



A Friendly Face: Re-Negotiating Death in and through Fiction

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Abstract

Contemporary Western culture is marked by a paradoxical relationship with death: while images of death are ubiquitous across news and digital media, meaningful engagement with mortality, grief, and loss often remains limited. This article examines how contemporary fiction responds to this tension through increasingly sympathetic and recuperative literary personifications of Death. Drawing on theories of figuration, representation, and thanatology, it argues that depictions of Death as a fictional character function as cultural negotiations of mortality, reflecting and reshaping dominant attitudes towards death. Within a broader context of popular fiction, fantasy, comics and visual media, the article identifies a move away from the threatening Grim Reaper towards approachable, compassionate, and often humorous figures of Death. Central to this discussion and treated as an early, yet enduring representative is Terry Pratchett's Death of the Discworld, whose familiar skeletal appearance is humanised by his empathy, curiosity, humour, and care. The article proposes the concept of 'figuration through familiarity' to describe how contemporary authors such as Pratchett repurpose recognisable narrative traditions while subverting their fearful associations. By humanising Death without denying the inevitability of mortality, fictional narratives create imaginative spaces in which readers can engage more productively with grief, loss and the uncertainty surrounding death. Ultimately, the article argues that such figurations of death possess cultural and political significance: they challenge dominant discourses of denial and dread, offer alternative frameworks for engaging with mortality, and demonstrate fiction's capacity to make the unknowable more approachable through familiar narrative forms.

Keywords: Death, Contemporary Fiction, Terry Pratchett, Grim Reaper, Figuration.