Trapped: Fairytale in Pratchett and Lackey

by Dr. Audrey Taylor, Anglia Ruskin University

"People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it's the other way around. Stories exist independently of their players. If you know that, the knowledge is power."(8)

1   Thus begins Terry Pratchett's *Witches Abroad* (1991)*.* In *Witches Abroad* and Mercedes Lackey's *500 Kingdom Series*, specifically the first one, *The Fairy Godmother* (2004), stories have taken over. Both books look at stories from the other side, they actualise the (sometimes) cliché that stories are powerful, and can shape people. Tales have power of their own, and will shape the surrounding people or circumstances to suit, regardless of what the characters themselves think of it. Taking the concept that stories have power a step forward and literalising that power allows both Pratchett and Lackey to explore story from a different direction, though I would argue Pratchett does so in a more meaningful way, as will be explored later.

2   Fairy tales often have a predictable nature. Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale,* contends that fairy tales are regular enough to warrant an extensive taxonomy. Propp argues, "it is possible to make an examination of the forms of the tale which will be exact as the morphology of organic formations" (xxv). This regularity is taken advantage of by both Pratchett and Lackey. In *Witches Abroad* stories are explained; "their very existence overlays a faint but insistent pattern on the chaos that is history. Stories etch grooves deep enough for people to follow in the same way that water follows certain paths down a mountainside" (8). Both Pratchett and Lackey take these grooves as a given — and show in their own ways how story can have a power of its own.

3   Feminist theory lends insight to both Pratchett and Lackey's works. Susan Sellers in *Myth and Fairytale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* argues that "the power of myth [is] in giving expression to our common experiences and about the role of narrative in enabling us to undergo, shape, and survive those experiences" (vii). A similar point can be made with regard to fairy tales, as they are, like myths, important to the human experience in 'real' life as well as in the fictional worlds we create. Lackey and Pratchett interrogate these narrative expectations by literalising the stories they create, rendering them visible, and occasionally absurd.

4   When stories and their attendant structures are internalised too deeply, Caroline Webb argues that a dangerous kind of escapism can evolve.

> This version of escapism involves the reader mistaking what is said in the book: believing that it is true. To fall into this trap need not involve accepting the story as literal truth, although that is a possibility. Rather, the reader may be misled by the pattern of the story, especially by reading stories with similar patterns, into believing that certain solutions to problems are inevitable. (2)

These "similar patterns" are a noted facet of fairy tales, and thus the danger of beginning to believe in the stories they tell, in the happily-ever-afters, is increased accordingly. David Langford argues in his foreword to *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* that "Pratchett also shows the shaping effects of Story as rooted in human desire for narrative neatness, for events that follow comfortingly familiar patterns" (4). Both Pratchett and Lackey question this "neatness", but also the fact that it is comforting and something that humans seem drawn to (and in turn, work their characters into).

5   Pratchett and Lackey's use of story, and Pratchett's use of humour, allows the reader to examine pre-conceived notions about story and narrative. As Webb argues,

> [t]he trope is one familiar to readers of Pratchett: he deploys the structure and evokes the conventions of a genre even as his narrator and characters comment on the absurdity of those conventions [...] Pratchett […] is explicit and metatextual in its operation (31).

But it is useful not only to examine this convention, but to examine why it works so well. Lackey too draws conscious attention to the ordered patterns of fairy tales, but hers does not seem as radical, and this is really what this article seeks to examine. I am not the only to notice Pratchett's use of story, or his use of humour, but I think it is key that Pratchett changes narrative expectations, and in doing so provides humour. The narrative and the humour are linked, neither would have the power it does without the other, as evidenced by Lackey who seems to have largely missed the comedic aspect and focuses on narrative expectations instead.

6   Pratchett's popular *Witches Abroad* requires but a brief synopsis. In this Discworld novel, three witches must *keep* a princess in disguise from marrying the prince in a reversal of the "Cinderella" story. Lackey's *The Fairy Godmother* also begins with a "Cinderella" variant. Elena has all the criteria — a wicked stepmother, two ugly (in character at least) stepsisters, and is sufficiently downtrodden. However, there is no Prince waiting in the wings to sweep her off her feet — and this is where the trouble begins. In both books, the happy (sometimes conflated with an expected) ending is not what is needed. The characters in both books need the freedom to set about their own lives, but are constricted by the stories they should be following. In Lackey's novel, for example,

> Elena had spent her time since her father's death wrapped in a growing sense of tension and frustration, as if *something* was out there, some force that would make all of this better, if only she knew how to invoke it. That there was a way to turn this into a happy ending, and that her life was a coiled spring being wound ever tighter until it would all be released in a burst of wonder and magic. (39-40)

In both books, there is the premise that stories (specifically fairy tales) have expected and traditional outcomes. Vladimir Propp argues that "fairy tales possess a quite particular structure which is immediately felt" (6). Both Pratchett and Lackey take advantage of this expected and well established structure; James B. South argues that it is "story-shaped destiny" (28-30) which Granny Weatherwax helps people to escape. The same is true for Lackey where a fairy godmother serves the same function.

7   Pratchett and Lackey go about examination of structure in different ways. While Pratchett is the more subtle of the two, as will be explored below, in Lackey's series the expected stories have actual magic power. Lackey for example has a fairy godmother explain, "[y]ou see, whenever there is a person whose life begins to resemble a tale — the brave little orphan lad, the lovely girl with the wicked stepmother, the princess with the overly protective father — something begins to happen, and that something is *magic*" (56). Lackey calls this path "The Tradition" (58) and it works as an impersonal force, shaping stories. When "The Tradition" is thwarted it works to warp that into a new story — both good and bad.

8   Pratchett takes a different tack, He shows stories going badly because there is nothing natural about stories in their entirety. This is exemplified in Pratchett's rendering of the wolf from "Little Red Ridinghood" when a wolf is forced into a person/wolf hybrid and almost starves to death because he is not able to be both. In the end Granny Weatherwax mercifully has a woodman kill him, after the wolf has tried, and failed, to be the big bad wolf of the "Little Red Ridinghood" tale. The villain of *Witches Abroad*, a fairy godmother (and Granny Weatherwax's sister), has tried to force stories where they do not exist. In other words, she has tried to force the actual world into the patterns that are so neatly drawn in fiction. Pratchett capitalises on the incompatibility of neatly drawn story with how the world actually works. Granny Weatherwax explains, "Someone who knows about the power of stories, and uses 'em. And the stories have [...] kind of hung around. They do that, when they get fed" (135). In *Witches Abroad* the villain of the story is someone who is obsessed with the regularity of story, and has forced stories onto people, regardless of how this works out in reality.

9   Having the 'bad' character be someone trying to force happy endings on people is an interesting tactic, and one that forces the reader to more closely examine their expectations of both story and character. Granny Weatherwax explains, "[y]ou can't go around building a better world for people. Only people can build a better world for people. Otherwise it's just a cage" (250). Pratchett thus focuses on freedom, and allowing people to be happy or unhappy; in examining the premise of a happy ending and finding whether that is, in fact, always a good thing.

10   In Lackey, the focus is also on freedom, the power of stories can literally become binding as the tales entrap their participants, but it is less about the lack of personal freedom as in Pratchett and more about the shaping power of stories. As one of the characters explains, "The Tradition doesn't *care* you see, whether the outcome of a story is a joy or a tragedy" (68). In Lackey's work, there are two kinds of stories, those 'good' ones like "Cinderella" where things are meant to be happy, and those like "Ladderlocks" that are not. Much of the action of the book is set about preventing the latter stories while arranging for the former. The horror in Lackey is not the lack of ability to choose one's own way, it is that there are dark stories with terrible endings that someone could be forced to recreate to their tragic conclusions. Thus, unlike Pratchett, Lackey is not examining the basic happily-ever-after premise.

11   Pratchett makes no such distinction as the stories discussed in *Witches Abroad* are all ones with 'happy endings', regardless of how the stories might actually feel to those acting them out. In Pratchett the critique is of the fairy tale assumption that a certain pattern of events is a 'good' thing, a happy ending. Gideon Haberkorn in "Debugging the Mind: The Rhetoric of Humor and the Poetics of Fantasy" argues that "Fantasy can foreground the tools we use to make meaning. Humor can help us notice and correct mistakes our mind makes in its meaning-making" (160). Thus it is both Pratchett's use of a fantastical world where things can be literalised (as is also the case in Lackey) *and* his use of humour that allows the mind to "correct mistakes", which amounts, in this case, to acknowledging the framework that we place stories and ourselves in.

12   Key to both Lackey and Pratchett's revisions is the ordered structure of fairy tale. In his introduction to *The Russian Folktale by Vladimir Propp*, Jack Zipes argues that, "[Propp] believes that in order to establish what constitutes a genre, one has to demonstrate that there is a constant repetition of functions in a large body of tales" (xi). This constant repetition is what allows Lackey and Pratchett to subvert expectations. Neither book would work without an understanding of how the stories are meant to proceed. Part of the self-reflexiveness of both books is that the characters too are aware of this. In Lackey, her main character Elena is prompted for what ought to have been 'her' story, the "Cinderella" story, and she knows it and its variants in detail. The characters in Pratchett too are aware of traditional story. However, Haberkorn argues that "[t]hroughout the book, Granny subverts traditional fairy tales, and the fact that story structure is alien to her is illustrated, amusingly, by the fact that she cannot tell a joke — although she keeps trying" (182). I would disagree; Haberkorn has conflated two distinct facets of Granny Weatherwax's personality into an easy explanation. I will not go into what her inability to tell jokes is a symptom of as this is peripheral to my topic, but I would note that Haberkorn goes on to argue that "[o]nce such patterns have become observable laws, characters are bound to recognize and understand them, and they begin using them for their own ends" (182). And Granny Weatherwax, as one of (if not the) most knowing of the characters in the Discworld is surely part of this. Granny Weatherwax is powerfully aware of the shape and structure of story, which is in evidence every time that she subverts it. Her personal interactions with story force her to contend with it in an intimate manner. For example, her sister styles herself a fairy godmother but in fact works in ways considered evil (or traditionally witch-like), thus forcing Granny to counteract her effect by being 'good' (even if she looks the part of the evil witch). Just as Granny Weatherwax must be aware of story to subvert it, so too Lackey, Pratchett and the reader must all be aware of 'story structure' in order for these books to work.

13   In *Touch Magic,* Jane Yolen argues that "the great archetypal stories provide a framework or model for an individual's belief system" (18) and as Albert Laving argues further in the same book: "Myth conceived of as symbolic form...[is] a way of organizing the human response to reality...[and is] a fundamental aspect of the way we 'process' experience" (17). Thus fiction like fairy tales allows us to form belief systems, and shape how the world seems to us. This can be both a negative and positive experience. Freud, Jung and James Hillman, among others, have realised the potential for healing in

stories and myth but these archetypes can also act in a negative way in that these frameworks and processes can become encoded and un-questioned, no matter how unnatural the frame. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* famously argues that gender is performative, a layer of repeated acts instead of something biological or inherent. It is this tendency for repeated acts and customs to seem 'natural' that can sometimes be a danger in formalised settings like traditional fairy tales.

14   Pratchett attacks archetypes and fairy tales in several ways. Instead of having a "Cinderella" variant where she rescues herself (but still becomes entangled with the Prince as in Mercedes Lackey's version *Phoenix and Ashes* (2005)), Pratchett renders the story absurd and destroys it entirely. Lackey, on the other hand, does not question the happily-ever-after sentiment, which is the crucial difference between these authors. This might be because her stories are marketed as primarily romance (they are published by Luna — the fantasy imprint of romance publisher Harlequin). Webb argues "The wider problem of narrative patterning is not unique to fantasy, but the nature of the pattern, and its generally 'happy' conclusion, is perhaps of particular concern within this genre" (2). It is not just a matter of genre however, or at least, it is not *just* a matter of genre that separates Pratchett's take from Lackey's. Pratchett is not particularly known for his subtlety, but he is known for his humour (as John Clute examines in "Coming of Age" and as Andrew Butler explores in his chapter "Theories of Humour"). But in this instance Pratchett's approach is a far subtler one than Lackey's as it relies on a deeper understanding of old fairy tale variants, and an in depth inspection of what the traditional forms mean in the world, not just in the story world.

15   What both Pratchett and Lackey use is the 'classical' form of the fairy tales. But, as Yolen argues in *Touch Magic*, "These stories underwent continuous change, for they were not carved in stone, not set in wood or metal type to repeat themselves endlessly and perfectly on the white page" (22). This setting in stone came later, when many fairy tales had hundreds of different renderings, one of the reasons Propp chose to examine what the characters *did* rather than who they *were* for his taxonomy. However, both Lackey and Pratchett play with this, Pratchett in a slightly more knowing way. Towards the end of *Witches Abroad*, the interfering fairy godmother taunts, "[y]ou've got to put on your red-hot shoes and dance the night away?" (342), referring to the lesser-known "Cinderella" variant where that is the stepmother's punishment. Though Lackey's use of variants is less subtle, it is still evident in the ways in which the fairy godmothers twist the stories to suit their own ends.

16   As in Lackey, fairy godmothers are generally presented as a positive granter of wishes and smoother of ways. In Pratchett however, fairy godmothers are scrutinised. In typical Pratchett style, he uses humour to examine cultural norms. "Cutting your way through a bit of bramble is how you can tell he's going to be a good husband, is it? That's fairy godmotherly thinking, that is!"(118) scolds Granny Weatherwax. And, of course, in fairy tales, that *is* how good husbands are chosen, though it is not presented that way within the fairy tale world. In typical fairy tale worlds the ability to chop wood is presented as a clear strength, one only 'worthy' princes are capable of (just as the ability to chop wood is naturalised as a husband trait -so too is what makes a worthy husband not explored). "Fairy

godmotherly thinking" as Granny Weatherwax exclaims is critiqued throughout Pratchett, exemplified as what could otherwise be termed 'fairy tale logic'. In the traditional fairy tales typified by Disney, Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and others, a man's ability to chop through briars is considered a suitable test for matrimony without much thought as to what this might actually mean (or, more accurately, might not mean) in terms of spousal suitability.

17   In Lackey, the fairy godmother is presented in a more traditional light. A fairy godmother is a saviour — someone who ensures everything goes right. She is someone from within the stories who has a tradition of her own. When the Fairy Godmother of the title is first put into her costume, she exclaims, "And that wand looks, well, silly. Like something out of a book of tales" and one of her magical servants exclaims, "That's the *point*!" (131) The power in Lackey can be found and used within stories. The slight variation is that the fairy godmother is the main character — allowing Lackey to show the work put into keeping tales 'happy'. For example, Lackey's main character Elena in her new role as fairy godmother assists a woman whose baby "The Tradition" insists on turning into a Ladderlocks. Elena, as fairy godmother, works from within the tale to twist it into a different story. Elena makes sure to play the part of the 'angry witch' character so that when payment is demanded of the thief father as is traditional in the "Ladderlocks" story, Elena can turn the child into a character from "the princess and the pea" story instead. The child will thus still move in status from peasant to princess as "The Tradition" wishes her to, but in a far less damaging way to all involved. However, both stories are still standard variants. Pratchett uses standard variants as well — but a few times one of the witches, usually Granny Weatherwax, makes note that there are other variations of the tales than those presented.

18   When Pratchett's fairy godmother throws a toymaker in jail because he only makes toys (and does not whistle, or tell stories) we laugh, but are also reminded of narrative expectation and the way in which those roles may be binding. Maria Tatar argues "protagonists of the tales are often schematised or reduced to their function within the plot" (quoted in Sellers, 9), and this is true of characters in both Pratchett and Lackey. Lackey's character Elena is aware that as a young woman she has very few options within the tales available, and even within her world at large. And it is true that though men are impacted by fairy tales, it is the women that both Pratchett and Lackey focus on because it is the women who have fewer choices, and who are easier to dispatch in curtailed ways.

19   Richard Bradford uses the familiar structure of fairy tale to make a point about stylistics when he argues,

> a folktale in which the princess kidnaps her father, the King, in the hope of eliciting a ransom from the villain would be dismissed as absurd because it distorts the usual realm of possibilities within the social-familial network of roles and functions in the non-fictional world. (54)

This is just one example of many where the strict and traditional order of fairy tales can be used to startle its readers. Fantasy too uses this element of surprise, and as both Pratchett and Lackey work

within both these traditions this element of surprise can come from several different expected outcomes. Although not stretching to quite to the extreme Bradford goes, Pratchett and Lackey both disrupt the ordered, and the expected, and in doing so cause the reader to examine their expectations as well.

20   Pratchett's approach allows the fairy tales to be examined from within, highlighting the disadvantaged. Pratchett's witches discuss the "Little Red Ridinghood" story,

> It's all right if there's woodcutters! One of them rushes in [...]" "That's only what   children get told [...] Anyway, that's no good to the grandmother, is it? She's already *been* et!" "I always hated that story," said Nanny. "No-one ever cares what happens to poor defenceless old women. (122)

As Granny Weatherwax and Nanny Ogg have both pointed out, it is often women, and sometimes elderly women, who bear the brunt of the fairy tale. Perhaps young Little Red Ridinghood herself is given a happy ending, but what *about* the grandmother? This recognition, this seeing the other side of the tale, runs throughout both Pratchett and Lackey's stories.

21   This is an interesting play on the theme of stories coming alive, something which has become more common in recent years. In the children's book *The Great Good Thing* (2001) by Roderik Townley for example, the characters of a story book are alive within it, for instance, needing to dash from page to page in order to be in position for their next scene. There it is a literal 'seeing the other side', but Pratchett and Lackey approach similar questions from a different angle. There is a focus on highlighting the usually less important members of a story in all of these books. Pratchett does that multiple times throughout *Witches Abroad*, such as when the witches encounter the wolf from "Little Red Ridinghood", and Lackey does it to a lesser extent by focusing on the suitors who must die for a Ladderlocks, or the parents that lose their daughter at sixteen to be a Princess bride.

22   Donald Hasse and others have focused on female re-tellings, or revisions of traditional fairy tales in an effort to discover (or perhaps, re-discover) how women have subverted a male dominated tradition for hundreds of years. Elizabeth Wanning Harries argues that "Fairy tales provide scripts for living, but they can also inspire resistance to those scripts and in turn, to other apparently predetermined patterns" (103). This, though specifically applied to female feminist retellings, strikes me as exactly what Pratchett is doing. Feminist examinations of fairy tale have been prevalent since the 1970's, and fairy tales themselves have changed in that time. Perhaps it is time to examine them from both sides of the gender spectrum. As the title of the book *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* humorously proclaims, Pratchett has taken on a number of literary conventions and, in his own unique way, punctured or played with many of them, creating literature out of humour and fun. In her introduction to *The Hard Facts of The Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Tatar argues that "The cast of folkloric characters is remarkably limited when compared to that of literature, and the plots in which the characters of folktales move unfold in a relatively uniform matter" (xvi). Thus Pratchett frees fairy tales from their traditionally constrained forms, and allows the characters outside their normative patterns.

Lackey too does this. Both create spaces for the characters to move in, and thus provide options for readers living outside of these stories as well.

23   Studies have shown that humour is an effective way of remembering, or signposting where attention should be paid. Comic moments abound in Pratchett, like when a house lands out of the blue on one of the witches, and she is shaken but not harmed; and the "bad" fairy godmother thinks, "Witches ought to be squashed when a farmhouse lands on them. Lilith knew that. All squashed, except for their boots sticking out. Sometimes she despaired. People just didn't seem to be able to play their parts properly" (146). Lilith, and in turn the reader, know that this is the outcome from *The Wizard of Oz,* and thus an expected, and familiar, outcome. Andrew Butler argues that "we can begin to look at the Discworld as a secondary world which gives Pratchett a comic distance from reality in order to criticise the world of the everyday" (36). It is this comic distance, I argue, that separates Pratchett's effort from Lackey. Lackey seems to have fallen short of the comedic with her use of the expected — she instead focuses on the happiness or tragedy of the stories. That is not to say that Pratchett's look at stories is altogether humorous. Even though Pratchett is primarily known for his humour, he has also used it to convey serious messages. Perhaps humour is not always what Pratchett is using, maybe Brian Attebery's argument about fantasy literature as a whole gives the key, "Fantasy is fundamentally playful — which does not mean that it is not serious. Its way of playing with symbols encourages the reader to see meaning as something unstable and elusive, rather than single and self-evident" (2). Both Pratchett and Lackey "play with symbols" and in doing so, cause the reader to question the stories that have surrounded us, often since birth.

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