

A magnificent sign-off from Discworld



Terry Pratchett, top. *The Shepherd's Crown* is published by Doubleday, £20

Books
The Shepherd's Crown
 by Terry Pratchett
 ★★★★★
 By Kat Brown

One of the most endearing peculiarities of the Discworld, Terry Pratchett's bestselling fantasy series satirising the beliefs and behaviours of Earth, is that witches know the precise hour of their death. Some hold their funerals in advance so as not to miss out on a good party;

all tidy their homes beforehand, ready for the next occupant. Pratchett may not have known the hour of his death – which took place in March this year, when he was 66 – but, having suffered “the embitterance” of Alzheimer's since 2007, he knew it was coming. But there will be no future mastermind of the Discworld: his daughter, Rhianna, has rightfully said that nothing further should be done. Yet in this, his 41st Discworld novel, now his last, Pratchett gets his house in order beautifully. This isn't just a great Discworld book, it's extraordinary: a proper send-off for Pratchett and the series. It is shot through with an elegiac tone, a sense of it being his own “last scene”. Earlier themes and characters

return for a last hurrah, anchored by one of Pratchett's most popular recent characters, young witch Tiffany Aching. Now at the height of her powers, while still very much eligible for a Young Person's Railcard, Tiffany is forced to confront her enemies, the elves. Readers first encountered them 25 years ago in *Lords and Ladies*, and they have not improved over time.

Their reappearance calls for a convocation of witches, which calls for Magrat Garlick, now queen of the hilly kingdom of Lancre, and opera-singer Agnes Nitt, sadly AWOL since 1998's *Carpe Jugulum*. Pratchett's trademark footnotes are filled with references to past stories and new readers may struggle to keep up – but, after all, this is a finale, not an introduction.

Never one to avoid the elephant in the room, Pratchett confronts mortality early on with the death of one of his most cherished characters. Discworld regularly deals with death, but rarely with cornerstones of that universe. Lord Vetinari, Granny Weatherwax, Samuel Vimes: Pratchett's creations feel eternal. That any should die is unthinkable, and I will freely confess to sitting dumbly over my book, crying.

Pratchett has never been a sentimental writer, but there is an expansiveness here that is new and reflective. He introduces a fresh kind of magic, “calm-weaving” – an extreme form of likeability seen in a boy called Geoffrey, who wants to become a witch. Thus the idea of a girl becoming a wizard, first explored in 1987's *Equal Rites*, is echoed here with the masculine equivalent, bolstering Pratchett's principle that the most impressive magic of all is “headology”, or understanding the human psyche.

Having spent the last 30 years raising an amused eyebrow at the quirks of human nature, Pratchett uses his final novel to examine the power of humanity. Even his most ghastly creation, Lettice Earwig, proves to have something worthwhile underneath her pretensions. There is the potential for decency in all of us, he says. Touching on 2001's *Thief of Time* in which a seemingly inhuman creature develops a soul, an elf has a similar awakening here. Change is happening in Discworld: there is no place for elves and their mindless cruelty.

None of this is to say that Pratchett has gone soft. His trademark wisdom and seemingly bottomless knowledge remains sharp: “Alas for us, our dreams came true,” says one character – one wonders what a Discworld *X Factor* might have been like. As ever with this series, there is a delight in knowing you will spot another intriguing reference when you read it again. I noticed Monty Python, Alice in Wonderland, Neil Armstrong and Thatcher for starters, but who knows what I missed?

It is entirely Pratchettian to give the reader an opportunity to mourn fiction and reality at the same time. His death came too early, that disease unfair. The book ends with a moving afterword from his long-time assistant Rob Wilkins, which generously includes ideas that Pratchett had had for future books we will never read. But this last is a magnificent sign-off.

Arts



Kieran Hodgson's *Lance*, which traces his obsession with the Tour de France cyclist Lance Armstrong, has been a highlight at the Edinburgh Festival and is one of eight nominations for best act – the award's longest-ever shortlist

Sport and surrealism on a very long shortlist

Last year's Foster's Edinburgh Comedy Awards panel chairman Mark Monahan looks at this year's nominees

This year's shortlist for the Foster's Edinburgh Comedy Awards is an impressive but lumbering beast. The main list, for best stand-up act, turns out to be eight-strong – the longest in the awards' 35-year history – with seven acts up for best newcomer (a figure second only to 2011's eight).

The point is that the shorter the list, the more kudos a nomination has. As last year's panel chairman, I was frustrated to wind up with a main list of seven, as opposed to the usual and far tauter five. Eight feels like pushing it, and it devalues the award.

In fairness, there are some superb acts on a list that's a curious combination of uniformity (a full seven solo men) and eccentricity, and of dead-certs and complete surprises. There is also one glaring omission, more of which later.

Topping the former camp – for my money – are two stupendously original solo hours of character comedy.

Soothing Sounds for Baby sees Joseph Morpurgo give *Desert Island Discs* the trippiest reworking possible, using an arcane collection of vinyl as inspiration for a bizarre clutch of (re-)creations (try AA Milne: “Name of a battery, mind of a killer”), and holding an extraordinary faux “conversation” with *Discs* presenter Kirsty Young. *Lance*, by Yorkshireman Kieran Hodgson, sees the young comedian and Anthony Perkins lookalike retrace his youthful cycling obsession and hero Lance Armstrong's fall from grace, zipping between characters with remarkable agility in a

Joseph Morpurgo, right, is nominated for his bizarre recreation of *Desert Island Discs*



show that's both touching and truly hilarious.

Only a whisker less deserving is the even stranger *Spaghetti for Breakfast* by already-twice-nominated Australian Sam Simmons, in which he goes through his pet hates from “I've never finished a Chapstick” to the time he swallowed a moth. I'm also very glad to see the list graced by Nish Kumar's *Long Word...Long Word...Blah Blah Blah...I'm so Clever*, an unusually smart, slick and entertaining hour of socio-political scrutiny. And, although James Acaster's imperiously nerdy delivery is starting to grate a little these days, there's no denying that the already three-times-nominee's *Represent* is a very craftsmanlike set.

Also on the list are the three that have surprised all observers: Aussie storyteller Sarah Kendall's *A Day in October*, *Niche as F--* by British clown-turned-comedian Seymour Mace, and *Nautilus*, by New Zealand mime artist Trygve Wakenshaw.

As for the newcomer list, this ranges from the promising motormouth Adam Hess's *Salmon* and former Pappy's star Tom Parry's *Yellow T-shirt* to the superb Daphne. The latter are particularly welcome as being the only sketch troupe. (Also on the newcomers list are sets by Larry Dean, Sofie Hagen, The Story Beast and Tom Ballard.)

If the shortage of women is a pity, it is, in truth, indicative of a Fringe that has not been a strong one for female comedians.

I am disappointed by the omission of Scottish nutcase Richard Gadd, whose show-that-goes-wrong, *Waiting for Gadd*, is the wildest, most creative and most exhilaratingly unpredictable ride I've been on all month. Still, if Hodgson, Morpurgo, Simmons or Kumar win the main prize – and, fingers crossed, Gadd snaffles the Panel Prize for spirit of the Fringe – all will be forgiven.

The winners will be announced at 12.30pm on Saturday

Magical, moving premiere in the spirit of Mahler

Prom 54
BBSO/Gardner
 Royal Albert Hall and Radio 3
 ★★★★★
 By John Allison

Mahler's spirit hovered over the first half of this concert, without a note of his music being played. It was Mahler who initiated the tradition of symphonies of songs, something reinvented here for the 21st century in the premiere of Raymond Yiu's *Symphony*. A BBC Proms commission from the 42-year-old Hong Kong-born, London-based composer, this new work addresses in part the Aids crisis that the world has quietly forgotten about, and sets poetry by Walt Whitman, Constantine Cavafy, Thom Gunn and John Donne.

Perhaps the most strikingly original thing about Yiu's work is not that it is scored for countertenor and a large orchestra, but that the singer

extends to the conjuring up of a disco shuffle in the fourth movement, complete with amplified crooning from the singer. The BBC Symphony Orchestra responded with fluidity, guided with complete control by the conductor Edward Gardner. Together with Watts, he made the John Donne finale a

Warm tone and silvery flights of virtuosity: Emily Beynon

becomes protagonist. Yet just as with the recent casting of a countertenor as Oscar Wilde in an American opera about the gay hero, this seems to raise surely unintended questions of subliminal stereotyping. At least the countertenor Andrew Watts quickly laid such worries to rest, showing from the opening movement – where breathy syllables from the singer are picked up by shimmering percussion – that this music could have been written only for his voice type.

The second movement, a scurrying scherzo, is scored for orchestra alone, and features almost Mahlerian café music, which clears to reveal the reconfigured sounds of a Scarlatti sonata – a magical moment akin to the Schubert quote in Tippett's *Knot Garden*. Yiu's magpie exuberance

moving epilogue, with its repetitions of the word “everlasting” carried on consoling music.

Britten's most Mahlerian work, the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, had provided a suitably dark opening to the concert, but the other real highlight of the evening was the first-ever Proms outing for Nielsen's 1926 Flute Concerto. Characteristic of the composer's late period, it balances sardonic humour with a pastoral

character so quintessential to the flute, and the soloist Emily Beynon reflected both aspects as she mixed warm tone with silvery flights of virtuosity.

Gardner, soon to take up his new post with the Bergen Philharmonic, has already begun a cycle of Janáček recordings there, and he showed his mastery of the idiom in a taut and transparent performance of the composer's *Sinfonietta*, another work from 1926. It's a pity that Gardner never did Janáček operas in his decade at ENO.

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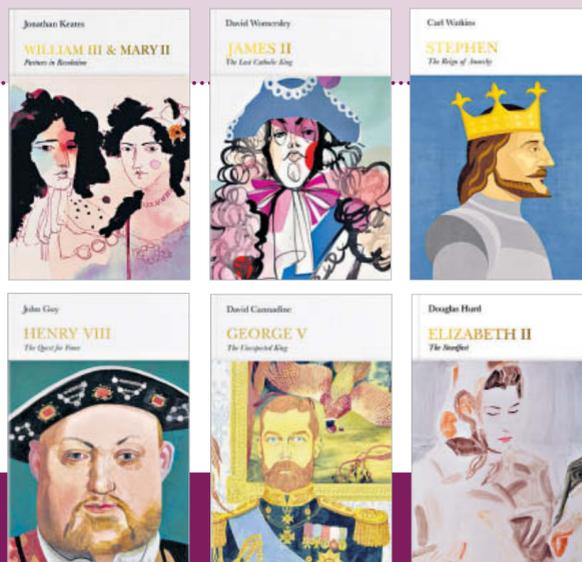
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