

One might be tempted to think that *Monstrous Regiment*, the latest book in the Discworld series by Terry Pratchett, was written in response to current events. Not being privy to the author's thoughts, this could easily be the case. But it could be more likely that the concept of war merely provided a device and a setting in which to tell a much more important story.

Our heroine, Polly Perks, lives in the country of Borogravia. It is notable that at one point in the book it is pointed out that nobody in Ankh-Morpork had heard of Borogravia until they knocked down the clacks towers*, and neither have longtime readers of Discworld novels. Borogravia is constantly at war with its neighbors and is currently having a hard time drumming up recruits, partly due to the fact that there are no more young men to recruit. So when Polly cuts her hair and changes her name to Oliver and goes to join up posing as a young boy, few objections are made. She is put in a group with several other new recruits, including a troll, a vampire, and an Igor, and goes off to find her brother.

The overarching theme of the book is identity...yours and other people's. It is plain that the author was having fun with these characters, which is evidenced not only by the way many of them turn out in the end, but also in the fact that the humor for which Pratchett is noted is much more in evidence in this book. Make no mistake, this is a serious book, and has some rather sharp edges in certain cases, such as the descriptions of war and what happens to young girls who are sent to the Girl's Working School, but there are places that are extremely funny, and they are much more frequent than they have been in more recent Discworld novels. As you get deeper into the book the events take on a bit of an absurd quality until the characters start talking about how it's possible to go too far and that's when you realize that the author is preparing to do just that, and then does.

The identity of the characters is constantly in question, and not just the gender aspects that you might expect in a book about girls dressing as boys in order to join the army. This is especially true of the character Wazzer who also brings a bit of religious fanaticism to the table by praying to the Duchess, the theoretical leader of Borogravia who is rumored to be dead. There are other religious themes buried in the subplots as the worship of the god Nuggan is frequently mentioned, mostly in the context of finding something Abominable.

Pratchett has been reported to say that the thing that may ultimately kill Discworld is overpopulation, the inability to write a story because certain characters will eventually get in the way. I think the last 4 books have shown that he is discovering that this is not the case. Just as in *The Truth*, Commander Vimes makes an appearance in this book, but he is not the central character and the other members of the Watch that appear (Sergeant Angua and Corporal Swires) are less supporting characters than they are plot devices. The focus is sharply on Polly, her seven compatriots, and their commanding officers, Lieutenant Blouse and Sergeant Jackrum.

This is a strong, rich, worthy addition to the Discworld series as far as the writing goes. I would like to offer just a brief mention of the cover art, however. The American editions

of the Discworld books have for some time now concentrated on symbolic images on the covers instead of artistic depictions of the characters. Garish colors and simplistic icons replace the cover art that is provided for the British editions which is generally more representative of the events contained therein. A couple of people I know have told me that they like the American cover for this book. My advice is to find the British edition cover art online and decide for yourself. And then make your opinions known to the publishers. And speaking of the publishers, it might also be a good idea to tell them that if they're going to make any changes from the British to the American editions (which I don't know if that's the case here or not, having only read the American edition) they should proofread more carefully. There are a lot of typos in this book, and I mean enough to the point of distraction. A petty complaint about an otherwise excellent book? Perhaps, but this is supposed to be a professional publication. I don't expect to have to decide what the word should have been.

* The clacks towers were introduced several books ago and are a way of transmitting information over long distance by use of semaphore codes given by opening and closing shutters on towers. What seems like a natural parallel to the telegraph is actually taking on a stronger resemblance to the internet as the concept is developed, even going as far as to giving an e-mail address for William de Worde, the newspaper reporter introduced in *The Truth*. One wonders how many Pratchett readers will be attempting to use it.

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