents of many of the gels were often abroad on business of one sort or another, and it was sometimes the kind of business where the chances of rich reward go hand in hand with the risks of meeting unsympathetic men.

Miss Butts knew how to handle these occasions. It was painful, but the thing ran its course. There was shock, and tears, and then, eventually, it was all over. People had ways of dealing with it. There was a sort of script built into the human mind. Life went on.

But the child had just sat there. It was the *politeness* that scared the daylights out of Miss Butts. She was not an unkind woman, despite a lifetime of being gently dried out on the stove of education, but she was

conscientious and a stickler for propriety and thought she knew how this sort of thing should go and was vaguely annoyed that it wasn't going.

“Er...if you would like to be alone, to have a cry—” she'd prompted, in an effort to get things moving on the right track.

“Would that help?” Susan had said.

It would have helped Miss Butts.

All she'd been able to manage was: “I wonder if, perhaps, you fully understood what I have told you?”

The child had stared at the ceiling as though trying to work out a difficult problem in algebra and then said, “I expect I will.”

It was as if she'd already known, and had dealt with it in some way. Miss Butts had asked the teachers to watch Susan carefully. They'd said that was hard, because...

There was a tentative knock on Miss Butts's study door, as if it was being made by someone who'd really prefer not to be heard.

She returned to the present.

“Come,” she said.

The door swung open.

Susan always made no sound. The teachers had all remarked upon it. It was uncanny, they said. She was always in front of you when you least expected it.

“Ah, Susan,” said Miss Butts, a tight smile scuttling across her face like a nervous tick over a worried sheep. “Please sit down.”

“Of course, Miss Butts.”

Miss Butts shuffled the papers.

“Susan...”

“Yes, Miss Butts?”

“I’m sorry to say that it appears you have been missed in lessons again.”

“I don’t understand, Miss Butts.”

The headmistress leaned forward. She felt vaguely annoyed with herself, but...there was something frankly unlovable about the child. Academically brilliant at the things she liked doing, of course, but that was just it; she was brilliant in the same way that a diamond is brilliant, all edges and chilliness.

“Have you been...doing it?” she said. “You promised you were going to stop this silliness.”

“Miss Butts?”

“You’ve been making yourself invisible again, haven’t you?”

Susan blushed. So, rather less pinkly, did Miss Butts. *I mean*, she thought, *it’s ridiculous. It’s against all reason. It’s—oh, no...*

She turned her head and shut her eyes.

“Yes, Miss Butts?” said Susan, just before Miss Butts said, “Susan?”

Miss Butts shuddered. This was something else the teachers had mentioned. Sometimes Susan answered questions just before you asked them...

She steadied herself.

“You’re still sitting there, are you?”

“Of course, Miss Butts.”

Ridiculous.

It wasn't invisibility, she told herself. She just makes herself inconspicuous. She...who...

She concentrated. She'd written a little memo to herself against this very eventuality, and it was pinned to the file.

She read:

You are interviewing Susan Sto Helit. Try not to forget it.

"Susan?" she ventured.

"Yes, Miss Butts?"

If Miss Butts concentrated, Susan was sitting in front of her. If she made an effort, she could hear the gel's voice. She just had to fight against a pressing tendency to believe that she was alone.

"I'm afraid Miss Cumber and Miss Greggs have complained," she managed.

"I'm always in class, Miss Butts."

"I daresay you are. Miss Traitor and Miss Stamp say they see you all the time." There'd been quite a staff room argument about that. "Is it because you *like* Logic and Math and don't like Language and History?"

Miss Butts hesitated. There was no way the child could have left the room. If she really stressed her mind, she could catch a suggestion of a voice saying "Don't know, Miss Butts."

"Susan, it is really *most* upsetting when—"

Miss Butts paused. She looked around the study and then glanced at a note pinned to the papers in front of her. She appeared to read it, looked puzzled for a moment, and then rolled it up and dropped it into the wastepaper basket. She picked up a pen and, after staring into space for a moment, turned her attention to the school accounts.