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Terence (Terry) David John Pratchett

Pyramids (Discworld, 7)

United Kingdom (1989)

TAGS: Aesop Ancient Religious Practices Ancient Sacrifice Ancient Warfare Aristophanes Aristotle Athens Cleopatra VII Democracy Egypt Egyptian Mythology Founding Legends Greek Philosophy Homer Plato Ptolemaic Egypt Pythagoras Sparta Sphinx Symposium Thermopylae Trojan Horse Trojan War Zeno of Elea





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General information	
Title of the work	Pyramids (Discworld, 7)
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1989
First Edition Details	Terry Pratchett, *Pyramids*. Great Britain: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1989, 256 pp.
ISBN	9780575044632
Official Website	terrypratchettbooks.com; discworld.com (accessed: November 15, 2019).
Awards	1989 – British Science Fiction Award (Best Novel)
Genre	Fantasy fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Crossover (12+)
Author of the Entry	Selene Patterson, Victoria University of Wellington, selenerosepatterson@gmail.com

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Creators



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Terence (Terry) David John Pratchett , 1948 - 2015 (Author)

Terry Pratchett was an English writer best known for his Discworld series. Born in Buckingshire, England, and active since 1971, Pratchett's novels have sold more than 85 million copies worldwide in 37 languages. His most well-known books include *The Colour of Magic* (1983), *Snuff* (2011), and *Good Omens* (1990), a collaboration with long-time friend and fellow author Neil Gaiman. Pratchett was knighted in 2009 for services to literature. Pratchett was also interested in literature, computers, astronomy, and natural history (he collected carnivorous plants). He was a noted humanist, being awarded Humanist of the Year by the British Humanist Association in 2013, for his campaign to fund research into Alzheimers and his public contribution to the euthanasia debate. Pratchett died in 2015 after a long and well-documented struggle with Alzheimer's disease.

Sources:

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'BHA mourns patron Terry Pratchett', British Humanist Association (accessed: September 13, 2019).

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Additional information

Translation

Polish: *Piramidy*, trans. Piotr W. Cholewa, Prószyński i S-ka, 1998.

Serbian: *Пирамиде/Piramide*, trans. Dejan Papić, Belgrad: Laguna, 2000.

Russian: *Пирамиды* [Piramidy], trans. V. Simonov, Eksmo, 2001.

Spanish: *Piromides*, trans. Albert Sole, Debolsillo, 2004.

French: *Pyramides*, trans. Marc Simonetti, Jacques Goimard, Benedicte Lombardo, Patrick Couton, Pocket, 2011.

Dutch: *Pyramides*, trans. Venugopalan Ittekot, De Boekerij, 2011.

German: *Pyramiden: Ein Roman von der bizarren Scheibenwelt*, trans. Andreas Brandhorst, 2015.

Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs

Pyramids is the seventh novel of Pratchett's Discworld series.

It was the first of the stand-alone novels, and is not part of the myriad of subseries within Discworld, though it is sometimes published as an omnibus under the name *The Gods Trilogy* (2000) with *Small Gods* (1992) and *Hogfather* (1996).

Pyramids is not the only novel within the Discworld series to feature extensive classical references. The most obvious example is *Eric* (1990), where Pratchett rewrites the sack of Troy.

Summary

Pyramids is set in the fictional Djelibeybi (or the Djel), the tiny, powerless remains of an empire whose only importance is as a strategic block between its neighbours, Tsort and Ephebe. Pteppic/Teppic, the crown prince, has been training at the Assassin's Guild in Ankh-Morpork. Returning to the kingdom following his father's death, Teppic discovers that he has no real power, and the real ruler is Dios, the ancient high priest. After an unfortunate series of misunderstandings in which he is accused of attempting to assassinate himself, Teppic escapes the palace with a handmaiden

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named Ptraci. At the same time, the massive pyramid being built to house Teppic's deceased father warps space time and pulls the Djel out of alignment with the rest of the Disc by 90 degrees. As the Djel's powerful neighbours prepare for war, Teppic and Ptraci travel to Ephebe to consult their famed philosophers about the kingdom's disappearance. Meanwhile, the beliefs of the Djel's inhabitants come true: bestial gods fight each other for control, and the Djel's several thousand deceased rulers come back to life.

Teppic manages to re-enter the kingdom with the intention of destroying the Great Pyramid. He is confronted by Dios, who is as old as the kingdom itself. Dios believes the kingdom should stay exactly as it has always been, but Teppic gets away and, with the help of his newly resurrected ancestors, succeeds in destroying the Great Pyramid. The resulting explosion returns the Djel to the same reality as the Disc and sends Dios back in time, restarting the cycle. Teppic then abdicates, replaced by Ptraci (who turns out to be his half-sister). Ptraci immediately institutes much needed change – most importantly, no more pyramids.

Analysis

Pyramids is an early example of a Discworld novel, and relies on parody more than the satire familiar from Pratchett's later novels. Pratchett plays with existing history and literature, subverting the reader's expectations or pushing the concept to the point of ridiculousness to introduce humour. His work is also scattered with references and allusions in varying degrees of difficulty, most just subtle enough to make the reader feel accomplished in recognising them. Nevertheless, Pratchett's works never feel elitist; they are accessible and enjoyable while introducing a dizzying range of topics from Hollywood and rock 'n roll to ancient Egypt and quantum physics. While primarily a fantasy novel, *Pyramids* features extensive references to science fiction, particularly the quantum mechanics in Pratchett's interpretation of the function of pyramids. Much of the history and ancient culture present in *Pyramids* - elements of popular modern belief such as togas and mummies – would be recognisable even to a reader with a cursory knowledge of the topic, making the book accessible to younger readers as well as adults; however, there are a few characters and references that are harder to distinguish, and require either prior knowledge or an inquisitive mind to understand. The symposium scene, for instance, requires a more in-

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depth knowledge of classical philosophers and writers to understand the caricature figures of Pythagonal and Ibid, among others. Like Pullman, Pratchett's works reward re-reading.

Djelbeybi features all the well-known aspects of ancient and Hellenistic Egyptian culture, but these are subverted: the mummies are not all that fond of pyramids, or mummification for that matter, and the god-king remains unconvinced of his own divinity. In its bankruptcy, relative powerlessness, sheer age and penchant for rather useless rulers, Djelibeybi resembles the last few decades of Ptolemaic Egypt: the name 'Pteppic' is similar to 'Ptolemy', and the practice of interfamilial marriage, though also common in the ancient dynasties, resembles Ptolemaic practices; Teppic's half-sister Ptraci, who enters wrapped in a carpet and bathes in asses' milk, is clearly based on popular modern conceptions of Cleopatra as she appears in films like *Cleopatra* (1963) and *Carry On Cleo* (1964).

Despite the emphasis on Egypt, there are also numerous references to the Classical world. Tsort and Ephebe, the Djel's neighbours, are hodge-podges of traditional enemies: Greece and Persia, Rome and Carthage, Mycenae and Troy – but everything is so confused not even their inhabitants can remember which is which. This is typical of Pratchett novels, particularly the early ones. He builds on subjects the readers are likely to know (or at least think they know) and combines or subverts them to introduce comedy. Usually this happens because the characters - like the majority of Pratchett's audience - only know enough about certain subjects to make an educated guess. Unfortunately, that guess is often wrong. This is illustrated particularly well in the symposium scene, where the Ephebian philosophers are arguing over what to do when Tsort and Ephebe inevitably go to war; Antiphon complains that the Tsorteans are bad sports, and the Ephebians should not be held to account for stealing their queen. But Copolymer corrects him; it was the Tsorteans who stole the Ephebian queen, at least he's pretty sure. The point is, of course, that Copolymer is not actually sure of anything. Not even the well-educated philosophers remember the truth of the matter. Both countries are a confused mishmash of classical traditions. They are enemies, but no one remembers exactly why. Throwaway comments like 'Tsort wasn't built in a day', and Teppic's befuddled idea of Ephebe's system of government (which he believes is called a 'mocracy') strengthen the association. The Ephebians themselves wear only crisp white togas familiar from Roman portraiture, and the lighthouse Teppic admires resembles the real-life Lighthouse of

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Alexandria.

The symposium Teppic attends in Ephebe, which he concludes really 'meant a knife-and-fork tea', resembles the ancient Greek version in that it is a gathering of men from which women are excluded, who are set a topic by the symposiarch and expected to intelligently debate it, as do the characters in Plato's *Symposium*. Many famous figures are present here, in barely disguised forms. Teppic's mission is to consult the famed geometrist Pthagonal – Pythagoras – who spends most of the dinner miserably contemplating the ridiculousness of Pi. The first philosopher he actually meets is Xeno, the only character to retain his original name due to his relative obscurity. Xeno is deep in a failed experiment involving an arrow and a tortoise, a reference to Zeno's Paradox. His colleague Ibid is harder to pin down; however, Xeno's complaint that 'the trouble with you, Ibid, is that you think you're the biggest bloody authority on everything', together with his name, hints towards one of the more quoted philosophers, Aristotle, perhaps, or Plato. Also present at the symposium are Copolymer, a storyteller with a terrible memory who tells a confused version of the Tsortean War (Homer), Iesope, the 'greatest teller of fables in the world' (Aesop), and the comedic writer Antiphon (Aristophanes). The chaos of this dinner scene, and in particular the way they rhapsodise over Copolymer/Homer, is reminiscent of the 1863 Magny dinners in Paris: mediocre food, overlapping conversation, and all of the greatest thinkers in Paris competing to be heard.

Religion in the Djel resembles Egypt by the Hellenistic period. Hundreds of ancient animal-like gods are worshipped simultaneously, many of whom perform the same function. Most aspects are familiar from ancient religion: sacrificial offerings later eaten by the worshipper, daily offerings of food to the dead, living god-kings, and belief in a certain kind of afterlife. The sections of the novel have titles referring to the Egyptian Book of the Dead, a guide to travelling through the afterlife. There is a heavy emphasis on life after death throughout, with sections told through the eyes of Teppic's deceased father, and, if one counts the ancestors, there are arguably more deceased characters than living ones. The staff of Dios, the undead high priest, is entwined with snakes, similar to the staff of Asklepius, who was said to have raised people from the dead. Snakes themselves were associated in Classical times with the underworld and immortality; all very suitable for a character like Dios.

A major mythological reference, to which Pratchett returned in *Eric*

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(1990), is to the Trojan War. On the Discworld, this is the Tsortean War between Tsort and Ephebe, though no one can remember who started it (much as Herodotus reports conflicting accounts of the beginnings of the Persian War, 1.1-4). Several figures are recognisable: Eleanor of Tsort is obviously Helen of Troy ('the face that launched a thousand camels'). There is also the Trojan Horse, which both Tsort and Ephebe attempt to replicate when hostilities break out again, to no effect. There are several strong references to Sparta; a young soldier reports that his mother told him to come back 'with your shield or on it', a quote from Plutarch's *Sayings of Spartan Women* (241 F 16), and the Ephebian captain starts to give a message, 'Go tell the Ephebians…', referencing the beginning of Simonides' epitaph of the 300 at Thermopylae (Herodotus, 7.228).

The presence of these numerous references is the basis for Pratchett's plot, and provides hundreds of opportunities for the writer to parody existing concepts and show off his witty style and broad knowledge. Character associations (such as Ptraci with Cleopatra) add extra depth to the characterisations and play off pre-existing audience expectations. In some cases this adds more humour to the situation; the character of Copolymer becomes far more humorous once the Homer association is clear. Placing these references within a fantasy genre allows Pratchett greater freedom to explore and more room for parody. Unlike other books for children and young adults, Pratchett does not write with didacticism in mind. On the contrary, his novel assumes prior knowledge of the subject, and instead turns whimsical, showing readers that classical culture can, when allowed, be merely a source of enjoyment.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aesop Ancient Religious Practices Ancient Sacrifice Ancient Warfare Aristophanes Aristotle Athens Cleopatra VII Democracy Egypt Egyptian Mythology Founding Legends Greek Philosophy Homer Plato Ptolemaic Egypt Pythagoras Sparta Sphinx Symposium Thermopylae Trojan Horse Trojan War Zeno of Elea
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Death Family Heritage Hierarchy History Humour Identity Life Magic Modernity Religious beliefs Scepticism Science Tradition Truth and lies War

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Further Reading

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