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A Smart Bugger?

Andrew M. Butler

There was a moment at a convention panel when someone asked Terry Pratchett, standing in the doorway, what he thought about what a critic had said about his work. "I just write 'em," he replied. "It's up to you smart buggers to explain to me what they mean." I suspect this was a well-rehearsed ad lib. Let it be said that I aspire to be a smart bugger. And, clearly, Pratchett is one too.

Authors vary in their response to literary analysis. Some would rather not see it, some fight back, some engage. Pratchett largely demurred but my experience is that he had gained an *ad hoc* protective wall.

I was a Pratchett reader. I only met him twice, but I saw him on various panels at conventions. Being a Pratchett writer came later, because I was inspired to write things. After my last project, *An Unofficial Companion to the Novels of Terry Pratchett* (2007), I confess that I walked away. It had become work. But that is to get ahead of ourselves.

Back in about 1994, I went with Robert Edgar to a conference on Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque was relevant to Rob, but I think I just tagged along. Listening to the discussions, it occurred to me that they should be talking

about Pratchett and Death and 'Terry Pratchett and the Comedic *Bildungsroman*' was born.

I forget who suggested editing *Guilty of Literature*, but I'm sure it was my title.

Edward James, Farah Mendlesohn and I came up with chapter suggestions and we got most of the writers together to workshop materials. I ended up editing people senior than myself – Clute, for example – and I suspect made a career-long enemy in alienating one potential contributor. One review sticks in my mind: how could we write about Pratchett if only a couple of us were fiction writers?

The *Pocket Essential Terry Pratchett* (2001) and *Unofficial Companion* were both commissions. The former led to my being summoned by Terry Pratchett's agent to Gerrards Cross – he feared that I was writing a biography and noted that I had spoken to no one connected to Pratchett. Having read the manuscript, he said kind things and offered corrections. Some readers become defensive on Pratchett's behalf and the *Unofficial Companion* suffered from comparison to Stephen Briggs's indispensable work – but this was meant to cover both major characters and themes within the Discworld, but also influences on Pratchett and real world facts. Even the cover (carefully cleared with copyright holders) caused a kerfuffle. But it upset some readers that it wasn't all adulation on my part.

When I criticise popular culture, it's because I love it so much and want it to be better. Fantasy, comedy and bestsellers all deserve to be taken seriously – and Pratchett worked within all three categories and made statements that deserve

attention and should be remembered. One day I will go back. When I'm smart enough.