

Interesting Times Short Guide

Interesting Times by Terry Pratchett

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Characters

Rincewind is the reluctant hero and bumbling coward who failed wizardry at Unseen University. He spends much of his time trying to run away from dangerous situations, only to smack up against another one. He becomes one of the counterpoints against the Empire's social values and serves to actively compare them with those of Ankh-Morpork. He questions whether there are any peasants involved in the plan for a new government (there aren't) or if anyone has asked the peasants what they desire (no one has). While our hero believes it is wisest to give peasants the opportunities to learn on their own, he also realizes that in the Agatean Empire, people simply do what they are told.

Lord Hong is chief antagonist in the novel. He sets up Rincewind and the Red Army to take the blame for the Emperor's death so that he can become the new ruler. Lord Hong represents everything that is wrong with the Empire. He is willing to sacrifice the peasants of Hunghung in order to win the Emperor's throne and believes they should be willing to die at his bidding. The Empire only dissolves completely when Lord Hong is killed.

Cohen the Barbarian not only moves the plot along by usurping the throne, but also represents the values of the Morporkians. While he is not civilized nor clean, once he is Emperor he embodies loyalty, fairness, earning one's riches, and treating people like human beings, if not always kindly. Cohen earns the throne through bloodshed and even confronts Lord Hong, who has captured Rincewind. "Rincewind's a weasel," declares Cohen, "but he's our weasel."

Social Concerns

The main social issue in *Interesting Times* is oppression. Rincewind the Wizard meets with it everywhere he turns during his adventures in the Agatean Empire.

When he meets up with his old friend Ghenghiz Cohen, a ninety-year-old barbarian who has been captured and placed in a chain gang, he sees firsthand how embedded subjugation has become in the culture of the Empire. Upon freeing himself, Cohen kills the five guards and frees the other slaves. The former slaves, however, regard Cohen as their new master, an idea reinforced when Rincewind feeds them real meat instead of entrails. Cohen encapsulates the problem with a comment on the popular pig's ear soup: "What's that tell you about a place, eh? . . . Some other bugger pinches the Pig" Although the inept wizard runs away from any involvement in events, Rincewind inevitably sees for himself the truth of Cohen's statement. The peasants have become trained not to draw attention to themselves and pointedly avoid eye contact with anyone above them in rank.

Rincewind is mistaken for nobility simply because he is riding a horse and no one dares look at him. Even the revolutionaries who seek to overthrow the Empire are polite and demure. They use slogans such as "Long Live The Changing Things To A More Equitable State While Retaining Due Respect For The Traditions Of Our Forebears And Of Course Not Harming The August Personage Of The Emperor Endeavor!"

Although Ghenghiz Cohen is aware of the persecution of the poor, he soon learns that the upper classes are equally restricted in their thoughts and actions.

While they have more economic freedom than those of lower status, cultural mandates enforce obedience to the Emperor and his ministers. Rules of politeness silence any criticism of the government.

Veneration of one's ancestors is so important that a reproach of the government is also an insult to one's forefathers, an unthinkable sin. Movement is also restricted through mutilation of the body in the name of fashion. The binding of feet and wearing extremely long fingernails sacrifice ease of movement to perceived beauty.

Absolute monarchy, with its unconditional control over others, becomes a social concern as Pratchett juxtaposes it against Ankh-Morpork, chiefly through Cohen's Silver Horde and Rincewind the Wizard. True, Ankh-Morpork has its share of peasants living in inhuman conditions, political intrigues, and life-threatening dangers. However, there is an attitude of choice and individualism among Morporkians. Criticism of government is more likely than veneration of anyone, except one's self. Uneducated men, the Silver Horde choose to rob and fight for large amounts of money rather than performing manual labor for menial pay.

While such a capitalistic system is not perfect, Pratchett seems to find the opportunities it provides preferable to the enslavement of monarchy.

Pratchett connects his ideas to the modern world by lampooning China and Great Britain through his depiction of the Agatean Empire and Ankh-Morpork.

The Agatean Empire bears strong resemblance to China with its emphasis on enforced obedience, as well as the practice of feet-binding and a class of eunuchs. Britain can be seen in Ankh-Morpork's dual governing system. Britain still retains a monarchy which works in conjunction with Parliament, similar to Ankh-Morpork's supreme ruler Lord Vetinari and the powerful Unseen University. Pratchett produces comic effect by exaggerating modern countries' faults to an extreme, such as Silver Horde's attempt to "steal" the Agatean Empire for themselves.

Techniques

Although Pratchett's novel is a fantasy, one crucial technique he uses is that of comedy in an Aristotelian sense. Characters are made farcical, thus rendering them inferior to readers and thereby distancing these readers from the serious undertone of the book. Deformities are made ridiculous—such as Cohen's diamond dwarf teeth—and minor faults are magnified—as with Rincewind's practiced art of running away. Distancing the characters in these ways allows the reader to enjoy the tale and the author to discuss serious social concerns such as oppression of the masses.

Pratchett also uses *deus ex machina*, but with a twist. Instead of introducing the idea of the gods at the end of the tale to quickly rescue his characters, the author introduces the gods at the beginning of the tale, plainly setting up Fate and Lady Luck to interfere in events whenever Pratchett may deem it necessary. Several times the Quantum Weather Butterfly affects the action in the story, most notably at the end to rescue Rincewind from certain death. However, the outcome is never quite so neat and tidy as one might expect. Although Rincewind is detoured from Unseen University where he would have died landing, he is sent to the XXXX Continent, where it seems he will once again become involved in "interesting times." By making the *deus ex machina* device ridiculous through overuse, Pratchett weaves the technique into the comedy fabric itself.

Themes

Oppression of the masses leads into the larger theme of social values. The moral principles of the Agateans are compared to those of the Morporkians.

Cohen and his Silver Horde—a group of sixty elderly barbarians and one elderly former teacher—make an excellent counterpoint to the Agateans. Saveloy's role is to civilize the Horde so that they can overthrow the Empire in an Agatean fashion. The barbarians find good manners and politeness chaffing and difficult, not to mention incomprehensible.

As part of his training, Cohen is instructed by Saveloy to buy an apple from a merchant, a task that he performs grudgingly. When the merchant calls him "venerable," Cohen beats the cart owner and steals his money. Pratchett here is underlining the hypocrisy of barbarian ethics. Cohen pays for the apple with one hand, while robbing the merchant with the other hand. It is questionable whether Cohen's paying for the apple is an improvement over the Agatean's style of polite theft without payment.

Pratchett's comment on conflicting social ethics continues as the values of Ankh-Morpork are placed under scrutiny as well. Pratchett notes that the Thieves Guild makes a point of not killing its victims so they can be robbed again the following week. Much of Ankh-Morpork is as ruthless and independent. People are free to make their own decisions and never kowtow to anyone. Rincewind reflects that had he tried to demand that a person hand over her money in Ankh-Morpork, he would "be scrabbling in the gutter for his teeth." Rincewind notes, too, that "freedom did, of course, include man's age-old right to starve to death." Independence and freedom have their price.

In the end, a more humane and practical rule has come to the Empire through Ghenghiz Cohen, but it is not a perfect one. Saveloy illustrates a point that the Silver Horde, and many people of AnkhMorpork, never seem to grasp: "It is possible sometimes for money to legitimately belong to other people." The inconsistencies of the Horde's morals are worth it, however. Defending yourself and your friends, fighting for what you believe in, and giving everyone a fair chance to succeed or fail are welcome changes in the Empire.

Returning to the underlying comparison of Britain and China, Pratchett creates an ending that favors British government and ideals. While not a perfect system, it does grant individuals basic rights and freedoms, oppressing no one group in favor of another. The benefits to the Chinese would result in individual growth and success.



Key Questions

Interesting Times provides much material for group discussions. Readers can study how Pratchett's series compares to other fantasy series, focusing on either series that link novels through place, like Bradley's Darkover, or through character and plot, as in David Eddings's Belgariad series. Readers who are familiar with other Discworld novels may want to discuss how two or three of the novels compare with each other.

Readers may give heed to Pratchett's use of comedy to tell his story, comparing Interesting Times with novels in the fantasy genre (any of Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker series), as well as across genres. Shakespeare, for example, often uses the clown in his plays to delivery serious points in an argument, as with the grave-diggers in Hamlet (V.i.).

Finally, Interesting Times contains serious social concerns. Readers can concentrate on oppression, values of a society, and how Pratchett's world may reflect our own.

1. How does magic work in this novel in comparison to other fantasy novels you have read? What do you suppose Pratchett's purpose is in creating the magic of Discworld in the way that he does?

2. What is the value of magic versus technology in the Agatean Empire? In Ankh-Morpork? Compare the two. What does the novel conclude?

3. How has Pratchett developed his Discworld novels? Does he use the same literary techniques to tell a story? Do recurring characters like Rincewind evolve? How so?

4. The opening scene of the gods playing board games can be viewed as a prologue of sorts. What might the purpose be in opening the novel this way? How does it compare, for example, to Shakespeare's use of prologue in his plays, notably Henry V?

5. How do Ankh-Morpork's social values compare to the Agatean Empire's?

Is it really a better way of life? Are the Silver Horde's values so different from Lord Hong's?

6. How does the novel define "honor"?

Does it change in the course of the story?

Does meaning vary from character to character? What is a character's basis for meaning? How does the outcome of the novel affect the understanding of honor?

7. What is the role belief plays in this novel? Which characters are most affected by what they believe in and how?

Does belief create reality in Discworld?



8. What does the author believe to be the right way to help the peasants? How does Pratchett assert his opinion? Why does he not act upon it?

Literary Precedents

Interesting Times as a Discworld fantasy novel, falls into step with Mercedes Lackey's Valdemar novels, as well as Marion Zimmer Bradley's Darkover series and Anne McCaffrey's Pern novels. Each of these series links its novels together by place, rather than by plot. The main characters change from novel to novel, although some characters do reoccur.

The Discworld series most closely follows Bradley's Darkover novels, in that each book contains a complete story, rather than a plot carrying over two or three books, as with some of the Valdemar and Pern novels.

The recurring character placed in different roles is one benefit of connecting a series by place. Rincewind figures largely in Interesting Times, but has been a supporting character in other Discworld novels. Lackey makes the same move in her Valdemar. Kerowyn, for example, is the protagonist in *By the Sword* (1991; see separate entry). She later appears in a minor role in other novels, such as *Winds of Fate* (1991).

Discworld and Pern share similarities as well. The amount of detail given over several novels is such that the setting becomes almost another character. As more novels are added, the characteristics of the setting change and develop.

McCaffrey's Pern begins as a dangerous threat to the settler with its silver Thread.

As time goes on, the community begins to understand what the Thread is, thus removing some of the threat, making Pern a less dangerous place to live. With Pratchett's *Ankh-Morpork*, the more details uncovered about the city, the more the character of the city is revealed as crooked, greedy, and dangerous.

Related Titles

Interesting Times is a stand-alone book in Pratchett's Discworld series, which includes *The Colour of Magic* (1983; see separate entry), *The Light Fantastic* (1986), *Mort* (1987), *Sourcery* (1988), *Wyrd Sisters* (1988), *Pyramids* (1989), *Guards! Guards!*

(1989), *Eric* (1989, with Josh Kirby), *Moving Pictures* (1990), *Reaper Man* (1991), *Witches Abroad* (1991), *Small Gods* (1992; see separate entry), *Lords and Ladies* (1992), *Men at Arms* (1993), *Soul Music* (1995), *Maskerade* (1995), *Feet of Clay* (1996), *Hogfather* (1996). Rincewind makes his first appearances in the first two Discworld novels: *The Colour of Magic* and *The Light Fantastic*. Students may be interested in reading books from different points in the series to study the growth and change of the author's writing.



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