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The Shepherd's Crown

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Editor's Choice:

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Book

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5

In his Afterword, Terry Pratchett's assistant Rob Wilkins suggests this final **Discworld** novel was 'not quite as finished as he would have liked when he died'. Wilkins describes Pratchett 'writing the bits he could see clearly and assembling it all into a whole ' like a giant literary jigsaw ' when he was done'. Writing in this way ' in any way ' as Alzheimer's took its own relentless course, is beyond criticism. There may be the odd missing piece or a digression pursued just for the fun of it. There might not be the sustained threat mounting throughout the novel for Tiffany Aching to confront as you might expect. And maybe the book's final battle, sending the troublesome elves back to where they belong, is rather easily won.

None of that will matter a jot to the legions of Pratchett fans (AS Byatt: 'No writer in my lifetime has given me as much pleasure and happiness'). They will be more than grateful the tale made it through to publication. Poignantly, the Afterword mentions that ideas for several more books were teeming in Pratchett's mind before the illness ' 'the embuggerance' ' finally overtook him in March 2015.

For old **Discworld** hands, reading this novel must be at once a delight and a sadness, a farewell to Pratchett and to characters they have loved through 40 earlier stories. Discworld is a reassuring, old-fashioned universe, where it is acceptable to indulge in coy humour about bodily functions, find being fat somehow funny in itself, and enjoy somewhat arch gender games. Pratchett was fond of making gentle jokes by avoiding the point, often in footnotes, and he continues to play that trick here: one glossing 'the Stick and Bucket dance' reads 'a dance that should only be performed when no women are nearby. If you saw it, you would know why'. There are allusions to be enjoyed from **Henry V** ('So cry 'Crivens' and let loose the clan Mac Feegle!') to **Dad's Army** (' 'They will not like it up and over 'em,' Smack Tremble called out, waving what looked like a rusty bayonet ...'). Mrs T gets in there briefly ('This lady is not for turning,' booms Mrs Earwig, the overbearing and self-regarding witch). Sudden asides surprise by their sheer cheek and invention: 'The elvish has begun to leave the building?'. Pratchett even nicks the Darling gag from **Blackadder**, but in his hands it feels like a tribute, not a lazy theft.

At one level this is comfort reading, much like comfort food ' he makes his reader welcome; though it's easy to miss among the warmth the clear morality, the dismissal of selfishness and the value placed on care for others. His play with words is infectious: 'Elves could take umbrage. They loved umbrage, and as for sulking, that was a top entertainment.'

That's *just* right for adolescent readers learning to muck about with words for themselves. Many of the old favourites make a final appearance here. There are the ubiquitous Nac Mac Feegles with their 'Dinna fash yersel' Scots idiom ('Who are you callin' an idiom?'), exhausting energy, love of drinkin' and fightin' and dancin'. Then there's the old senior witch, Nanny Ogg, rarely without her flagon of homemade cider, her relishing of lusty sex and the numerous consequent offspring, her heart of gold and the wisdom of her well-lived life.

As for the plot, well, appropriately, it's the end of an era. The book is dedicated to 'Esmerelda Weatherwax' mind how you go? and as the novel begins, Granny Weatherwax slips peacefully away in the company of another familiar Discworld character, 'an individual with a scythe' a scythe with a blade so shadow-thin that it could separate a soul from a body?. Which witch is to succeed her as the first among equals? Why, young Tiffany Aching, featuring in her fifth novel. It's not going to be easy, with two steadings to care for, trouble stirring among the elves, and some quibbling between the older witches. Is she up to the task? You know what? She is.

Mind how you go.

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