

# AN INTERVIEW WITH SIR TERRY Pratchett

Neil Gaiman

Where did the idea for Snuff originate?

Terry Pratchett

I haven't a clue, but I think I started out by considering the character of Sir Samuel Vimes, as he now is, and since I find his inner monologue interesting I decided to use the old and well tried plot device of sending a policeman on holiday somewhere he can relax, because we all know the way this one is supposed to go. And then I realised that moving Vimes out of his city element and away from his comfort zone was going to be a sheer treat to write.

**The Watch fascinate me. You get to do hardboiled police procedurals while still writing funny smart books set in a fantastic world.**

On a point of order, Mister Gaiman, the world in which Sam Vimes finds himself is hardly fantastic. Okay, there are goblins, but the overall ambience is that of the shires of Middle England. It's all about the commonality of humankind. Shove Sam Vimes into a situation that has gone toxic and away he goes, as realistic as any other policeman and thinking in the very same ways and being Sam Vimes, questioning his motives and procedures all the way through.



**Do you remember the initial inspiration for Sam Vimes? How do the real police react to him and to the Watch?**

I have three policeman's helmets lined up in my study, gifts from policemen who are fans of Sam Vimes. I remember when I was touring, there would occasionally be the copper turning up in the book shop; they would never come through the front door, but via the staff entrance, and with a nod to the manager, after the queue had finished. And what they would say to me was so predictable that I could have almost said it for them. They would say things like, "Oh, yes, [scathing laugh] we certainly have a Nobby Nobbs alright, and every nick has got a Sergeant Colon," although I must report that the policeman who told me that was quite clearly a Sergeant Colon in his own right. I know loads of coppers and dealt with them a lot when I was a journalist—coppers are easy to write for; they tend to run on rails.

**Did you really say in a previous interview that you'd like to be like Sam Vimes? Why?**

I don't think I actually said that, but you know how it is and 'how it is' changes as you get older. The author can always delve into his own personality and find aspects of himself with which he can dress his characters. If you pushed me I would say that

ever since I stood up and talked about my Alzheimer's I have been a public figure; I visited Downing Street twice, wrote angry letters to the Times, got into debates in the House of Commons, and generally became a geezer to the extent that I sit here sometimes bewildered and think to myself, "Actually, your job is to sit here writing another book. Changing the world is for other people..." and then I come back to myself with, "No it isn't!" And so, bearing in mind that these days, people call a kid from the council houses "Sir" allows me to create a mindset for Vimes.

**When you put your Vimes-writing head on, is there a difference in the way you view the world to, say, when you're in your Rincewind-writing head, or your Granny Weatherwax-writing head?**

Oh, yes, surely you know how it is. Once you have your character sitting right there in your head, all you really need to do is wind them up, put them down, and simply write down what they do, say, or think. It really is like that. It verges on the weird; you know you are doing the thinking, but the thinking is being driven by the Sam Vimes module. There is also a fully functioning Tiffany Aching module, too, which is rather strange.

**You've written enough books now that you must have some odd favourites—the ones that other people might not understand why you like them so much. Can you pick favourites? Are there any books of yours you'd like to point people to that they might otherwise miss?**

That's a good question, but hard to answer. I really did enjoy writing Monstrous Regiment, which in a way became very close to becoming mainstream. With minimal changes it could have been set in the Peninsular Wars in the real world. I know you and you know me and we both know that while sometimes you do some research, at the same time you automatically do some research without knowing what you are researching; simply reading books on any subject that takes your fancy, and it is amazing how all those little things you read in all those second-hand books suddenly turn up and hand you a plot. As a matter of fact I did a lot of interesting work for Monstrous Regiment in lesbian book shops.

**Are there any Discworld characters you expected to return to, but haven't yet?**

Somewhere in the back of my mind there is a plot where the hero is Evil Harry Dread, not exactly cut out to be a contemporary of Sauron...but saying that has made me think that I should polish that one up again.

**On a piece about writing in the New York Times, Carl Hiaasen (a writer you started me reading on the Good Omens tour), wrote, "Every writer scrounges for inspiration in different places, and there's no shame in raiding the headlines. It's necessary, in fact, when attempting contemporary satire. Sharp-edged humor relies on topical reference points...Unfortunately for novelists, real life is getting way too funny and far-fetched." Does the Discworld as a setting allow you to escape from that? Or is it a tool that lets you raid the headlines in ways people might not expect?**

I think that's the commonality of humankind again. I hope that everyone in Discworld is a recognisable and understandable character and so sometimes I can present them with modern

and contemporary problems, such as Mustrum Ridcully getting his head around homosexuality. In truth, I never have to go looking for this stuff; I turn to find it smacking me in the face. I was very pleased when Making Money came out just before the banking crisis and everyone said I had predicted it. It was hardly difficult.

**What are the biggest changes you've seen in the last thirty years in the way that the genres you've worked in—primarily humour, science fiction, and fantasy—are perceived and received by the world? Or has anything really changed?**

This is a debateable one. My perception is that these days, fantasy and science fiction are effectively mainstream. You, Neil, must surely see the same thing. When I first started touring, the people that you met were, for those of us with the right radar, typically fans. These days, my Discworld books and most of my other stuff seem to be out there for what I might call 'the general reading public'. Certainly, when we were in Australia earlier this year, Rob and I seemed to float on the wings of fandom. Went into a shop to buy a pair of RM Williams boots, the saleslady is a fan. Went into David Jones in Sydney to buy a pair of Calvin Kleins and the first woman we met is a fan who became our personal shopper for the morning. And then so was the man on the till, and so it went on. People at airline check-in desks were fans, and on one flight, halfway through lunch, a very nice bottle of wine was put down in front of me and the attendant said, "The captain's wife is your biggest fan." However, there's still an assumption that it's all a bit nerdy; the died-in-the-wool perception of the readers of my books is that they are still that fourteen-year-old boy called Kevin. But you know, that boy has grown up and is still reading, and so are his kids.

**Have you discovered any wonderful Victorian Reference Books recently?**

I rather believe that I have very nearly all of them, and it's strange you should ask because in spare moments before the finishing of The Long Earth I am working on an early Victorian book, just to use up all of that stuff that you and I picked up in those days when we trawled the bookshops off the Tottenham Court Road in London. I still pick up that stuff even. Did I not tell you that in Hay-on-Wye I picked up a collection of very large books with the series title 'London Then And Now' and realised that the 'now' was in fact 1880? There was even a lovely woodcut of Primrose Hill when it had primroses on it. It really is wonderful stuff. Small things that people might not notice but to me are like a fly to a rising trout.

**How has the Discworld changed over the years?**

I suppose the simple answer is that there is still humour, but the gags are no longer set up; they are derived from characters' personalities and situations. These days the humour seems to arrive of its own accord.

**How has writing the Discworld novels changed how you see the world?**

I think it more true that getting older changes how you see the world. There is stuff in Snuff, for example, that I couldn't have written at twenty-five. Although I had written things before Discworld, I really leaned writing, on the job as it were, on Discworld. I think that the books are, if not serious, dealing with more serious subjects. These days it's not just for laughs. My world view had changed; sometimes I feel that the world is made up of sensible

people who know that plot and bloody idiots who don't. Of course, all Discworld fans know the plot by heart!

**How has writing the Discworld novels changed how the world sees you?**

Has it? My agent pointed out one day that I had been quoted by a columnist in some American newspaper, and he noted with some glee that they simply identified me by name without reminding people who I was, apparently in the clear expectation that their readers would know who I am. I have quite a large number of honorary doctorates; I am a professor of English at Trinity College Dublin and a fellow of King's College London, on top of all the other stuff, including the knighthood. However, when it gets to the sub-editors I am always going to be that writer of wacky fantasy, though I have to say that dismissiveness is getting rarer and rarer.

**Are you respectable?**

Is this a trick question? If so, then I shall say yes. Generally speaking I try to obey the law, pay my taxes (of which there are an enormous lot), give to charity, and write letters to the Times that they print. It's a weird term, respectable; isn't 'respek' what every street kid wants and might possibly expect at the point of a knife? I certainly get involved with things and shortly after finishing this interview will be annoying my local MP. It's fun. Discworld and the Alzheimer's together have given me a platform.