



A Blink of the Screen: Collected Shorter Fiction

By Terry Pratchett

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A collection of short fiction from Terry Pratchett, spanning the whole of his writing career from schooldays to Discworld and the present day.

In the four decades since his first book appeared in print, Terry Pratchett has become one of the world's best-selling and best-loved authors. Here for the first time are his short stories and other short-form fiction collected into one volume. **A Blink of the Screen** charts the course of Pratchett's long writing career: from his schooldays through to his first writing job on the *Bucks Free Press*, and the origins of his debut novel, **The Carpet People**; and on again to the dizzy mastery of the phenomenally successful Discworld series.

Here are characters both familiar and yet to be discovered; abandoned worlds and others still expanding; adventure, chickens, death, disco and, actually, some quite disturbing ideas about Christmas, all of it shot through with Terry's inimitable brand of humour. With an introduction by Booker Prize-winning author A.S. Byatt, illustrations by the late Josh Kirby and drawings by the author himself, this is a book to treasure.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A book meant to be cherished.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Some writers simply possess the Gift. No matter what they bring out. . . . That’s certainly the case with Terry Pratchett.” —*The Washington Post Book World*

“In the history of comic fantasy, Pratchett has no equals for invention or for range.” —*The Wall Street Journal*

“Clever . . . insightful. . . . [Pratchett’s] wry wit is as good as gold.” —*The Boston Globe*

“Pratchett is one of the great comic writers and storytellers of our time.” —*The Guardian*

“One of the giants in the world of fantasy literature.” —*New York Daily News*

“You can’t call what Pratchett does satire—it’s far too good-natured for that—but he has a satirist’s instinct for the absurd and a cartoonist’s eye for the telling detail.” —*The Daily Telegraph* (London)

“A short story collection covering the entire career of one of our most prolific, and beloved, fantasy writers. . . . One of the main draws of [*A Blink of the Screen*] for serious fans, or aspiring writers, will be the chance to trace the evolution of Pratchett’s craft—but there’s plenty here for readers who have never heard of him to enjoy.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“A little absurdism, a little wordplay, a lot of inventive fantasy, a lot of heart, and a deep-seated fascination with the way technologies change societies. . . . Pratchett can easily fill an entire bookcase by himself. . . . But he has kept the piquant sense of someone playing with language, with new worlds, and with the familiar old tropes that he enjoys upending.” —NPR

“What Pratchett does is not just great, but unparalleled. In five hundred years, it won’t be the Nobel laureates who are being studied. It’s going to be this guy.” —Brandon Sanderson, *Tor.com*

“One of the greatest comic novelists of all time, in his way the equal of Wodehouse and Waugh.” —*GQ* (UK)

“The master of humorous fantasy . . . [Pratchett] should be recognized as one of the more significant contemporary English-language satirists.” —*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

TERRY PRATCHETT is the acclaimed creator of the global bestselling Discworld series, the first of which, *The Color of Magic*, was published in 1983. In all, he was the author of fifty bestselling books. His novels have been widely adapted for stage and screen and he was the winner of multiple prizes, including the Carnegie Medal, as well as being awarded a knighthood for services to literature. Worldwide sales of his books now stand at 70 million, and they have been translated into thirty-seven languages. He died in 2015.

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The Hades Business

Science Fantasy magazine, ed. John Carnell, no. 60, vol. 20, August 1963. An earlier version was published in the *Technical Cygnet*, the High Wycombe Technical High School magazine.

Argh, argh, argh?..?..?if I put my fingers in my ears and go "lalalala" loudly I won't hear you read this story.

It's juvenile. Mind you, so was I, being thirteen at the time. It's the first thing I ever wrote that got published. In fact it's the first thing I ever wrote with the feeling that I was writing a real story.

It began as a piece of homework. The English teacher gave me twenty marks out of twenty for it, and put it in the school magazine. The kids liked it. I was a writer.

And this was a big deal, because I hadn't really been anything up until then. I was good at English. At everything else I was middling, one of those kids that don't catch the teacher's eye and are very glad of it. I was even bad at sports, except for the one wonderful term when they let us play hockey, when I was bad and very dangerous.

But the other kids had liked it. I'd sniffed blood.

There were three, yes, three professional sf and fantasy magazines published in the UK in those days. Unbelievable, but true. I persuaded my aunt, who had a typewriter, to type it out for me, and I sent it to John Carnell, who edited all three. The nerve of the kid.

He accepted it.

Oh boy.

The £14 he paid was enough to buy a second-hand Imperial 58 typewriter from my typing teacher (my mother had decided that I ought to be able to do my own typing, what with being a writer and everything) and, as I write, it seems to me that it was a very good machine for fourteen quid and I just wonder if Mum and Dad didn't make up the difference on the quiet.

Fortunately, before I could do too much damage with the thing, study and exams swept me up and threw me out into a job on the local paper, where I learned to write properly or, at least, journalistically.

I've reread the story and my fingers have itched to strip it down, give it some pacing, scramble those clichés, and, in short, rewrite it from the bottom up. But that would be silly, so I'm going to grit my teeth instead.

Go ahead, read.

I can't hear you! Lalalalalalala!

Crucible opened his front door and stood rooted to the doormat.

Imagine the interior of a storm cloud. Sprinkle liberally with ash and garnish with sulphur to taste. You now have a rough idea as to what Crucible's front hall resembled.

The smoke was coming from under the study door. Dimly remembering a film he had once seen, Crucible clapped a handkerchief to his nose and staggered to the kitchen. One bucket of water later, he returned. The door would not budge. The phone was in the study, so as to be handy in an emergency. Putting down the pail, Crucible applied his shoulder to the door, which remained closed. He retreated to the opposite wall of the hall, his eyes streaming. Gritting his teeth, he charged.

The door opened of its own accord. Crucible described a graceful arc across the room, ending in the fireplace, then everything went black, literally and figuratively, and he knew no more.

A herd of elephants were doing the square dance, in clogs, on Crucible's head. He could see a hazy figure kneeling over him.

"Here, drink this."

Ah, health-giving joy-juice! Ah, invigorating stagger-soup! Those elephants, having changed into slippers, were now dancing a sedate waltz: the whiskey was having the desired effect. Crucible opened his eyes again and regarded the visitor.

"Who the devil are you?"

"That's right!"

Crucible's head hit the grate with a hollow clang!

The Devil picked him up and sat him in an armchair. Crucible opened one eye.

The Devil was wearing a sober black suit, with a red carnation in the buttonhole. His thin waxed moustachios, combined with the minute beard, gave him a dignified air. A cloak and collapsible top hat were on the table.

Crucible had known it would happen. After ten years of prising cash from the unsuspecting businessman, one was bound to be caught by Nemesis. He rose to his feet, brushing the soot from his clothes.

"Shall we be going?" he asked mournfully.

"Going? Where to?"

"The Other Place, I suppose."

"The Other Pl—? Oh, you mean home! Good Heav— oops! pardon me—Hell! no! No one's come Down There for nearly two thousand years. Can't think why. No, I have come to you because I need some help Down There; the Hell business is just not paying—no more lost souls. Only chap that's come Down There for the last two thousand years was a raving nit called Dante; went away with quite the wrong impression. You ought to have heard what he said about me!"

"I did read something about it somewhere."

"Indeed? Bad publicity for me, that. That's where you come in."

“Oh?” Crucible pricked up his ears.

“Yes, I want you to advertise Hell. Clumsy! You’ve spilt your drink all over the carpet.”

“W-why me?” croaked Crucible.

“You are the owner of the Square Deal Advertising Company, are you not? We want you to make the public conscious, Hell-wise. Not for eternal damnation, of course. Just day trips, etcetera, Grand Tour of Hell, and all that.”

“And if I refuse?”

“What would you say to ten thousand pounds?”

“Good-bye.”

“Twenty thousand?”

“Hmm. Aren’t I supposed to give you some tasks; sand ropes and all that?”

The Devil looked angry.

“Forty thousand and that’s my last offer. Besides”—the Devil pressed the tips of his fingers together and smiled at the ceiling—“there are some rather incriminating facts about the Payne-Smith Products case, which we could make public?”

“Now you’re speaking my language. Forty thousand pounds and hush about the P and S case?”

“Yes.”

“Done.”

“I’m so glad you see it my way,” said the Devil. Crucible seated himself behind his mahogany desk and took out a pad. He indicated a polished silver box.

“Cigarette?”

“Thanks.”

Crucible took a cigarette himself and felt for his lighter. Suddenly, a thought struck him.

“How do I know you are Old Nick?”

The Devil shuddered. “Please! Nicholas Lucifer to you. Well, I know about the P and S case, don’t I?”

Crucible’s eyes gleamed.

“You may be some smart-aleck Dick. Convince me. Go on, convince me!”

“Okay, you asked for it. By the way, that gun in your left-hand pocket would be useless against me.” The Devil leaned nonchalantly, extending a finger towards Crucible.

“See? You’re a phoney, a low do—”

Crack!

A bolt of lightning shot across the room. The end of Crucible’s cigarette glowed.

“I—I—I’m convinced!”

“So glad.”

Crucible became his old self.

“Let’s get down to business. I take it you want Hell to be exploited in every possible way?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t do much until I have seen the place—from the living point of view, you understand.”

“Quite. Well, I could take you back with me, but that might be a hair-raising experience for you. Tell you what, if you wait at the corner of this street, at—shall we say, eight o’clock this evening?—I could pick you up and we could walk there. Okay?”

“Right.”

“I’ll be seeing you, then. Cheerio!”

Poomf!

He was gone. The room was again filled with sulphurous smoke. Crucible opened the windows and then closed them again. If some busybody saw the smoke, he would have a hard time explaining to the Fire Brigade just why there was no fire. He strolled into the kitchen and sat down thoughtfully; he wished he had read more fantasy.

In wishing the Devil would mind his own business, Crucible was thinking along the same lines as certain other beings. Where they differed was the reason. Crucible opened the fridge and took out a can of beer.

Having someone running around loose, who knows about things one would prefer to keep to oneself, is dangerous. Crucible’s love of money warred with his love of freedom. He wanted that forty thousand pounds, but he did not want Lucifer running around loose.

Suddenly, the perfect solution struck him. Of course! Why not! He grabbed his hat, and hurried out to the local church.

Crucible stood in the pouring rain at the corner of the street. A small stream of water was coursing down his

back and flooding his suedes. He looked at his watch. One minute to eight o'clock. He shivered.

"Psst!"

Crucible looked round.

"Down here."

He saw that a manhole in the middle of the pavement was raised. The Devil poked his head out.

"Come on!"

"Through there?"

"Yes."

He edged himself through the narrow hole.

Splash!

He would have to put his shoes on "Expenses."

"Well, let's be off," said the Devil.

"I didn't know one could get to Down There along the sewers!"

"Easiest thing there is, old man. Left here."

There was no sound but the echoes of their footsteps: Crucible's suedes and the Devil's hooves.

"How much further?"

They had been walking for several hours. Crucible's feet were damp and he was sneezing.

"We're there, old man."

They had come to the end of the tunnel. Before them stretched a dark valley. In the distance, Crucible could see a giant wall, with a tiny door. Across the valley ran a black river; the air was tainted with sulphur.

The Devil removed a tarpaulin from a hump by the tunnel mouth.

"May I present Geryon II!"

Crucible blinked. Geryon II was a Model T Ford crossed with an Austin 7, tastefully decorated in sulphurous yellow.

The Devil wrenched at the offside door, which fell off.

They climbed in. Surprisingly, the car started after only a few swings of the starting handle.

They chugged across the sulphur plain.

“Nice car.”

“Isn’t it! Forty dragon-power. Built her myself from a few bits and pieces from Earth. Trouble with springing out of the floor near a junkyard,” said the Devil, gritting his fangs as they cornered at speed in a cloud of sulphur, “is the fact one often surfaces under a pile of old iron.” He rubbed his head. Crucible noticed that one of his horns was bandaged.

They skidded to a halt by the river. The car emitted clouds of steam.

A battered punt was moored by the river. The Devil helped Crucible in and picked up the skulls—pardon - me—skulls.

“What happened to what’s his name—Charon?”

“We don’t like to talk about it.”

“Oh.”

Silence, except for the creaking of the oars.

“Of course, you’ll have to replace this by a bridge.”

“Oh, yes.”

Crucible looked thoughtful.

“A ha’penny for them.”

“I am thinking,” said Crucible, “about the water that is lapping about my ankles.”

The Devil did not look up.

“Here.”

He handed Crucible a battered mug, on which the initials “B. R.” were just discernible. And so they continued.

They stood in front of the gate. Crucible looked up and read the inscription:

ALL HOPE ABANDON, YE WHO ENTER HERE.

“No good.”

“No?”

“Neon lights.”

“Oh, yes?”

“Red ones.”

“Oh, yes?”

“Flashing.”

“Oh, yes?”

They entered.

“Down, boy; get off Crucible.”

Three tongues licked Crucible simultaneously.

“Back to your kennel, boy.”

Whining, Cerberus slunk off.

“You must excuse him,” said the Devil, as he picked Crucible up and dusted him down. “He has never been the same since he took a lump out of Orpheus’s leg.”

“It didn’t say that in the story.”

“I know. Pity, because the real story was much more—er, interesting. But that’s neither here nor there.”

Crucible took stock of his surroundings. They appeared to be standing in a hotel lobby. In one wall was a small alcove containing a desk, on which a huge Residents’ book, covered in dust, lay open.

The Devil opened a small wooden door.

“This way.”

“What?”

“My office.”

Crucible followed him up the narrow stairway, the boards creaking under his feet.

The Devil’s office, perched precariously on the walls of Hell, was rather dilapidated. There was a patch of damp in one corner, where the Styx had overflowed, and the paper was peeling off the wooden walls. A rusty stove in the corner glowed red-hot. Crucible noticed that the floor seemed to be covered with old newspapers, bills, and recipes for various spells.

The Devil dropped into a commodious armchair while Crucible sat down in a tortuous cane chair, which all

but collapsed under his weight.

“Drink?” said the Devil.

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Crucible.

“Very nice drink, this,” said Crucible. “Your own recipe?”

“Yes. Quite simple—two pints bats’ blood, one— I say! You’ve gone a funny colour! Feel all right?”

“Ulp! Ghack! Um—quite all right, thanks. Er—shall we get down to business?”

“Okay.”

“Well, as I see it, our main difficulty will be to make the public take Hell—and you for that matter—seriously. I mean, the generally accepted theory of Hell is a sort of fiery furnace, with you prodding lost souls with a pitchfork and hordes of demons and whatnot running around yelling— Hey, that reminds me, where is everybody—er, soul?”

“Who?”

“Lost souls and demons and banshees and whatnot?”

“Oh, them. Well, like I said, no one has been down here for two thousand years, except that nit, Dante. And all the souls down here gradually worked their way up to Purgatory, and thence to—yes, well, the demons all got jobs elsewhere.”

“Tax collectors,” murmured Crucible.

“Quite so. As for fiery furnaces, the only one still in working order is the Mark IV, over there in the corner. Very useful for my culinary efforts but not for much else.”

“Hm. I see. Have you a map of Hell handy?”

“I think so.” The Devil rummaged in an old oak desk behind him and produced a roll of yellow parchment.

“This is the newest map I have.”

“It’ll do. Now let me see. Hum. I take it this is where we came in.”

“Yes! That shading is the Sulphur Plain.”

“That’s good. I’m sure the Acme Mining Company would give a lot to have the mining rights—”

“Oh, yes?”

“Of course, we would have to build a proper road over it for the increased transport—”

“Oh, yes?”

“Get a large tunnel dug down from Earth—”

“Coffee bar here. Dance hall there. Racetrack at the far end. Bowling alley over—”

“We could put a funfair here—”

“Leaving room for a restaurant there—”

“Put some ice cream stalls here and here, and here—”

“All-night jazz band there. Get in touch with your demons and offer them higher wages to come back to help run the place—”

“Get Orpheus to organize a jazz band—I’m sure Apollo would oblige—”

And so it continued. Soon the map was covered in symbols representing everything from a dance hall to a cycle track. Then they sat back and discussed Stage One: putting Hell in the public eye.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Calvin Baker:

Why don't make it to be your habit? Right now, try to ready your time to do the important take action, like looking for your favorite guide and reading a publication. Beside you can solve your long lasting problem; you can add your knowledge by the reserve entitled A Blink of the Screen: Collected Shorter Fiction. Try to the actual book A Blink of the Screen: Collected Shorter Fiction as your pal. It means that it can being your friend when you really feel alone and beside associated with course make you smarter than ever before. Yeah, it is very fortunated for yourself. The book makes you a lot more confidence because you can know every thing by the book. So , let us make new experience as well as knowledge with this book.

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Tammy Campbell:

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