

Soul Music

A Novel of Discworld



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**Terry
Pratchett**

Soul Music
A Novel of Discworld®

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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.

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 Holidys: What I did On my holidys I staid with grandad he has a big White hors and a garden it is al Black. We had Eg 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 daylight 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.

Susan waited politely for a while, and then got up and left as quietly as possible.

Certain things have to happen before other things. Gods play games with the fates of men. But first they have to get all the pieces on the board, and look all over the place for the dice.

It was raining in the small, mountainous country of Llamedos. It was always raining in Llamedos. Rain was the country’s main export. It had rain mines.

Imp the bard sat under the evergreens, more out of habit than any real hope that it would keep the rain off. Water just dribbled through the spiky leaves and formed rivulets down the twigs, so that it was really a sort of rain concentrator. Occasional *lumps* of rain would splat onto his head.

He was eighteen, extremely talented, and, currently, not at ease with his life.

He tuned his harp, his beautiful new harp, and watched the rain, tears running down his face and mingling with the drops.

Gods *like* people like this.

It is said that whomsoever the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad. In fact, whomsoever the gods wish to destroy, they first hand the equivalent of a stick with a fizzing fuse and Acme Dynamite Company written on the side. It’s more interesting, and doesn’t take so long.

Susan mooched along the disinfectant-smelling corridors. She wasn't particularly worried about what Miss Butts was going to think. She didn't usually worry about what anyone thought. She didn't know why people forgot about her when she wanted them to, but afterward they seemed a bit embarrassed about raising the subject.

Sometimes, some teachers had trouble seeing her. This was fine. She'd generally take a book into the classroom and read it peacefully, while all around her The Principal Exports of Klatch happened to other people.

It was, undoubtedly, a beautiful harp. Very rarely a craftsman gets something so right that it is impossible to imagine an improvement. He hadn't bothered with ornamentation. That would have been some kind of sacrilege.

And it was new, which was very unusual in Llamedos. Most of the harps were old. It wasn't as if they wore out. Sometimes they needed a new frame, or a neck, or new strings—but the *harp* went on. The old bards said they got better as they got older, although old men tend to say this sort of thing regardless of daily experience.

Imp plucked a string. The note hung in the air, and faded. The harp was fresh and bright and already it sang out like a bell. What it might be like in a hundred years' time was unimaginable.

His father had said it was rubbish, that the future was written in stones, not notes. That had only been the start of the row.

And then he'd said things, and *he'd* said things, and suddenly the world was a new and unpleasant place, because things can't be unsaid.

He'd said, "You don't know anything! You're just a stupid old man! But I'm giving my life to music! One day soon *everyone* will say I was the greatest musician in the world!"

Stupid words. As if any bard cared for any opinion except those of other bards, who'd spent a lifetime learning how to listen to music.

But said, nevertheless. And, if they're said with the right passion and the gods are feeling bored, sometimes the universe will re-form itself around words like that. Words have always had the power to change the world.

Be careful what you wish for. You never know who will be listening.

Or what, for that matter.

Because, perhaps, something could be drifting through the universes, and a few words by the wrong person at the right moment may just cause it to veer in its course ...

Far away in the bustling metropolis of Ankh-Morpork there was a brief crawling of sparks across an otherwise bare wall and then ...

... there was a shop. An old musical instrument shop. No one remarked on its arrival. As soon as it appeared, it had always been there.

Death sat staring at nothing, chinbone resting on his hands.

Albert approached very carefully.

It had continually puzzled Death in his more introspective moments, and this was one of them, why his servant always walked the same path across the floor.

I MEAN, he thought, CONSIDER THE SIZE OF THE ROOM ...

... which went on to infinity, or as near infinity as makes no difference. In fact it was about a mile. That's big for a room, whereas infinity you can hardly see.

Death had got rather flustered when he'd created the house. Time and space were things to be manipulated, not obeyed. The internal dimensions had been a little too generous. He'd forgotten to make the outside bigger than the inside. It was the same with the garden. When he'd begun to take a little more interest in these things he'd realized the role people seemed to think that *color* played in concepts like, for example, roses. But he'd made them black. He liked black. It went with anything. It went with everything, sooner or later.

The humans he'd known—and there had been a few—had responded to the impossible size of the rooms in a strange way, by simply ignoring it.

Take Albert, now. The big door had opened, Albert had stepped through, carefully balancing a cup and saucer...

... and a moment later had been well inside the room, on the edge of the relatively small square of carpet that surrounded Death's desk. Death gave up wondering how Albert covered the intervening space when it dawned on him that, to his servant, there was *no* intervening space ...

"I've brought you some camomile tea, sir," said Albert.

HMM?

"Sir?"