



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.

Introduction

'I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary', the narrator in Markus Zusak's

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The Book Thief (2007, p. 4) declares confidently. They will be known by each of us, sooner or later, and are entirely recognisable. After all, they are Death. Yet, however familiar and unavoidable, death (and Death) remains a problem, particularly in Western societies. Thanks to technical advancements and media developments of the 20th and 21st century, it is now near impossible to escape images of death, loss and destruction, and their reality of irreversibility. Simultaneously unavoidable and unimaginable, death is still accompanied by uncertainty, dread and fear, and – as a topic – often avoided. Literature and art more generally offer, as is often the case, a place to turn to and try to make sense of it all. At the heart of this ‘double bind’ created ‘between the impossibility of narration or representation and its necessity’ sits contemporary fiction with its literary figurations of death, trying to reconcile them (Critchley, 1997, p. 161). While death personifications such as the Grim Reaper have revelled in the fear of the unknown for centuries, contemporary writing tries to do something else: it takes away the grim and fearful and offers an alternative.

As Jack Zipes explains, changes in storytelling mirror ‘struggles of human beings worldwide to adapt to their changing natural and social environments’ (Zipes, 2012, p. xi). This phenomenon is evident in contemporary writing, with fiction authors such as Terry Pratchett and his *Death of the Discworld* leading the way: as part of and in response to a complicated relationship with death, popular fiction gives rise to figurations that attempt to present other, arguably more productive options. An important notion of figuration comes into play here, namely that ‘there is no creation that is not distinction, separation, spacing before all else’ (Nancy, 2018, p. 157). As death cannot be seen or represented, any representation must therefore also show something else (Clement, 2016). Contemporary death figures then show a commentary on and engagement with a perceived dominant discourse (such as above double bind). In what I call ‘figuration through familiarity’, contemporary writing accesses a collective memory of dread and avoidance in the face of death, thereby highlighting the problem it poses. Repurposing and subverting the familiar, popular fiction both shapes and engages with the politics of representation and discourse of and around death. Pratchett’s *Death of the Discworld* is a particularly popular and enduring example of such figuration and the subversion and instrumentalization of the familiar. This Death is still unavoidable, still certain, still something to be grappled with, but he offers a smile and invites a conversation.

1. The Problem with Death

Rendering death inescapable, the digital age faces a paradoxical dilemma: in what Sigmund Freud (1918) already calls the ‘denial of death’ (p. 57), the indisputable reality of death, once ubiquitous and widely accepted, has lost some of its visibility in the modern Western world. However, developments in television and social media complicate this notion as some aspects of death ‘are always also public matters’ (Bronfen, 2000, p. xv). With death thus also, once more, inescapable and highly visible, there appears to be a hyper-visibility of death that nevertheless remains superficial, leaving a sense of pointless intrusion (Barker, 1998). A ‘serious consideration of mortality is excluded’ in the media, but ‘an extensive, yet distanced and artificial presentation of dying and dead individuals’ persists, Joachim Wittkowski et al. (2015, p. 454) observe. This perceived over-exposure of destruction and the dead body and the lack its denial and superficial hyper-visibility create are what both recent literary publications and academic research efforts attempt to address and fill.

This dilemma moves beyond questions of visibility. Death as a topic ‘goes hand in hand with the evolution of literature, both in oral and written practices, and including all genres and species’ (Dumitru-Lahaye, 2009, p. 661). Humanity’s need to portray death may be a way of negotiating its undeniable fact and inevitability, something otherwise difficult to communicate (Fitzsimmons, 2009). Marc Crépon (2013) emphasises the contradictory notion of death as a

universally unavoidable certainty and as individual, never truly shared: 'death is the only thing that belongs to me alone' (p. 28). Similarly, Jacques Derrida et al. (1984) highlight the impossibility of death since 'for the moment [it] has not taken place' and must remain the imperceptible, 'unanticipatable entirely-other' (p. 23). This Western view of death as individual, yet general, and as impossible to experience or verbalise plays into the above hyper-visibility and lack of productive engagement with death and loss, thereby calling for reparation and writing that can encourage and support this. Cristina Dumitru-Lahaye's (2009) notion of the 'testimonial function of literature' is useful here: while the writer cannot give true testimony to their own or another's death, 'writing about the death of others' can nevertheless help to '[master] the fears and anxiety related to the death of self' (p. 663).

More specifically, then, personifications of death serve a particular function: personified, death thus becomes 'concrete and visible', no longer 'shapeless and chaotically threatening' (Guthke, 1999, p. 10). There may even already be 'something reassuring about the embodiment of death' in general (Robson, 2019, p. 30). Ultimately, death can, of course, neither be actively experienced nor avoided indefinitely, and 'representations of death', as Bethan Michael-Fox and Renske Visser (2022) point out, have the potential to 'be formative' and offer 'a space for negotiating, making sense of, exploring, challenging, and learning different ideas about who dies, how they die, why they die and when they die' (p. 27). Similarly, Adriana Teodorescu and Michael Hviid Jacobsen (2020) argue that popular culture can generally offer 'possibilities to explore meanings of death and to discover resources for an authentic understanding' (p. 3). However, these meanings and figures are as unfixed as the attitudes and discourse whence they arise. By both embracing and subverting familiar motifs and narrative traditions such as the Grim Reaper or the Danse Macabre, contemporary figurations address the current problem of death and offer restorative alternatives, thereby embodying political power in the face of it. Figuration here functions both as a process (shaped by what it draws on and incorporates) and as a product (the resulting figure or literary character we can read), thus gaining a potential to be political and instrumentalised in Jacques Rancière's sense, who declares that 'there is politics [...] when the boundary separating the political from the social or the public from the domestic is put into question' (2011, p. 4). 'Popular culture', Keith Durkin (2009) confirms, 'both reflects and influences death-related attitudes' (p. 811). Any depiction or appearance of death as a literary character (henceforth referred to as 'Death' with a capital D) is therefore to be understood as deeply entangled with a cultural moment, mindset or attitude.

2. The Grim Reaper - and the Not-So-Grim Ones

Particularly in Western cultures, death is often 'morbid, grim, and frightening' (Clement, 2016, p. 4). In figures such as Freund Hein, Death in the Danse Macabre, or of course the Grim Reaper, it is thus historically represented 'through moving skeletons, ghosts, and specters [*sic*] or cloaked figures with scythes in hand' (Georgieva, 2016, p. 50). Regina Marchi (2022) also highlights how this attitude results in a recurring personification of death, while Phil Fitzsimmons (2009) specifies that this figure of the Grim Reaper, 'the dark, hooded, unknown, menacing being', is a 'visual metaphor represent[ing] the ultimate threat to human existence and that point of life beyond which there is no comprehensive understanding' (p. 360). Through this, Simon Bacon and Katarzyna Bronk-Bacon (2024) liken Death to monsters and thereby already further highlight the political potential of figuration and its role as both supporter and challenger of a dominant discourse: 'the figure of Death often represents that which causes society the most anxiety and which is most viewed as being an imminent threat to life' (p. 3).

Medieval Europe in particular depicted death as this 'dark, hooded, grisly figure' of the Grim Reaper (Kellehear, 2003, p. 446). A somewhat less frightening or gruesome Death does occasionally appear throughout Western history, but this image of a macabre, violent Death

seems to prevail (Tamm, 2003). However, given the observations of a conflict of denial and hyper-visibility of death outlined in section 1 as well as the increasing contemporary restructuring of grief concepts and death attitudes, we can yet more confidently assume a destabilised, complicated relationship with death in contemporary Western society. Resulting in a lack of tools or frameworks to engage with and rationalise death, loss and mortality, this gives rise to the need for something else, but not unfamiliar – a mindset and need manifest in contemporary re-workings of Death as a fictional character.

Entering the 20th century, death is given ‘a different face wrapped in old symbols’ (Wojtkowiak, 2009, p. 806). One of the most famous re-imaginings of the Grim Reaper figure appears in Ingmar Bergman’s film *The Seventh Seal* (1957): an ‘emotionless personification’ that appears ‘almost benign’ (Wojtkowiak, 2009, p. 806). Taking this further in the late 1990s is Brad Pitt’s appearance in *Meet Joe Black* (1998): as the handsome, charming and mysterious stranger Joe, Death here is generous, allowing an old man additional time for his goodbyes. While this may be representative of an age ‘increasingly obsessed with youth and beauty’, films of the 2010s mirror new fears of the early 21st century and thereby new death attitudes: following terror, political unrest and the threats of both nature and technology, they present Deaths that are ‘essentially faceless and can be recognised only by the chaos, or memento mori’ left behind (Bacon and Bronk-Bacon, 2024, pp. 4 and 10). In Philip Pullman’s *The Amber Spyglass* (2001), a similarly faceless Death is highly individual: every human has their own figure of death which accompanies them through life and steps into sight only at its end, waiting to kindly take them onwards (Pullman, 2001).

Death figures in cartoons and comics, meanwhile, have been moving into a distinctly humorous, sympathetic direction: Brian Rea (2019), illustrator of the ‘Modern Love’ column in the *New York Times*, recently published an illustrated journal kept by Death on his sabbatical. Online, millions follow not-so-Grim Reaper stories such as War and Peas’ webcomics of Death and his cat (Pich and Kunz, n.d.), Jenny Jinya’s (n.d.) touching short stories on the ‘Loving Reaper’, or Joscha Sauer’s (n.d.) German ‘NichtLustig’ comic panels in which Death is accompanied by a pink poodle. The astonishingly kind, thoughtful, approachable and often playful Death in Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* first appears in issue #8 of the series, ‘The Sound of Her Wings’, quickly gains momentum and popularity, and continues to appear in later issues and spin-offs, most of which are published together in the DC Comics collection *Death* (2014). Her internationally enduring popularity is once again highlighted by the emphasis put on her character in the recent Netflix adaptation of *The Sandman* (Mike Barker et al., 2022-2025). However, her potential as a fictional figure both deeply embedded in and shaping public discourse surrounding death was already emphasised by her appearance as the face of a 1993 AIDS awareness campaign titled ‘Death Talks About Life’ (Gaiman, 2007, pp. 311-317) which was first published by Vertigo comics and later distributed as a standalone pamphlet.

James Robertson’s collection of short fiction *365 stories* (2014), and Aidan O’Rourke’s musical responses, which were eventually released together online – for free, one pair a day, every day throughout 2020, a year marked by death and uncertainty for much of the world (see Robertson and O’Rourke, n.d.), present a contemplative, often uneasy Death: Robertson retells the story ‘Appointment in Samarra’, wherein Death bumps into a merchant’s servant in Baghdad who, mistaking Death’s expression as menacing, flees in shock; Death, it turns out, was surprised to see the man there, knowing they had an appointment later that night in Samarra (p. 12). The story, which some have traced back to the Babylonian Talmud, is also retold in the BBC’s popular mini-series *Sherlock*, directed by Rachel Talalay (2017); revived in John O’Hara’s 1934 book *Appointment in Samarra*; or traced through history in Sub-Sub-Librarian’s blog post ‘The history of the epigraph from Appointment in Samarra’ (2022). However, Robertson’s active re-working of the character Death in the tale is particularly

noteworthy: The encounter with the frightened servant gives Death pause, he is ‘not entirely at ease’ and feels the need to ‘practi[se] expressions’, thinking that nobody ‘could easily mistake a look of surprise for one of malevolence’ (p. 12). In other stories, Robertson’s Death is embarrassed, drinking in frustration, burnt out, or saddened and unsettled by his duty (see e.g. pp. 75, 175, 328). This Death is suddenly sympathetic, relatable even, and decidedly more human than one might expect – qualities which make Robertson’s Death striking and which he shares with other contemporary figures of death in popular fiction, most notably perhaps Pratchett’s Death, who stands in as a particularly persistent representative of this phenomenon.

3. Figuration through Familiarity

Dumitru-Lahaye reads such iterations of Death as a response to our contemporary ‘difficulty accepting tragic representations’ (2009, p. 665). I consider them to be both a symptom and in conversation with a recent need for friendlier faces in particular: ultimately, death cannot be tricked or controlled, and recuperative figurations step in to facilitate an engagement with this fact. This, in turn, warrants the question of how this need is met by these more positive, hopeful, approachable or recuperative figures of Death in contemporary fiction – and what it is that makes them appear so in the first place. In a process of ‘figuration through familiarity’, writers such as Rea, Robertson, Gaiman or, of course, Pratchett draw on shared narrative traditions such as the Grim Reaper, the Danse Macabre, folkloric figures, and cultural attitudes towards death, grief and nature, thereby repurposing and subverting elements that work together to create, in the form of their distinct figurations, active literary devices with the political potential and power to challenge and shape contemporary death discourse, to engage with the unrepresentable and inexpressible, and our anxiety around it.

In a simple definition, figuration is similar to personification as the ‘transmutation of ideas into images’ whereby an ungraspable ‘system of beliefs and ideas is rendered palpable’ (Shapiro, 1993, n.p.). Figures, in Leila Dawney’s sense (2020), ‘shape our world and understandings, providing a means through which power is given form and made material and meaningful. They provide us with images upon which to hang cultural myths’ (p. 1104). In contemporary fictional figurations of death, these senses of understanding and power are not singular: Firstly, figurations – as the image and reworking of a familiar image or trope – highlight and engage with dominant and thus powerful understandings, myths or frameworks. Secondly, they comment on and subvert these, providing alternatives and thereby becoming powerful and capable of shaping and offering an arguably recuperative understanding or engagement themselves. Within this notion of reworking in order to comment, Paweł Wojtas’s (2021) discussion of repetition alongside Jacques Derrida’s notion of the trace is useful: ‘the repetition of the original assumes the role of a supplement’ (p. 714). The supplement, in turn, ‘adds only to replace’, both completing a sign and supplanting what is supplied (Derrida, 1997, p. 145). Wojtas (2021) adds to this:

[E]very sign includes a trace of other signs from which it differentiates itself. The trace, however, is not present in the sign, but rather implies the possibility of presence [...] Trace is a repetition that by existing by virtue of its absence cannot claim identity without a difference. Nor does it allow for elements to differ from themselves totally as they already contain in themselves the traces of sameness that potentially reside in that which is repeated or reproduced. (p. 715)

This ties the alternative which contemporary figurations of death more generally, and Pratchett’s specifically, seem to offer to the presumed source material they draw on; the act of figuration to that of repurposing, and the recuperative to a figuration through familiarity.

The instrumentalised power of figuration, then, its ‘political stakes’ as Philippe Lacoue-

Labarthe (1994, p. xxii) puts it, already partly originate in the narrative traditions that inform it. In pointing towards, yet repurposing or subverting traditional representations of Death, contemporary figurations appear humanised or otherwise approachable, rather than purely frightening, thereby achieving a certain effect of recognisability as well as positive connotations. This invites a more active, meaningful engagement with death and loss, as is necessary within the context from which they appear and which they shape. This way, the present figurations - Pratchett's as much as the ones traced alongside his – further confirm another important aspect of figuration highlighted by Claudia Castañeda (2002): they are figurations of 'an entity in the making' playing 'a unique and constitutive role'; that which is figured is not fixed, it 'has the capacity for transformation' (pp. 1-2). They emerge from, exist in and shape the contemporary and, specifically, its death attitude, setting up an attunement to a cultural moment. As such, these figurations of death draw on material Julie Sanders (2016) considers to be dependent on a 'communality of shared understanding and access', material which is 'handed down [...] through the generations', adapted and repurposed, and thus able to 'participate in a very active way in a shared community of knowledge' (p. 57). Those story elements of familiarity that have, in stories, 'slipped across frontiers of culture and language as freely as birds in the air', are once more re-worked to aid in personal and cultural reparation and productive engagement in the ultimate moment of uncertainty (Warner, 2014, p. xvii). As Patrick Ness's (2001) monster explains to a boy grappling with the reality of death and loss, '*Stories are wild creatures [...] When you let them loose, who knows what havoc they might wreak?*' (p. 61).

4. (De-)Familiarising Death: Caring Death of the Discworld

For a utilisation or instrumentalization of the familiar, I assume a common narrative tradition, albeit perhaps not always recognisable in its entirety. Stuart Hall's (1997) idea of representation and 'cultural codes', particularly in relation to visual images, is interesting here; he states that '[m]eaning is a dialogue – always only partially understood, always an unequal exchange' (p. 4). Terry Pratchett's *Death of the Discworld* is a striking and strikingly popular example of such repurposing with political potential, one that emphasises the undeniability and universality of the fact of death, as well as its impossibility. Here, the visual and verbal are always working together, relying on a familiar image. Pratchett responds to what Michael-Fox and Visser later call 'a clear appetite for personifications of death that challenge normative and dominant ones' and pave the way for 'more dynamic, politically engaged, socially just and powerful' figurations of death, by actively building on and subverting the familiar (Michael-Fox & Visser, 2022, p. 221).

Pratchett's Death's connectedness to the Grim Reaper figure is clear, yet so is his re-working thereof: he builds a different, but in many ways recognisable world; builds his own, but recognisable Death. Alternative figuration through familiarity occurs here through an engagement with and subversion of reader and character expectations, allowing the figuration to take effect on an intra- and extradiegetic level. In his most striking features and aspects, Pratchett's Death is far from unique or original. On the contrary, unlike other elements in the Discworld universe, we are inherently familiar with Pratchett's Death. As a character, he is constantly recognisable within the Discworld, both to other characters and the reader; he is a cliché and is rather conscious of that, if not even occasionally embarrassed. At his apprentice Mort and his adoptive daughter Ysabell's wedding, the Master of Ceremonies announces Death's arrival:

'The Stealer of Souls,' he said in the faraway voice of one whose ears aren't hearing what his mouth is saying, 'Defeater of Empires, Swallower of Oceans, Thief of Years, The Ultimate Reality, Harvester of Mankind, the-'

ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT. I CAN SEE MYSELF IN. (Pratchett, 1987, p. 312)

Death is very open about who he is and what he does. He usually expects people to simply not allow themselves to fully process what they are seeing when they encounter him, especially outside of his duty. Through a generally familiar and in some sense stereotypical figuration, Death seems to be established as both universal and impossible, a valid occurrence and generally expected, yet unrelatable. As already implied in section 3, humour is a crucial cornerstone of figuration through familiarity in many contemporary figurations of death, but Pratchett's in particular. Freud's (1990) notion of humour as a sort of safety valve in the face of difficulty or taboo, alongside Simon Critchley's (2002, pp. 62-65) discussion of humour as 'the basic strategy of defamiliarization' wherein 'the unexpected is evoked, familiar subjects are situated in unfamiliar, even shocking contexts in order to make the audience or readership conscious of their own cultural assumptions', allows for a humorous Death within figuration through familiarity, given the impossibility of death as the ultimate abstraction, and the simultaneous presence of the familiar and the unexpected (or subversion of the familiar) in Pratchett's Death. Pratchett suggests that meaning-making occurs in a 'space opened up by the interplay between humor and fantasy [where] readers can probe their mental patterns for mistakes and try out new ones' (Haberkorn, 2014, p. 160). In *Mort* (Pratchett, 1987), Death's dramatic first appearance is 'rather spoilt by a patch of ice': he slips and exclaims, 'OH, BUGGER' (p. 22). This astonishingly human moment is both comic and unexpected, inviting readers to reconsider familiar ideas about death through humour and (de-)familiarisation.

On the Disc, Death presents himself as 'a very tall human skeleton, every bone pleasantly polished, with remote but piercing points of blue light in his eye sockets', he wears 'a hooded robe woven of absolute darkness' and carries a scythe, or a sword if the occasion calls for it; his voice is deep and resonant, possibly like 'many things of a funereal nature, such as the clang of the leaden doors of a crypt when slammed deep underground', although nothing ever truly compares (Pratchett, 1987, p. 454). Again, these are things with which readers are, maybe not exactly at ease, but familiar. And yet, something about Pratchett's Death is different, and our disconcertion may resemble granddaughter Susan's feelings upon reading the Hogfather's developing biography: 'But none of this is right! Everyone knows he's a jolly old fat man who hands out presents to kids!' (Pratchett, 1997, p. 155). This 'mis-mapping', as Minwen Huang (2018) calls it, occurs because Susan's understanding of the Hogfather is at odds with his biography, and is 'the result of a long evolution' and a 'necessary transformation' (p. 185). Susan's companion explains: 'Even gods have to move with the times [...] He was probably quite different thousands of years ago [...] No one wore stockings, for one thing' (Pratchett, 1997, p. 155). Pratchett's Death may cause a similar sense of defamiliarization: the move away from a more traditional or familiar Grim Reaper figure is, at times, subtle, then almost startling in the face of numerous persisting similarities. Pratchett and Simpson explain that Death chooses his own appearance, taking inspiration from the Middle Ages onwards, but occasionally accommodating shifts in the general death attitude (Pratchett & Simpson, 2009).

Pratchett thus figures both around and away from the Grim Reaper, and together with a presumed power of belief within the story as an acknowledgment of the figure's relation to death attitudes and expectations. One of Susan's students reports an encounter with Death during class; in that moment, the child had no reason to expect or fear Death and thus describes him as follows:

A man with all bones came to talk to us he was not scarey at all, he had a big white hors. We pated the hors. He had a sighyve. He told us interesting things and to be careful when crosing the road. (Pratchett, 2002, p. 89)

As Erica Neely (2014) explains, on the Discworld 'belief predates the object' (p. 233). Belief,

of course did not create death, which is simply a ‘prolonged absence of life’, but it did create Death, who ‘evolved, as it were, along with life’: ‘He was Death long before humans ever considered him; they only added the shape and all the scythe and robe business to a personality that was already millions of years old’ (Neely, 2014, p. 233). Death simply is and always has been, it is universal and, ultimately, entirely individual. However, while called into *a* being by the existence of life, and shaped – in his appearance and characteristics- by human belief, Death’s malleability eventually has its limits as Death discovers that ‘most people have no clear expectations at all, probably because in their hearts they never really believe they will die’ and stops politely catering to everyone’s specific ideas (Pratchett & Simpson, 2009, p. 455). This, then, gives rise to Pratchett’s particular Death: The familiar imagistic traditions of the Grim Reaper are partially reproduced, but ultimately subverted, supplemented or replaced to act as a placeholder and fill the space identified as empty, lacking or insufficient by what is a more contemporary need for something more comforting and recuperative. The idea of an all-seeing Death prevails, but this Death appears remarkably humanised - and thus suddenly familiar and approachable - in multiple ways.

4.1. Humanising Death

In some of ‘his more introspective moments’, Pratchett’s Death begins to wonder: ‘WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT? SERIOUSLY? WHEN YOU GET RIGHT DOWN TO IT?’ (Pratchett, 1995, p. 17). These moments of contemplation and occasional doubt play an important part in the humanising of Death, making him appear graspable, approachable, even likeable, and slightly less Other. His perception of his duty, his empathy, and his willingness to understand, care for and even emulate the humans he meets seem at odds with his bony and deceptively grim demeanour.

4.1.1. Death develops a Personality

Even though ‘GETTING ENTANGLED WITH HUMANS CLOUDS THE THINKING’, Death wants to learn how to behave more human-like (Pratchett, 1995, pp- 152-153). Despite Ysabell’s conviction that he ‘never feels anything’ and merely thinks emotions, Death does exhibit signs of human-like feeling on numerous occasions – or at least attempts to understand the concept (Pratchett, 1987, p. 146). Struggling for words – again a distinctly humanising experience –, Death must ask for help in naming unfamiliar feelings such as sadness or happiness. The latter is initially reserved for kittens, which he lures in with a strategically placed bowl of milk: ‘Occasionally Death would pause in his work and scratch one of them behind the ears. “Happiness,” he said, and puzzled at the sound of his own voice’ (Pratchett, 1987, p. 229). A particularly important change here is that in Death’s speech: Further emphasising the impossibility of death, Pratchett’s Death does not usually seem to speak out loud; rather, his speech just arrives in people’s heads, as Mort puts it (Pratchett, 1987, p. 22). This is formally implied in the typeset by Death’s utterances being in small caps and lacking quotation marks. Here, however, as Death names happiness, he no longer speaks in capitals and seems to be producing an actual sound – much like the humans within the Pratchett’s books. Feeling and recognition of emotion are thus highlighted as human traits which Death can only- but tries to- experiment with.

In a similarly flawed attempt at homeliness or human-like (and thus familiar, yet subverted) behaviour, Death struggled when building his house and its surroundings: everything had turned out rather too big, he had ‘forgotten to make the outside bigger than the inside’, and it took him a while to realise ‘the role people seemed to think that colour 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’ (Pratchett, 1995, p. 16). A reader can recognise Death’s attempt to approximate human behaviour and once again, this is relatable,

almost endearing. Death himself explains such efforts through his shape:

[WE] WHO ARE NOT HUMAN AND YET PART OF HUMANITY'S UNIVERSE – WAR AND DESTINY AND PESTILENCE AND THE REST OF US – WE ARE ENVISAGED AS HUMAN BY HUMANS AND THUS, IN VARIOUS FASHIONS, WE TAKE ON SOME ASPECTS OF HUMANITY. IT CAN BE NO OTHER WAY. EVEN THE VERY BODY SHAPE FORCES UPON OUR MINDS A CERTAIN WAY OF OBSERVING THE UNIVERSE. WE PICK UP HUMAN TRAITS... CURIOSITY, ANGER, RELENTLESSNESS... (Pratchett, 2002, p. 110)

Death, then, tries to behave like or, at least, learn about humans due to his humanoid shape, given to him by humans. While this reasoning appears somewhat circular, it applies on an extra-diegetic level: any temptation to attribute this behaviour (or, for example, the fact that he actively pieces together a family) to an attempt to battle the loneliness and sense of Otherness Pratchett's Death is highly aware of just further shows that we are inclined to sympathise with him and view him as an altogether likeable character deserving of our compassion – as well as a humanised figure. Death ends up with a chosen or found family, with Susan and the Death of Rats etc., but he remains an outsider, not fully aware of what a family really is at its core. As he declares himself: 'DEAR ME. I STILL HAVE A LOT TO LEARN ABOUT HUMANS' (Pratchett, 1997, p. 111).

4.1.2. Death's Duty

Arguably further connecting Death to a contemporary human reader is the repeated emphasis on his duty – the collection and accompaniment of the deceased – as work that simply must be done. This occasionally causes a sense of avoidance of accountability, reminiscent of the 'it's a job' mentality often necessarily prevalent in a capitalist society. It is, in part, through this matter-of-fact acceptance of his duty – and his struggle with it – that this Death can add a level of care, which allows him to achieve a recuperative function.

Pratchett's Death occasionally questions his position, has regrets or wants a holiday. When he replaces the Hogfather, Death realises how nice it is 'TO DO A JOB WHERE PEOPLE LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING YOU' (Pratchett, 1997, pp. 266-267). The disappearance of Death is a popular theme in contemporary stories, but the consequences are always problematic, further highlighting an ambivalent relationship with death (see e.g. Gaiman, 2014; Pratchett, 1987; Saramago, 2008; Bujor, 2002). In Pratchett, Death's exile as Bill Door causes a multitude of Deaths to come into existence for each being, proving further the necessity of death - and Death- to the course of nature. However, Death takes great care to emphasise that he is never what kills people: 'I? KILL? said Death, obviously offended. CERTAINLY NOT. PEOPLE GET KILLED, BUT THAT'S THEIR BUSINESS. I JUST TAKE OVER FROM THEN ON' (Pratchett, 1987, p. 26).

This framing of Death and his duty as an occupation, something that can be learned, carried out and quit, does two things: firstly, it further places the ungraspable concept of death within a relatable context of a Western workforce - there can be job satisfaction, there are rules, there is much bureaucracy surrounding Death's tasks, but there are also strikes or bad reviews. Secondly, it allows for a suitably distanced, yet nevertheless personified conceptualisation of death that fulfils the purpose of figuration in general and allows for Pratchett's commentary and a highlighting of the familiar in particular. However universal, Death's experience of and with humans is always unique – as is their experience of him. As Bill Door, Death is, significantly, a farm aid and thus in the business of creating life but also showing the romanticisation of farm life as the good old days, a simpler life and a return to the roots. Bill Door spends time among the living as one of their own, learning their habits and differences. His findings feed into his duty: Death insists on cutting 'ONE BLADE AT A TIME. ONE TIME, ONE

BLADE' (Pratchett, 1992, p. 91). The acknowledgement of individual life is important to him; it is all there is to rely on:

THERE IS NO GOOD ORDER EXCEPT THAT WHICH WE CREATE [...] THERE IS NO HOPE BUT US. THERE IS NO MERCY BUT US. THERE IS NO JUSTICE. THERE IS JUST US [...] WHAT CAN THE HARVEST HOPE FOR, IF NOT FOR THE CARE OF THE REAPER MAN? (Pratchett, 1992, p. 264)

Death cares for, respects and values every being he comes for. With this, Pratchett's figuration manages to counteract not only the perceived denial of death, but also the lack of personal engagement with it that results from its hyper-visibility.

5. Belief Revisited

The power of belief has been threading through this analysis thus far, emphasising its creative, sustaining and destructive abilities within the Discworld. Aside from Death and the experience of death, it gives shape to figures such as the Tooth Fairy, the Hogfather or indeed monsters lurking under the bed. Governess Susan thus faces a challenge: 'The children refused to disbelieve in the monsters because, frankly, they knew damn well the things were there. But she'd found that they could, very firmly, also believe in the poker' which Susan uses to fight them (Pratchett, 1997, pp. 37-38). Pratchett's Death considers belief in figures such as the Hogfather to be essential for humans. Susan initially interprets this claim as a human need for fantasies to be able to cope with life and while this is important for my reading of these figurations, Death's point goes beyond that: He believes that 'HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN'; they have to first believe in such fantastical creatures in order to later be able to believe the big lies of 'JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING' (Pratchett, 1992, p. 442). The stories we tell ourselves matter. Highlighting the necessity of recognising 'the role of our will in the shaping of reality', Jennifer Fellows argues that 'fictions are not simply falsehoods: they are falsehoods with the power to alter reality' (Fellows, 2014, p. 217). Fictional figurations such as Pratchett's Death, then, are visible, graspable and approachable – and thus maybe death can be, too. After all, the 'fat man in a red coat is easier to believe in than an abstraction such as justice, which you can't even visualise, let alone see' (Keeping, 2014, p. 261).

Death sits somewhere in between: without any assumption made about belief or potentially religious faith, Death and death are a given, an undeniable fact. Yet, Pratchett and others offer a slightly more graspable alternative for what must always be a potentially overwhelming not-knowing – an alternative, yet oddly familiar figuration which we can consider, confront and engage with. Contemporary writers acknowledge not only our complicated, seemingly ambivalent relationship with death, but also the gap this leaves, the lack of framework or tools to engage with and make sense of our own mortality, loss and the death of others. In embracing but also subverting the familiar figures that have come before, popular fiction addresses this lack and tries to offer recuperative alternatives, in themselves both a symptom of and in conversation with this problem of death. This is what makes these figurations necessarily powerful and potentially political: the familiar, but somehow friendlier face as a form of protest, of critique, of revolt against the sense of hopeless, helpless uncertainty in the face of the inevitable, yet ultimately unknowable. Living, navigating, and all too often battling with death in the contemporary, we can choose to arm ourselves with Susan's poker – or rather, with Pratchett's Death. He looks beyond empty representation and at the individual, he can be kind and caring regardless of someone's belief, expectation or attitude, yet never denies the inevitable. While we cannot know death, Death, at least, will have known us. If only the once.

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