

Allow me to start with a plot synopsis:

A young man is thrown into a situation he is not prepared for and finds himself in charge of a form of communication that Ankh-Morpork has not experienced in quite this way before. He has an odd assortment of helpers and meets a young lady who helps him make a fast success of this new enterprise, but powerful opponents try to hinder him at every turn. The offices that hold the now successful business burn down, but miraculously our hero finds a way to rebuild and rebuff those who would stand in his way.

The question now is whether the above synopsis refers to Terry Pratchett's latest book, *Going Postal*, or to his 2000 novel, *The Truth*. And the unfortunate answer is that it could be either.

In fairness, there's a lot more to *Going Postal* than just what I've outlined above. Pratchett's ability to craft characters is as strong as ever and that fact makes the book worth reading. Moist von Lipwig is as rich a character as any he has ever written, and it is to be hoped that more is to come from this character if for no other reason than to see what outrageous claim he will make (and deliver on) next.

And his inventiveness is as strong as ever. It may seem odd to point out that this book has essentially the same plot as a book written four years ago and then praise the author's inventiveness, but Pratchett *is* very inventive. The 'clacks' system, introduced several books ago, started out as a mildly amusing metaphor for the Internet, but Pratchett has expanded on that metaphor and made a technological wonder nestle comfortably in the magical Discworld without making it seem even remotely out of place.

But the problem with *Going Postal* is that it leaves the reader wondering what the point of it all is. Especially those of us who have been reading Discworld for quite some time. The characters have always been Pratchett's strong point, but in past novels the stories have been compelling and exciting. Several of Pratchett's recent books, and *Going Postal* falls into this category, seem like nothing more than vehicles to introduce new characters. And this is fine except for the fact that 1) he is doing so at the expense of his old characters (we haven't seen a witch book since *Carpe Jugulum*) and 2) he isn't doing much with the new characters once he introduces them. William de Worde, introduced in *The Truth* has been relegated to a supporting role in several novels. And while it's good to finally see some integration of the characters in this world (whereas before the Watch was the Watch and Rincewind was Rincewind and there was precious little overlap to even let you know they lived on the same Disc), when you get a story like this one that is practically a scene-by-scene retelling of a previous story with new characters...well, it's disillusioning.

Despite the rather downcast portrait the above comments may paint, I still feel comfortable recommending this book. The characters are compelling, the jokes are funny, and the underlying commentary is worth reading. There are some rather cutting remarks regarding the role of government institutions such as the Post Office, and some insightful exploration of personal identity in the form of a lead character who specializes

in identity theft and forgery. And, ultimately, it does diverge from *The Truth* in certain key places and does manage to be its own book. But the similarities are slightly distracting.

In closing I will remark on Pratchett's divergence from his usual writing style, which is to say that this book is broken into chapters, which is unusual for a non-children's Discworld book. I didn't find that this change added or subtracted anything from the reading experience. The illustrations of the stamps at the beginning of each chapter were interesting, and the inclusion of little foreshadowing comments were just enough to whet the appetite before plunging into the next chapter, but ultimately I found myself skimming that stuff and reading the book all in one go, as if the chapters weren't there.

*Going Postal* is a strong work by Terry Pratchett and well worth reading. But longtime readers of Discworld will want to see more of Moist von Lipwig if for no other reason than to see what will become of him in a fresh plotline.