

LOOKING AT THE DARK SUN: ASPECTS OF DEATH, WAR AND THE POWER OF STORIES IN MARKUS ZUSAK AND TERRY PRATCHETT'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author argues that Markus Zusak and Terry Pratchett make use of metafictional strategies as well as their respective anthropomorphic figures of death to allow readers, particularly young ones, to confront difficult topics, providing them with a glimpse of truth as far as their own mortality is concerned. In Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005) and Pratchett's *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* (2001), death, war and the nature of evil are considered through a fictional lens, allowing a certain amount of distancing between the young reader and these painful realities. Without naively underplaying the actuality of death, Zusak and Pratchett show how stories can ameliorate the traumatic and anxiety-inducing aspects of such events. Zusak challenges people's notions of what young adult literature can portray, while Pratchett focuses on what it means not only to be a human being, but an ethical sentient being.

Keywords: Markus Zusak; *The Book Thief*; Terry Pratchett; *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents*; death; anthropomorphism; metafiction

INTRODUCTION

In one of La Rochefoucauld's (Corr 1979, 49) maxims, he claims that "one can no more look steadily at death than at the sun". Clearly, death is very difficult to confront with a sure and steady gaze; some people seem to be blinded by the light, while others avoid



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taking more than a peek. Yet La Rochefoucauld's claim may not be as apodictic as it seems: there are authors who seem to approach death in a more judicious way. As the philosopher Charles A. Corr (1979, 49) avers:

[what Rochefoucauld claims] is undoubtedly true, but it does not mean that we can find no way at all to look either at death or at the sun. We obviously do look at the sun in many ways, often obliquely or through filters, and we live our lives in its necessary warmth and light. There is no a priori reason why we cannot do the same with death. We need to confront death openly from time to time, and then to face away in order to live our lives with full awareness of the lessons of that confrontation.

In this article, I will contend that certain authors manage the trick of looking at death "obliquely or through filters". By making use of anthropomorphic representations of Death (the Grim Reaper,¹ in essence), authors such as Markus Zusak and Terry Pratchett provide readers, particularly younger ones, with a way of confronting difficult topics, allowing readers to get a glimpse of truth as far as their own mortality is concerned. As human beings, people may never be able to confront death head on (until it is time, of course), but it need not be seen as merely a negative element; as Corr (1979, 49) implies, taking the analogy of death-as-sun to its logical conclusion (and perhaps beyond it), people can "live [their] lives in [death's] necessary warmth and light". The aim of the article is not, however, to claim that death is an unalloyed good; that would be naïve, as well as being untrue. Rather, I wish to show how Zusak and Pratchett approach death in novels aimed at a younger audience, and how their use of the Grim Reaper archetype allows them to question assumptions concerning death. Their novels allow younger readers to "confront death openly", yet with less anxiety than when confronting mortality in an actual traumatic event, such as a war. They can then "face away" again, closing the book but not forgetting the "lessons of that confrontation" with the dark star. Although this may remind readers of bibliotherapy (where texts serve a healing function, particularly for depression), I am not contending that the novels I will consider have a purely programmatic, not to say pragmatic, aim; they are far too entertaining for didacticism. Instead, I will contend that Zusak and Pratchett's writings reveal an abiding interest in the potential for stories to shape people's understanding of death, especially during events like a war or a clash of cultures.

In Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), Death narrates the disquieting experiences of a young German orphan, Liesel Meminger, who learns to cope with loss, and the complexities of good and evil, while growing up in a small German village during the Second World War. Pratchett's *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* (2001) (hereafter *Maurice*) is concerned with the eponymous Maurice, a talking cat, who has trained a group of intelligent rats and an unassuming young man named Keith

1. A familiar anthropomorphic figure from medieval and Renaissance woodcuts, such as Hans Holbein's famous Dance of Death (1523–26). The Grim Reaper (in the Western tradition, at least) is usually depicted as a skeleton wearing a black cloak and holding a scythe; the image has obvious connotations with dead bodies and the harvest, with the idea of Death gathering souls being predominant.

to swindle villages with a Pied-Piper-of-Hamelin routine. Despite these books being aimed at adolescents, Zusak and Pratchett make little concession to what might be called the prevailing topics of interest (as far as death is concerned) in adolescent speculative fiction, such as zombies, vampires and other denizens of the night side of nature. They do, however, write about anthropomorphic Death figures in these novels, but as I hope to show, neither Zusak nor Pratchett is interested in sensationalist or lurid depictions of their respective Death figures. Instead, they tell stories which are concerned with some of the big topics, such as death, war and the nature of evil. Although these novels may also seem somewhat heterogeneous in their style and content, I would argue that their concerns are similar, in that both novels represent attempts to investigate humanity's response to death, and both end up challenging somewhat complacent ideas of what it means to be human. Pratchett may, in essence, be writing about rats, while Zusak writes about people, but both authors imply that these living beings can be killed as easily as "shooting fish in a barrel"; death does not discriminate. The novels also share metafictional aspects, which foreground the authors' concerns with the nature of storytelling.

DEATH DURING WARTIME

Zusak reveals how people can approach the topic of death without becoming bedazzled by that dark star in his best-selling crossover novel, *The Book Thief*. Zusak's Death, though seemingly close to the Grim Reaper archetype, also differs from it in quite a few important points. This "death" is presented as something between an anthropomorphic being and a natural force. Because Death narrates the story, there is never a need for gender pronouns when referring to him, her or it; an "I" suffices. This also obviously makes it difficult to write about this Death in the third-person, as "personhood" seems almost beside the point.² Zusak seems to foreground the fact that this Death is a figment of the imagination, but no less "real" for all that. The reasons for having Death narrate the story are considered perhaps most cogently by Adams (2010, 223), where she claims that "Death, a potentially disturbing figure [as narrator] ... functions to mediate the harsh realities of the novel's subject matter". This is an interesting and persuasive reading of the novel, in which Adams (2010, 223) posits the idea that

Zusak's use of the narrating figure of Death ... serves simultaneously to confront the adolescent reader with the fact of death (in both an abstract and a historically located sense) and to offer protection from the most unsettling implications of this fact.

This recalls Corr's (1979, 49) claims about looking at death "obliquely or through filters". Yet, in her article, Adams (2010, 226) also foregrounds the "ethical problems surrounding escape and consolation in Holocaust literature". Her discussion of this is

2. To avoid gender confusion, I will therefore refer to this Death as "it" and "itself" when using the reflexive pronoun.

also valuable, though I do disagree with some of her readings of the text, which I will highlight below.

The Book Thief is, among other things, but perhaps centrally, a story about stories, about the growth of the imagination, about learning how to cope with reality through the telling of tales. In a curious sense, having a “death” narrate the story turns it into a metanarrative, in which readers have to consider the nature of narration and the ambit of stories. As Kissova (2009, 64) notes, even the “title of *The Book Thief* is metatextual”. During the novel, Liesel secretly writes a book about her experiences, called “The Book Thief”, and this saves her life when a bomb is dropped on her adopted home during an air raid, killing everyone except Liesel, who is busy writing in the cellar. This foregrounds not only the figurative power of words, but also the ambiguous potential of writing about death: Liesel may survive the bombing, but it is a bittersweet survival, as all of her loved ones die.

At the beginning of *The Book Thief*, Death introduces itself and announces to readers a “small fact”, namely, that “[y]ou are going to die” (Zusak 2005, 3). This is certainly a distressing introduction, but perfectly in keeping with this narrator’s candour. According to Death, people should not “ask [it] to be nice ... [as n]ice has nothing to do with [it]”, though Death does assure readers that “[it] is nothing if not fair” (Zusak 2005, 3). Readers who are familiar with Pratchett’s Discworld Death can see that Zusak’s Death is quite different; whereas Pratchett’s Death would certainly want to be seen as “nice”, but might not always manage to be so, Zusak’s Death seems to care little for people’s views of it, and is rather sardonic when referring to the traditional archetype.³ As it says, “I like this human idea of the grim reaper [note the lack of capitals]. I like the scythe. It amuses me” (Zusak 2005, 79). That Death can be “amused” would indicate some kind of personality, if only vestigial. When Death finally describes itself, however, readers realise that this idea of personality is something that humans add to abstract ideas – for better or for worse. As it says (Zusak 2005, 329):

I do not carry a sickle or scythe. I only wear a hooded black robe when it’s cold. And I don’t have those skull-like facial features you seem to enjoy pinning on me from a distance. You want to know what I truly look like? I’ll help you out. Find yourself a mirror while I continue.

Here, Death completely dismantles the Grim Reaper archetype, indicating that it resembles humanity much more closely than people might like to think. Zusak seems to be highlighting the prosaic nature of death by focusing on the normal appearance of this Death, its resemblance to humanity. Of course, a skeleton with “skull-like facial features” also resembles a human being, on a more than skin-deep level, as it were. Perhaps Zusak is trying to argue that the medieval archetype is unsuitable, as it focuses more on humanity’s fears concerning death than on the reality of death. He may also

3. Adams (2010, 224) claims that “Zusak’s Death bears a strong resemblance to Pratchett’s”, which I would dispute to a degree: Pratchett’s Death seems much more avuncular and also more of a rounded personality. Both Deaths do, however, hanker after fairness, and show a capacity for caring for their charges.

be foregrounding the human agency in death during something like a war; humans are often culpable when it comes to the deaths of other humans, especially during armed conflicts. The resemblance between Zusak's Death and humans in general in the quoted paragraph may finally also show that Zusak views the archetypal Grim Reaper as a disavowal of humanity's guilt when it comes to killing. Zusak's Death, which often seems more afraid of humanity than vice versa, can therefore be seen as a condemnation of humanity's cruelty towards humanity and especially to its most vulnerable and innocent members, such as children.

That Zusak's Death is troubled by humanity is exemplified by its reason for telling Liesel Meminger's story (Zusak 2005, 16):

In one of my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry, each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt – an immense leap of an attempt – to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it.

This passage recalls the phrase in line 430 of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" where Eliot (in North 2001, 20) writes that: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." But whereas Eliot (or, perhaps more accurately, the speaker in "The Waste Land") seems to posit his fragmentary verse as a Modernist jeremiad against the decay of modern society, Zusak's Death seems to go even further, to generalise as only Death can: the "immense leap of an attempt" shows the desperation this Death feels in trying to justify the ways of man to man. The oxymoronic phrase "small legion" perhaps shows that "these fragments" – these stories of Death – though seemingly negligible, are still meaningful and powerful in their own right. This Death also cares about humanity, despite it not being "nice". Although it cannot intervene to help the living (as exemplified by an early scene where it wishes to console Liesel for the death of her brother, but is unable to do so), it still wants to believe the best about humanity, but is often disappointed by the actions of human beings.

The war and Hitler's "final solution" for the Jewish people obviously bother this Death extremely, as they seem to represent the zenith (or nadir?) of human cruelty. When Death discusses war, readers can see that it is unhappy with the situation; not only because the war keeps it very busy (Zusak 2005, 331), but also because the war makes it question the humaneness of human beings. In one of the most moving scenes in the novel, readers are allowed a peek into Death's diary. Among other things, readers should note that the date is 23 June 1942 (Zusak 2005, 373–374):

There was a group of French Jews in a German prison, on Polish soil. The first person I took was close to the door, his mind racing, then reduced to pacing, then slowing down, slowing down.

...

Please believe me when I tell you that I picked up each soul that day as if it were newly born. I even kissed a few weary, poisoned cheeks. I listened to their last, gasping cries. Their French words. I watched their love-visions and freed them from their fear.

...

They were French, they were Jews, and they were you.

As I hope is clear, Zusak's Death is very compassionate, as it "free[s] them from their fear", but at times words escape it when trying to convey the immensity of human suffering during the Holocaust. The final line focuses on the common humanity of the sufferers, but also seems to have an excoriating tone; this Death does not allow us the luxury of distance, but rather forces readers to confront the reality of the suffering of others, as well as their own. Adams (2010, 226) refers to this scene (and other similar depictions of Death in the novel) as "provid[ing] a firm illustration of the ethical problems surrounding escape and consolation in Holocaust literature", and she goes on to say that there is a

possibility that softening the finality of death by offering a redemptive aftermath entails a form of narrative fetishism ... [T]he redemptive narrative of Jewish death distorts the events in a significant way, denying both their traumatic dimension and their status as an unresolved ethical and memorial site that continues to demand a response.

I am not wholly persuaded by her argument. Despite raising pertinent questions concerning the consolatory nature of anthropomorphic Death figures, Adams's claims rest on what is, in my opinion, a misreading of Death's role in the narrative. The notion that Death offers a rescue for the dying Jews, and that this is evidence of "redemptive repositioning" (Adams 2010, 226), is debatable. Zusak never explicitly states that dying is commensurate with being rescued or redeemed, and he similarly avoids saying anything about a putative afterlife. Although Death says that it "free[s the dying French Jews] from their fear" in the passage quoted above, this seems to me a limited liberation; Death is not making any grand metaphysical claims for its role. In my reading, the novel posits dying as an endpoint, but whether death is a terminus from which people can eventually embark on a further journey, or is a complete termination, seems to be beyond Zusak's remit.⁴

Death's views on God are an interesting coda to this argument. Death invokes a deity in the same scene as the one quoted from above, saying: "His name in a futile attempt to understand." Yet, as Death succinctly puts it: "God never says anything" (Zusak 2005, 373). According to Kissova (2009, 62), "[The omission of] God's voice, heaven and hell has a specific purpose in the narrative ... it stresses the thematic concept of man's responsibility for the tragedy." This omission could also point to the influence of secularisation, or even atheism, on Zusak's approach (though it is also possible that Zusak is merely referring to a *deus absconditus*, a hidden or unknowable deity). The fact that "God never says anything" may indicate the all-too-human characteristics of this

4. Adams (2010, 225) claims that Zusak introduces the "fact of the Holocaust's death toll ... while qualifying this fact with the ... possibility of a consciousness after death". During the course of her article, however, Adams seems to obscure the fact there is merely a "*possibility* of a consciousness after death"; Zusak is careful to never make any authoritative statements concerning an afterlife in the novel.

Death, which also despairs at times and does not know why it has to witness so much apparently meaningless suffering.

When considering Liesel and her family hiding in a bomb shelter together with other German citizens in 1942, Death says (Zusak 2005, 403):

As is often the case with humans, when I read about them in the book thief's words, I pitied them, though not as much as I felt for the ones I scooped up from various camps in that time. The Germans in basements were pitiable, surely, but at least they had a chance. That basement was not a washroom. They were not sent there for a shower. For those people, life was still achievable.

This Death, though obviously compassionate, is distressed by the possibility that even apparently innocent civilians may be tainted by their association with a genocidal regime. That Zusak's novel focuses on a German child and her foster family, a family which is, on the whole, very loving and humane, indicates the complexity of issues of guilt and culpability. Zusak does not offer readers any easy solutions, with even his Death figure becoming morose and condemnatory at times. Zusak seems to argue that humanity's common origins and fate – the fact that humans are all born without their consent, and will all die someday – serve to connect them somehow, but even this is ultimately not enough; they also need to *realise* this connection. A story like Liesel's may help people to do so, may "prove ... that ... human existence [is] worth it" (Zusak 2005, 16). The metafictional aspects of a Death figure telling this story serve to reinforce the realisation of humanity's common fate, highlighting the transient nature of life by concretising the reality of death. "Human existence" may seem pointless in the face of death, but Zusak shows that this is ultimately the wrong inference to draw from this fate; an acknowledgment of death can serve to bind disparate people and communities, giving meaning in the here and now.

Although the figure of Death can sometimes appear extraneous to the main plot of the novel, I would contend that it serves to raise the stakes of the story, in the sense of foregrounding the mortality of the characters – and the reader. As Adams (2010, 224) states, the "personification stands between the reader and the reality of death as an ambivalent figure, both agent and alleviator of this incomprehensible threat". Having Death narrate the story also provides Zusak with something like the chorus of classical Greek theatre, through which he can comment on aspects of the story without seeming too didactic or polemical. *The Book Thief* treats a notoriously difficult subject with empathy and respect, while neither falling into sentimentalism, nor avoiding the realities of its topic. That said, the use of Death as narrator for the novel may be viewed by some readers and critics as an affront or discourtesy to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust and second world war, in the same way that some have criticised Spiegelman's *The Complete Maus* (1996) for trivialising this period of history. This seems misguided to me, as the use of anthropomorphic figures in an allegorical style forms part of a long tradition. It is only in recent times, with the advent of fantasy writing as a niche genre which is often disparaged, that anthropomorphism and allegory

have come to be seen by some as inherently trivialising. But both are merely tools in the imaginative writer's workshop, which can be used either poorly or well. Likewise, the setting of a story, whether it be an invented fantasy land or the killing fields of Europe, ought to be treated with respect for, but not deference to, any possible readership's feelings and intelligence.

A RATHER GRIM STORY

The late British author, Sir Terence John David "Terry" Pratchett, was also never afraid of engaging with controversial subject matter, despite his humorous approach when dealing with such topics. Although his writing may seem whimsical and jovial at times, it marries any such levity to a high seriousness; his style epitomises modern satire. The science fiction and fantasy critic Clute (2004, 19) makes the salient point that "[as] a parodist, Pratchett is quite unusual in that his parodies are almost always benign, open-ended, without animus ...", which is amplified by Butler's (2004, 69) claim that "[Pratchett's] criticisms are not the barbed wit of Swift, Sterne or Wilde ...". Pratchett is certainly *kinder* in his satire than the above-mentioned authors, in the sense that his tone is milder. Yet, perhaps the critics' comments should be placed next to those of Pratchett's friend and sometime collaborator, Neil Gaiman (Pratchett 2014, ix-x):

There is a fury to Terry Pratchett's writing. It's the fury that was the engine that powered Discworld ... [T]hat anger, it seems to me, is about Terry's underlying sense of what is fair and what is not. It is that sense of fairness that underlies Terry's work and his writing ... [Terry's] authorial voice ... is always Terry's: genial, informed, sensible, drily amused. I suppose that, if you look quickly and are not paying attention, you might, perhaps, mistake it for jolly. But beneath any jollity there is a foundation of fury. Terry Pratchett is not one to go gentle into any night, good or otherwise.

Of course, there is a difference between the fury about which Gaiman writes and personal animus. Yet, as amiable as Pratchett's writing may seem, it certainly contains a strong core of criticism, aimed at social ills and other issues. Pratchett was more than aware of the darker sides of life and death, and he was therefore willing to use the conventions of fantasy literature to address uncomfortable topics.

This is particularly true of Pratchett's *Maurice*, which was the first novel in his popular Discworld series to be written expressly for younger readers. The premise of the novel seems simple enough: Pratchett makes use of the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, but instead of the piper leading rats (and, eventually, children) away from a village, Pratchett presents his piper and rats as being in on a scam to defraud villages, all orchestrated by the "amazing Maurice", a highly intelligent, talking cat. Despite the apparent simplicity of this scenario, however, Pratchett is at pains to complicate the story right from the beginning of the novel: chapter one begins with a famous quote from Robert Browning's "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" ("Rats!/They chased the dogs and bit the cats ..."), yet Pratchett (2001, 9) immediately writes: "But there was more to

it than that. As the amazing Maurice said, it was just a story about people and rats. And the difficult part of it was deciding who the people were, and who were the rats.” This hints at the complexity of what might be seen as a “mere” children’s fantasy story and already indicates to readers Pratchett’s abiding concern with presenting reality through fantasy. His novels are, to a large extent, Menippean satires⁵ on the modern world, with *Maurice* being an extended reflection on what makes us human and on the nature of evil. It is also what Oziewicz (2009, 86) calls a “metatextual satire on the social organization of Discworld”. These weighty topics might not seem suited to a book about talking animals aimed at younger readers, but that assumption merely points to certain prejudices against children’s literature, particularly of the fantasy variety. Swinfen (1984, 23) makes several claims pertinent to the discussion of fantasy literature:

... fantasy, just as much as the “realist” novel, is about reality – about the human condition. All serious fantasy is deeply rooted in human experience and is relevant to human living. Its major difference from the realist novel is that it takes account of areas of experience – imaginative, subconscious, visionary – which free the human spirit to range beyond the limits of empirical primary world reality. In a sense, then, fantasy provides the writer with greater scope to construct his own scheme of morality, his own time structure, his own political and social order. But at no time does this apparent freedom permit the author to escape from contemporary reality.

Despite not referring directly to children’s literature here, Swinfen’s arguments can, in my opinion, be fruitfully applied to Pratchett’s writing for younger readers. Even in a novel like *Maurice* (with its aforementioned talking animals and quasi-medieval setting), Pratchett never attempts “to escape from contemporary reality”; very much the opposite, in fact.

Pratchett uses *Maurice* to metafictionally investigate the types of stories we tell ourselves and our children, stories that are supposed to explain death and evil, and to mitigate the fear these facts of life can cause. As Malicia Grim says about the events of *Maurice*, “it was a story about stories” (Pratchett 2001, 9). Malicia knows all about fairy tales and lives life as though it were a story, perhaps because her grandmother and great-aunt were the “Sisters Grim” (Pratchett 2001, 77), a famous story-telling duo, obviously based on the Brothers Grimm. Throughout the novel, Pratchett evinces reservations about Malicia’s habit of pretending that life is a story, and he also criticizes, or at least participates in dialogue with, some of his predecessors in the children’s literature field. This dialogue is not always particularly harsh, and it can be quite funny: an example would be when Malicia tells Keith (the conman piper) that “... it would be more ...

5. This type of satire is “modelled on a Greek form developed by the Cynic philosopher Menippus”, and forms part of “indirect satire”, defined as a “fictional narrative ... in which the objects of the satire are characters who make themselves and their opinions ridiculous or obnoxious by what they think, say, and do, and are sometimes made even more ridiculous by the author’s comments and narrative style” (Abrams and Harpham 2005, 286). Although it should be pointed out that Menippean satire is not a perfect fit for all of Pratchett’s writings (in the sense that his works tend to mix satirical forms with more mimetic styles), it is still true that Pratchett appropriates certain procedures from his satirical forebears in his commentary on social ills.

satisfying if we were four children and a dog, which is the right number for an adventure ...” (Pratchett 2001, 87) This obviously refers to Enid Blyton’s *Famous Five* books, which, with their fairly simplistic structures and didactic stories, are the exact opposite of what Pratchett does in *Maurice*: Malicia may want an “adventure”, and think she is living in a fairy-tale, but as Maurice says, “in fairy-tales, when someone dies ... it’s just a word” (Pratchett 2001, 88), implying that this will not be the case in the novel. That Pratchett is uneasy with certain aspects of story-telling may seem ironic at first glance, given the fact that he is above all telling a story in the text. But his undermining of some of the tropes of popular children’s stories shows that he is not criticising storytelling per se, but rather the less nuanced pabulum that is often dished up to young readers. Pratchett wants stories to be entertaining, of course, but also to mean something to the reader. This is why the death of a character should be more than a mere plot point, and more than “just a word”.

In *Maurice*, death matters. Pratchett (2001, 89) writes a fascinating scene in which a number of Maurice’s “educated rodents” (rats who have become sentient after eating magical garbage) discuss death and the afterlife:

“What do you think happens to you, after you’re dead?” said a rat, slowly.

“You get eaten. Or you go all dried up, or mouldy.”

“What, *all* of you?”

“Well, people usually leave the feet.”

The rat who’d asked the question said, “But what about the bit inside?”

And the rat who’d mentioned the feet said, “Oh, the squishy green wobbly bit? No, you ought to leave that, too. Tastes *awful*.”

“No, I meant the bit inside you that’s *you*. Where does *that* go?”

This discussion, which continues for a number of pages, is quite funny (e.g. “the squishy green wobbly bit”), but also has an important function in the novel, as it shows readers the (for lack of a better word) “humanity” of the rats. Readers should notice that the rats refer to themselves as “people”, but even more than this, their concerns about dying are quintessentially human; as far as is known, only human beings consider their own mortality, at least in their world. (Things are slightly more complicated on the Discworld, where there are other sentient creatures like trolls and dwarfs, but even there, rats are generally unable to converse or have philosophical debates.) This discussion is a potted history of the philosophy of mortality and the soul, with Pratchett (2001, 90) parodying the way in which humanity has moved from so-called primitive beliefs towards more sceptical contemporary ideas, as shown towards the end of the dialogue:

“I don’t like this kind of talk,” said one of them. “It reminds me of the shadows in the candlelight.”

Another one said, “Did you hear about the Bone Rat? It comes and gets you when you’re dead, they say.”

“They say, they say,” muttered a rat. “They *say* there’s a Big Rat Underground who made everything, they *say*. So it made humans, too? Must be really keen on us, to go and make humans too! Huh?”

“How do I know? Maybe they were made by a Big Human?”

“Oh, now you’re just being silly,” said the doubting rat ...

Any reader of the Discworld novels will know that there is, in fact, a “Bone Rat”, more usually known as the Death of Rats, who aids the anthropomorphic Death of the Discworld in his duty of collecting souls. That the Bone Rat actually exists may foreground Pratchett’s irony in this scene, which pokes fun at humans’ often cherished spiritual beliefs concerning their own immortality. This reflects Pratchett’s usual satirical practice of presenting recognisable aspects of everyday life through the prism of fantasy. That the “doubting rat” finds it “silly” to contemplate the possibility of a “Big Human” (i.e. God) merely highlights humanity’s own anthropocentrism; most humans would probably find it ridiculous if someone proposed that rats might have a rat god, for example. Readers should, however, also notice that Pratchett maintains his humorous tone throughout; despite the satire, he is not really ridiculing people (or the rats) for holding beliefs, but instead seems to be ridiculing the doubting rat for a lack of imagination. That humans make stories out of their beliefs, and that these can be beneficial, is one of the main themes of *Maurice* and, I would argue, all of Pratchett’s writing.

Towards the end of the novel, Maurice offers one of his nine lives to save the life of Dangerous Beans (one of the educated rodents which serves as a prophet-like figure for the other rats). Maurice’s dialogue with the anthropomorphic Death figure is interesting for the way in which it not only highlights Maurice’s respect for Death, but also satirises the way people obsess about a putative afterlife (Pratchett 2001, 221):

THAT MAKES FIVE LIVES, MAURICE. UP UNTIL TODAY’S ADVENTURE. YOU STARTED WITH NINE.

“Fair enough, sir. Fair enough.” Maurice swallowed. Oh, well, might as well try. “So let’s say I’m left with three, right?”

THREE? I WAS ONLY GOING TO TAKE ONE. YOU CAN’T LOSE MORE THAN ONE LIFE AT A TIME, EVEN IF YOU’RE A CAT. THAT LEAVES YOU FOUR, MAURICE.

...

“And I say take two, sir,” said Maurice urgently ...

ARE YOU SURE? said Death. AFTER ALL, HE IS A RAT.

“Yessir. That’s where it all gets complicated, sir.”

Although this discussion may seem to be merely humorous, predicated as it is on the superstition concerning cats having nine lives, Pratchett again (as at the beginning of the novel) indicates that things are more “complicated” than they might appear. Maurice is, after all, sacrificing a part of his existence for the life of another creature, something

which Death describes as VERY UN-CAT-LIKE of Maurice. This highlights what Oziewicz (2009, 91) calls the “challenge of mutual trust” in the novel. When Maurice asks whether there is a “Big Cat in the Sky”, Death’s answer (THERE ARE NO CAT GODS. THAT WOULD BE TOO MUCH LIKE ... WORK) indicates Pratchett’s (2001, 222) humorous undercutting of theological concerns. This ties in with the educated rodents’ discussion of the “Big Rat Underground”, amplifying Pratchett’s idea that living well (i.e. in harmony with other sentient beings) is much more important than worrying about dying and the afterlife. That Maurice’s “death” seems to be “just a word” is, of course, ironic, given Pratchett’s qualms about fairy-tale endings and magical thinking. But Maurice is quite obviously only given a reprieve here – he will neither live forever, nor “happily ever after”.

CONCLUSION

Near the end of *Maurice*, Pratchett (2001, 255) has Maurice tell the rats, who are busy negotiating a peace treaty with the humans, some home truths about humanity: “Do you know about wars? Very popular with humans. They fight other humans. Not hugely big on common bonding.” Throughout *Maurice* and *The Book Thief*, characters who are not human (Maurice and the rats, and the respective Deaths) comment on the more savage side of humanity, showing how humans can be inhumane towards both animals and other human beings. Yet, I would argue that neither book represents a counsel for despair; instead, their authors present stories which ultimately argue for a more inclusive, tolerant and kinder human race. By making use of metafictional strategies, Pratchett and Zusak show how stories can shape humanity’s ethical understanding of the complex situations created by a lifeworld that is not always favourable to humanity, but which humans nonetheless have to try to understand and make the best of while they are here. Otherwise, humans really are merely “rats in a barrel”, doomed to squabble through their little lives, destroy the environment and other living beings, and then face a meaningless death, which would hardly “prove [their] human existence [to be] worth it”.

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