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Subverting Expectations of Stories and Environments in Terry Pratchett's *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents*

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Abstract— *In The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents, Terry Pratchett subverts expectations about story, fantasy, and the environment. The novel features intricate stories within stories. An overarching narrative framework comes from a gentle parody of Victorian children's literature. Due to magical pollution in a city, rats and one cat have become fully sentient. The rats are guided by a children's book which, written in a style parodying the talking animal genre, serves as the rats' cultural lodestone and guide for navigating human society. The rats struggle to reconcile the book's idyllic world of mostly happy interactions between animals and humans with their experiences. Not content with parodying somewhat cloying children's literature, Pratchett also dissects the idea of story, including fairy tales. Throughout, the environment and interactions with it are important motifs. The sentient animals hail from the largest city in the world and journey through the countryside grifting the rustic population. The juxtaposition of city and country shows both environments in nuanced lights. The rats' goal of finding a desert island paradise reflects the desire for nature shown in Victorian Era reform movements. This goal is subverted showing the ironic superficiality of perceptions of nature while encouraging appreciation for whatever environments in which people find themselves.*

Keywords— ***environment, fantasy, nature of story, young adult literature***

I. INTRODUCTION

The late British fantasy author Terry Pratchett was known for writing fantasy that satirized the conventions of the genre as well as modern life. Although many of his books were popular with all ages, relatively late in his career he began writing novels specifically for children and young adults. Pratchett wrote stand-alone fantasy novels as well, but he remains best known for his Discworld series. The Discworld is a flat circular world. It is carried through space on the back of four elephants who themselves are perched on a giant world turtle, Great A'Tuin, that swims through the universe. Initial Discworld books (*The Colour of Magic* and *The Light Fantastic*) were mostly straight parodies of the epic fantasy genre. Quickly, though, Pratchett began to use his writing to skewer not only genre conventions, but also social issues as well as other media. Early works included riffs on rock and roll (*Soul Music*), Hollywood (*Moving Pictures*), and ancient history (*Pyramids*). However, issues of race, class, and gender quickly became important issues in works like *Jingo* and *Feet of Clay.*

In his first Discworld novel written for young audiences, Pratchett parodies the fairy tale "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." However, social satire remained a part of Pratchett's works for children just as they remained in his adult works. *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* [1] is largely told from the view of the titular Maurice. Maurice is not a piper or a human. Rather, he is a sentient cat. He comes from the most important city on the Discworld, Ankh-Morpork, which can be thought of as a

fantasy cross of London and New York. The metropolis is dominated by, well, by smell and sound probably, but in terms of buildings and culture, by Unseen University (UU) which is the world's premier university for training wizards. Like any good research institution, UU has waste products from its myriad experiments. Here, though, those experiments are magical, and the waste material does not suffer from radioactivity but from an excess of magic. Creatures who grow up around UU often find themselves suffering from side effects of this magical pollution. This setting allows Pratchett to explore issues of narratives and environments. In so doing, he subverts traditional expectations of what a fantasy setting should be and the very nature of story itself.

Maurice has been a victim of the excess magic. He became sentient after living around UU. So, too, did a group of local rats who became sentient after eating magical waste. Maurice devised a plan. He would use the rats to make a fortune by running a con game across the Discworld. He and the rats would come to a town. The rats would infest the town, and the town, of course, would then be in need of a pied piper to rid them of their rodent plague. Maurice recruited a local orphan who loved music to serve in that role. As a result, Maurice and his merry band have traveled the Discworld. The pied piper removes the rats from one town, and the group travels to the next.

The rats possess their own agency. They want money to move to a desert island free from humans (and cats). The human piper, Keith, just wants to make music. Maurice solely wants to make money. His love for money causes him both to take his cut of the earnings but also to steal from the rats.

There, then, is the parody of "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" in a fantasy setting. If that were all the book was, it would still be an entertaining text, one in a long line of fractured fairy tales, postmodern retellings of traditional literature. *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents*, however, goes further. Pratchett does not just play with the archetypal fairy tale. He also plays with the very nature of story. This occurs in several ways as discussed throughout this paper.

One of the main characters is related to famous storytellers. Malicia sees the world as a story. This allows Pratchett to discuss the nature of fiction and, of course, the ways in which fiction deviates from reality. Furthermore, the rats learned to read using a children's book they discovered. The children's book, *Mr. Bunnsy Has an Adventure*, features talking animals in full human dress with cordial relationships with each other and humans. This book, then, does not only represent twentieth-century Disney properties (although I have to hope that Pratchett would have appreciated Carl Barks's similar social satires featuring his most famous talking animal creation, Uncle Scrooge McDuck). It also represents the didactic, maudlin children's literature often associated with the Victorian Age, but, really, that has found an audience ever since as well.

Mr. Bunnsy, intended to teach manners to children, is used by the rats to develop their culture. It also serves as a guiding light for a future harmonious world. As mentioned, animal-human relations (and inter-animal relations) in the book are not largely positive. This, then, is a depiction of an earthly paradise for the rats, a world where humanity is not bent on species extermination. The rats, though, are also split. The older rats who still remember being, well, rats rather than sentient rats cling to traditions and do not fully trust the new learning found in the book. The younger rats are both respectful of their elders and frustrated, at times, by the slow pace of social change.

In this paper, then, I explore the ways in which Pratchett uses the nature of story to reflect on fiction, place, and the environment. I do this through a close reading of the text. In it, I argue that Pratchett creates a world that subverts readers' expectations based on their experience with genre literature (both fantasy and fairy tales) as well as their very conceptions of the structures of story, environment, and city.

II. CHARACTERS AND THE NATURE OF STORY

The very first page of the book sets up a basic dichotomy of setting: pleasant vs. unpleasant, real vs. imaginary, and the fictionalized world vs. the real world. These binary opposites (I take the term from Kieran Egan [2]) set the stage for a thoughtful exploration of the environment and humanity's place in it. Although they are animals, the interactions of Maurice and the rats with the environment often represent humanity's interaction with the environment as well. Pratchett is not sentimental. The wilderness is not seen as bucolic, but dangerous, just as the city is.

As noted above, the rats dream of a perfect future environment: a desert island on which they could create their own society. This dream society would be free of negative influences like people and, a reader might assume, pushy cats like Maurice. The rats are a bit murky on what the island will actually be like. Maurice and the rats *think* that coconuts will be present there. No one is really sure where coconuts come from, but they are positive that they are associated with desert islands. In this disquietude, readers sense a classic disconnect between

urban and rural where urban dwellers have only a vague idea of where various foodstuff originate.

The reader is given bits of personal history as the book progresses. The rats became sentient after eating magical waste products. Maurice, however, did not partake of the magical waste. It eventually emerges that his mutation was caused by encountering the waste secondhand: he ate a rat that had eaten the waste. Sentience has not necessarily been a blessing for the rats. The rat's leader, for example, is repeatedly nonplussed by the experience. He felt he was no longer the real leader, because he was not used to the intricacies of the rapidly emerging cultural milieu: "The world was moving far too fast for him now, which made him angry. He wasn't so much leading now as being pushed" [1; all remaining quotes come from 1].

Maurice, though, has been largely unconcerned with the changes. His interests revolve around those changes could benefit him. He is also anxious that the rats may be smarter than him, or at least smart enough to recognize that Maurice has been stealing their earnings by telling them that gold coins are "shiny like the moon" and silver coins are "shiny like the sun." The rat Peaches points out that that was incorrect causing tension in the group. Upset with the financial improprieties and concerned with their past close calls, the group decides to run the scam only one more time. The group arrives at the town of Bad Blintz.

At first glance, Bad Blintz looks like a stereotypical fantasy town in a vaguely European setting. The group arrived at market day, but there was little activity. The pied piper, Keith, noted that "the people look poor" while "the buildings . . . look rich." It turns out there has already been a huge plague of rats. The city's residents are starving because of it. The price of bread is skyrocketing, as is the bounty offered on rat tails. The town's rat catchers have had a monopoly on the trade in part because they had spread false information. They have told the townsfolk that rats carried a deadly plague that would make a person's legs explode. The rat catchers nimbly handle Keith's wondering why, then, the rat catchers' legs have not exploded. After all, they avow, they are professionals.

Keith is introduced by Maurice namelessly, just a "stupid-looking kid" who desperately wants to play his music. He goes along with the operation because it lets him play. However, even early on, Keith shows wisdom that belies his appearance and Maurice's assessment of his capabilities. Wisdom is also shown by many of the younger rats.

The binary opposition of the book continues with the rats' discussion of darkness. They light a candle (not an easy task even for intelligent rats). One of the young rats who displays leadership qualities, Dangerous Beans, is nearly blind. (The rats named themselves from labels on cans and other things they discovered. They did not know what the words meant, just that they liked the sounds.) He tells Hamnpork, the leader, though, "I am not completely blind. I can tell the difference between light and dark." This statement refers not just to the physical light; it also speaks to the younger rat's ethical wisdom. Hamnpork does not understand the point of the fire. Their ancestors did fine without it. Dangerous Beans responds, "With the flame we make a statement to the darkness." Ironically, light has scared some younger rats because it has made them aware of the darkness. The young rat Peaches recognizes this new reality when he says, "We didn't know the shadows were there until we had the light." Dangerous Beans is unpersuaded, "Learning to face the shadows outside helps us to fight the shadows inside. And you can control *all* the darkness." By this statement, Dangerous Beans means that, with light, one can control the shadows without as well as the shadows within.

Mr. Bunnsy Has an Adventure was a turning point in the rats' emerging culture. They were shocked, first, by the pictures. The illustrations showed fully dressed animals interacting with humans. Even before the rats learned language, they were astounded by the images of the book, for the images appeared to show a harmonious world. When some rats learned to read, those initial impressions held true. What could the book's purpose be? Was it picturing a utopian future? The rats could not understand "surely even humans wouldn't make a book about Ratty Rupert the Rat, who wore a hat, *and* poison rats under the floorboards at the same time. Would they? How mad would anything have to be to think of that?" From *Mr. Bunnsy*, the rats began to learn not just human language but how to read and even write human language. They were also learning about human nature.

Some of the worst of human nature is shown by the happenings in Bad Blintz. The rat catchers indicate there is a huge plague of rats. The sentient rats, though, see no evidence of that. The rat tunnels beneath the town exist, of course—they are in them. What are not present are other rats, not even their smell. Despite this lack of rats attacking the food supply, the town is still starving.

The desperate situation of the town is partially shown by the mayor's daughter, Malicia, who explains a curious event that occurred when the group first came to town. A townsman tried to buy Maurice from Keith. Both assumed that, due to the rat problem, he wanted to buy the cat to catch rats. Malicia disabuses them of that notion: "Ratter? He wasn't interested in catching rats! . . . Everyone's hungry here! There's at least two meals on that cat!" Malicia leads Maurice and Keith to her home's kitchen. It

looks like a kitchen, anyway, but there is a distinct lack of "what a kitchen traditionally had, which was food."

The lack of food is despite Malicia's father's status as mayor. He feels it unfair to be given extra goods due to his status. Malicia agrees in principle, still, she thinks, once the family's solidarity with the people has been shown, they should get "just a little extra." Malicia is infatuated with stories and thinks the world should be like a story. She questions Maurice on his magical status. She is sure that it is due to having been owned by a witch with a name like Griselda with many warts on her face. She is disappointed when Keith introduces himself as Keith, for the name does not sound like it fits in a story. She hopes, at least, that he was spirited away as an infant and is really the heir to a kingdom somewhere. She perks up when she learns he is an orphan, although she is somewhat deflated when she learns the Guild of Musicians, who raised him, did not keep him locked in a cellar.

Malicia sees her own experiences as story, too. She tells Maurice and Keith that she has two stepsisters. Readers, of course, immediately think of "Cinderella." The impression builds when Malicia tells her audience that she must do all the chores. Then, she says she must do some of the chores. Finally, she admits that she has to clean her own bedroom which "is very nearly the smallest bedroom."

Perhaps because of either her interest in story or her native intelligence, she infers their plan. Maurice uses her love of story against her. When she threatens to call the City Watch about their scam, Maurice retorts, "If you do, you'll never find out how the story ends." Such a threat creates a significant deterrent to Malicia who, as she encounters not just Keith and Maurice but one of the talking rats, Sardines (who also likes to tap dance for his audience), begins to create a story about the story herself as Maurice notices from observing her facial expressions. This trait is apparently genetic; Malicia's grandmother and great-aunt were Agonista and Eviscera, the Sisters Grim, famed storytellers on the Discworld.

Malicia, then, agrees to help. To explain away the broken crockery caused by Sardines, she says that she saw a giant rat and the crockery broke while she was climbing on a cupboard to try to escape it. Maurice is surprised. "You lied?" he wonderingly asks. No, Malicia replies. "I just told a story. . . . It was much more true than the truth would sound." Maurice realizes that Malicia sees the world as a story and is concerned. Keith replies, "Well, that's harmless, isn't it?" Not exactly, for Maurice, "[I]n fairy tales, when someone dies . . . it's just a word." Stories soften the world. Believing in their power belies the dangers in reality, even in the fantasy reality of the Discworld.

The commingling of story within a story continues when Malicia decides to disguise herself. Her disguise nearly screams that is a disguise. Malicia "obviously thought that it was no good looking inconspicuous unless people could see that you were being inconspicuous." Malicia deeply feels the performative nature of story. She believes things happen because stories dictate that they must. That assertion frustrates Maurice who argues, "The world hasn't got a *plot* . . .. Things just . . . happen, one after another." Nonsense, Malicia counters, "There's always a plot. You just have to know where to look."

Malicia likes her stories straightforward, perhaps like traditional fairy tale plots. She believes that an "unnecessary complication" would wreck the story. Here, the unnecessary complication is the role of the rat catchers. The rat catchers are not killing rats. Rather, they have captured and caged all the city's rats. They bring fake rattails in for bounties warning people not to get too close due to the leg-exploding plague. The rats are housed in cages underneath the rat catchers' shed. Also in the underground warren is a powerful Rat King. When the educated rodents encounter the underground evil, they become so terrorized that they lose the power of speech and thought. They revert to their animal nature, just as, perhaps, humans do when they encounter unimaginable conditions. In their cages, the rats were eating each other. At the sight of it, Keith yells at Malicia, "This is not a story! This is real!" The horrors of reality cause Malicia's fairy tales to pale by comparison.

Malicia, though, cannot help but continue to think of their experiences as story. She "knows" that the rat catchers are "the humorous thugs" because they fit that story archetype. Those "humorous thugs," though, knock her cold and threaten to put Keith in the cage with unfed rats. As the narrator says, "And then the story went wrong." Maurice has been infected with Malicia's narrative-view of the world. When the rat catchers knock Keith's beloved pipes out of his hand, Keith gets angry. Maurice expects the next events to unfurl as if in a story: Keith would be so irate that he knocks the rat catchers out and resolves the crisis. Keith does try to fight, but he has "ordinary human strength" and is once more knocked to the ground. Hamnpork bravely leaps from above to attack a rat catcher. Maurice first thinks the rat has come to the rescue. Then he realizes, like Malicia, he is viewing life as a story. Unsurprisingly, the rat catcher handles Hamnpork with no problems.

The rat catchers, too, play their roles in a story. One corrects the other for using *good* grammar. Doing so is not

in keeping with their persona, and "people get suspicious of rat catchers who talk too good." They, too, are using people's perception of story for their own ends.

Despite her own disappointments, Malicia continues to consider herself part of a story. She cannot believe that Keith is not a hero. She questions him about his origins repeatedly. Keith tells her that he understands why she keeps hoping he is a hero, but he isn't. Instead, he says, "I'm the kind of person heroes aren't. I get by and I get along. I do my best." Disappointed and upset, Malicia complains about the story's structure, "I don't think this adventure has been properly organized." Keith, once more, tells her, "This isn't a story . . .. Real life isn't a story. There isn't some kind of . . . of magic that keeps you safe and makes crooks look the other way and not hit you too hard and tie you up next to a handy knife and not kill you." Malicia, though, has none of that. She tells Keith, "If you don't turn your life into a story, you just become part of someone *else's* story." What, he asks, if your story does not work? Then, she says, "You keep changing it until you find one that does."

Malicia tends to be self-centered. She sees herself as the protagonist of her own story. Arguably, this is a very human trait. She has always been largely uninterested in others' feelings not because theirs are less important than hers, but because hers are more interesting to her. Her egocentrism is a character flaw, but it is, sadly, not an unusual one.

The humans continually underestimate the rats. Keith, who has traveled with them for some time, is more likely to appreciate their abilities. He explains to Malicia, for example, that the rats "taught themselves" how to speak; "they're not trained animals, you know." Even he, though, has a difficult time, perhaps understandably, recognizing the rats' capabilities. For example, he asks the rats to gnaw through the ropes imprisoning Malicia and him. Peaches suggests that the rats' knife blade might be a better choice.

Malicia is most upsetting to the rats, though, not through her egocentrism or even her human-centrism. Rather she, unknowingly, disparages their most important book. She is very familiar with *Mr. Bunnsy*, part of a series of children's books. Her father had them all a child, kept them, and read them to her. She complains, "There's no subtext, no social commentary." Of course, such complaints have often been lodged against children's literature as well as modern fantasy, but Pratchett consistently proves those complaints highly misguided. In any case, Malicia's diatribes against the books, including couldn't they have at least included "a bit of interesting violence," are not only overheard by the rats, but they shock them to their core. Keith tells Malicia that the rats thought the stories were true, and he "never had the heart" to tell them otherwise.

The rat catchers prove only a minor complication to the plot as a whole. Malicia tries to tell the townsfolk the truth of the situation, but they do not believe her. They think she is making up another story. The crux of the story relates back to Dangerous Beans's description of light and dark. In the sewers, as they encounter the Spider, a supernatural entity that is far more powerful than the hapless rat catchers, the young rat leader Darktan warns his fellow rats, "We're in the Dark Wood now." The Dark Wood was a dangerous physical location in *Mr. Bunnsy*. To the rats in Pratchett's story, it has come to represent not just physical despair, but emotional or spiritual despair as well.

In the new "Dark Wood," Dangerous Beans meets Spider, something akin to a god of the rats who has been called into existence by their suffering. Spider tells him, "You know that by facing the dark, we become strong. You know about the darkness in front of us and the darkness behind the eyes." Spider goes on, and reminds Dangerous Beans about humanity, "There is a race in this world that steals and kills and spreads disease and despoils what it cannot use." Of course, some would think Spider was discussing rats. That is their reputation, and it is that reputation that the educated rodents trade on for their own benefit.

Spider continues and asks Dangerous Beans how pied pipers operate. They lead the rats to the river where they drown. Dangerous Beans questions that: rats are good swimmers. Yes, says Spider, but that does not make a good story, and "humans like to believe stories! They would prefer stories rather than the truth!" Spider is out for revenge. Dangerous Beans demands to see him. Spider questions this demand; he knows that Dangerous Beans is blind. I am, Dangerous Beans responds, but his eyes "see more than you think." Furthermore, he says, "I am not so blind that I can't see darkness." Dangerous Beans is unconcerned, for he "can control the darkness inside, which is where all darkness is." The young rodent will not be taken in by Spider's blinding hate.

In the end, the rats prevail. They also discover that their paradise is not an imaginary tropical island. Rather, it is in the real world (that is, in the real world of Pratchett's story). The rats come to terms with the mayor. They will stay in the town, and they will keep other rats away. They will not destroy things, and the town will employ them. Speaking for the rats, Darktan tells the mayor that if he promises to "pretend that rats can think" the rats will "pretend that humans can think, too." Because, though, it is "real life," they do not all live happily ever after. There

is a contract to be created and signed and endless committee meetings .

In still happier news, Malicia returns a lost copy of *Mr. Bunnsy* to the rats. She had found and repaired it. The rats are still unsure as to the book's meaning. Is it just a fairy tale? No, decides Dangerous Beans, it is a map—a map to a better future for rats and humans. Keith stays in Bad Blintz, but Maurice goes on his way. Eventually, he runs across another "stupid-looking kid" whom he recruits for another scheme "because some stories end, but old stories go on."

III. CONCLUSION

Pratchett's use of story throughout the text is inventive. In talking about his story as both story (in Malicia's eyes) and as the real world (in most everyone else's), he breaks the narrative fourth wall. He also uses a story-within-a-story with the rats' important *Mr. Bunnsy* book. Although the story has a happy ending, it is not the neat ending that might be expected. Furthermore, Pratchett subverts his readers' attitudes about the environment including humans' relationships with it and the environment's relationship with humanity. He does not rely on stereotypes except when subverting them. It is unsurprising that *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* was awarded the Carnegie Medal in the United Kingdom. It is children's literature that is philosophical, astute, funny, thought-provoking, and intelligent.

The work of Pratchett is rife with opportunities for future research. While this study examined it using a reader-response lens, additional work could use postmodern approaches. Additionally, themes related to the power of story resonate throughout Pratchett's adult and young adult work. Additional research could explore how those themes developed through the series.

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