

Small Gods Short Guide

Small Gods by Terry Pratchett

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Characters

Brutha is a sort of idiot savant at first, a lowly novice in the Citadel relegated to tending melons because he is not up to much else. He is tolerated because of his absolute humility and obedience, and he attracts the attention of Vorbis because of his phenomenal memory. Brutha is simply incapable of forgetting anything, except for a few mysterious childhood traumas. He solves the Labyrinth of Ephebe by recalling and retracing every step; he absorbs the entire contents of the great library of Ephebe before it is burned.

He cannot read, but he can nonetheless recall every symbol he saw. All the information stored in his astonishing brain interacts with his new and transforming experiences to galvanize his essential goodness for action. Always fleshy, passive, and lumpish, always unquestioningly obedient to authority, he begins to think. Carrying his god around in the form of an irascible tortoise, hearing to his horror how much of his religion has simply been invented by the prophets without reference to Om, Brutha somehow keeps his faith, and adds wisdom to it. He stops obeying anyone or anything but his own sense of what is right; thus, he gains the moral authority to become the lawgiver and prophet of the new Omnianism, a religion of basic decency, tolerance, and forgiveness.

As a virtually helpless but constantly wrathful tortoise, Om combines features of several stock comic characters.

He is the fiery midget goading the gentle giant, the street-smart hustler carping at the innocent he has decided to protect. He is so helpless for so long that he remains amusing even after he is restored to his old avatar: It has become impossible to take seriously his repeated curses and threats. Although he could smite anyone he liked, and though he has a long list of enemies made during his time in the shell, he has grown in other ways, grown too large for petty revenge.



Social Concerns

Small Gods focuses on religion: why people need it, how they abuse it, what makes it work. By setting the tale in his imaginary Discworld, Pratchett avoids some of the minefields that tend to bedevil the path of those who explore such issues. "Omnianism" is a broad parody of Christianity, but Pratchett is less interested in ridiculing religion than in examining how it affects people. Although many of his allusions are to practices and conflicts of the distant past, his concerns are contemporary, stirred by the persistence of fanaticism and intolerance.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

In a sense, the entire novel is built around a favorite anecdote from classical times, the yarn about the philosopher who was killed when an eagle mistook his bald head for a rock and dropped a tortoise on it. All the rest falls rather neatly in place around the central joke. The philosopher turns into Ephebe, a whole city full of marvelous parodies of Greek thinkers. The tortoise naturally calls to mind the galactic turtle on which the Discworld muddles through the universe, which in turn suggests a new religion for the Omnians to persecute. Once the philosophical and religious conflicts are established as central concerns, Pratchett has ample scope for his whimsy, and the pages are full of allusions which are opposite to the story and at the same time a delight for the educated reader, references to Galileo, the Church Fathers, Greek mythology and history, invariably funny, and invariably with a thought worth noting wrapped in the humor.

Pratchett may be the most accomplished parodist since Cervantes. He carries on a tradition dating back at least to Aristophanes and Lucian, both of whom showed the same outrageous disrespect for gods, philosophers, and other institutions. An interesting precursor of Brutha is the mnemonic Ireneo Funes of the story "Funes el memorioso" (Funes the Memory Man) by Jorge Luis Borges. Borges's protagonist is eventually destroyed by the sheer weight of all that memory, however, whereas Brutha is able to keep his balance.

Themes

The central theme of the novel might be expressed as follows: gods need people, and people need gods. This theme comes through most consistently and effectively in the ever-evolving relationship between Brutha and Om.

Brutha is the only genuine believer left to the (formerly) great god Om. Everyone else is too caught up in the machinery of Omnianism to remember the god; some devote their energies to crushing infidels and heretics, while the rest scramble to observe all the ceremonies; they pray, if at all, only to be spared the attentions of the "Quisition." Brutha progresses from unthinking fundamentalism and blind obedience through doubt to a humane, philosophical Omnianism of which he is the reluctant prophet. He never abandons his god, despite unusually concrete reasons for doing so; instead, he rejects his old, bad religion, and helps to make a new one by thinking for himself.

Om, a god fond of manifesting himself as a trampling bull or lightningslinging smiter during his glory years, has fallen on hard times. As worship of Omnianism gradually took over from worship of Om, the god dwindled.

Finally, he has become trapped in the body of a tortoise and only remembers his own divine nature when a preposterous coincidence brings him close to Brutha. Thereafter he is almost completely dependent on his last remaining worshipper. As he often does, Pratchett offers a mock-scientific explanation: all gods start off as small gods, mere sparks of yearning, buzzing around single-mindedly like insects. Those lucky enough to attract followers grow in proportion to the number of believers and the fervor of their belief. Gods need people; Om has sunk so low that he needs Brutha to rescue him from a mess of soup ingredients. By the time Om finally regains his lost stature, he has learned a few lessons himself and seems likely to take a more enlightened and informed interest in his worshippers than in the past.

The wrongness of Omnianism is incarnated in its most powerful figure, the sinister Deacon Vorbis. He is a man who only hears and sees what is inside his own head. His religion consists of an immovable but not passionate determination to stamp out all heresy, and then to spread such fear through all the neighboring lands that heresy will never arise again. In a work of literature written in our tradition, it is inevitable that such a man and such a system should lose. But Pratchett does not dismiss Vorbis as just another wouldbe tyrant; rather, he shows his wrongness on all levels, and then wipes him out by having an eagle drop Om (still in the form of a tortoise) on his bald head. This is hilarious, and Pratchett has been setting up this little joke from the beginning. There is a point, however: The absurdity of the death seems to be a comment on the putridity of Vorbis's life and beliefs.



Key Questions

Pratchett's fiction is extraordinarily rich in allusion, incident, and ideas, and thus offers innumerable starting points for discussion. It would be both challenging and instructive to try to get past the jokes and identify the few principles in which Pratchett unequivocally believes. There is some danger of heated disagreements, in view of the subject matter and Pratchett's irreverence, but it is by no means necessary to confine the discussion to religion, since the book also has interesting things to say about politics and technology, to name only two alternatives.

1. What is the point of the most repeated line in the novel: "There's very good eating on one of these, you know"?
2. Commenting on Omnia's version of the Inquisition, Pratchett observes: "there are hardly any excesses of the most crazed psychopath that cannot easily be duplicated by a normal, kindly family man." Are we to take this comment literally? Is it just a casual gibe, or does it reflect a continuing theme in the novel?
3. Early in the book, a character describes the sport of surfing, and Pratchett hints at its symbolic value.

Would it be reasonable to speak of Pratchett's approach to philosophy and religion in this book as ideological surfing?

4. In discussing the Discworld Athens, Ephebe, Pratchett does not hide the warts; he points out that only a minority can actually vote. What makes Ephebe preferable to Omnia, then?

How do his experiences there help to open Brutha's eyes?

5. Brutha's total recall is useful in the plot of *Small Gods*. How does it form his character? How does it aid or hinder his search for truth? How does it set him apart from other people?
6. Pratchett's half-joking theory of divine mechanics — that the size and power of gods depends on human belief — can be interpreted in different ways. An extreme view, for example, would regard it as a brief for atheism.

What other readings seem possible to you?

7. Brutha believes in the same god throughout, but his religion changes profoundly. What is Pratchett trying to say? Does his humorous approach enhance or confuse the message?
8. Since classical times, writers have found the Labyrinth a powerful image, and have explored its symbolic possibilities again and again. What does Pratchett add to this tradition?



9. Clearly, Vorbis represents all that is wrong with Omnianism. Are the opposite, good characteristics all concentrated in Brutha, or spread among several characters?

Related Titles

The entire Discworld series will interest readers of *Small Gods*; it is especially interesting to contrast its more restrained humor and more unified action with the early novels. Those interested by Pratchett's views on religion might prefer to read *Good Omens* (1990), a comic novel about the Apocalypse set in our own place and time.



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