

# The Czech Discworld Wizard

An interview with translator **Jan Kantůrek**

**Terry Pratchett has created a whole fantastic universe in his books, filled it with characters with funny names and peppered his stories with unique humour and constant word play. Have you ever wondered what it takes to translate his books into other languages? Read an interview with Jan Kantůrek, who has brought Discworld to Czech readers.**

**What do you consider most difficult about translating Terry Pratchett's books?**

It's his puns based on word play with English pronunciation and spelling. Moreover, you sometimes deal with the pun somehow, and then Pratchett uses it with a different meaning and you can delete your translation and start over.

As far as I know, I'm one of the few translators who also translates the majority of names which appear in Pratchett's books. The names he uses often carry some meaning connected to a person or place. And it is the same with geographic places and names of animals and plants (which are often very unusual). There are about 200–250 such expressions in each book! The basic Discworld series consists of 32 books, so it is more than 6500 expressions in total. If I counted Pratchett's other books, it would be twice as many. I use computer tables to keep a track of who is who and what is what. But still sometimes a reader complains to me that the boy who picks his nose in the fifth book is called "Petříček", but when he plays with a kite in the twenty-second book I call him "Pavlíček".

**Can you give some examples of Pratchett's puns or meaningful names and explain how you translated them?**

For example, the title of the book *Equal Rites*\*. In this book, Granny Weatherwax decides to challenge the fact that girls cannot study at the Unseen University and fights for the same magical rights for them. So I translated the title as *Čaroprávnost* – a play on the word "rovnoprávnost".

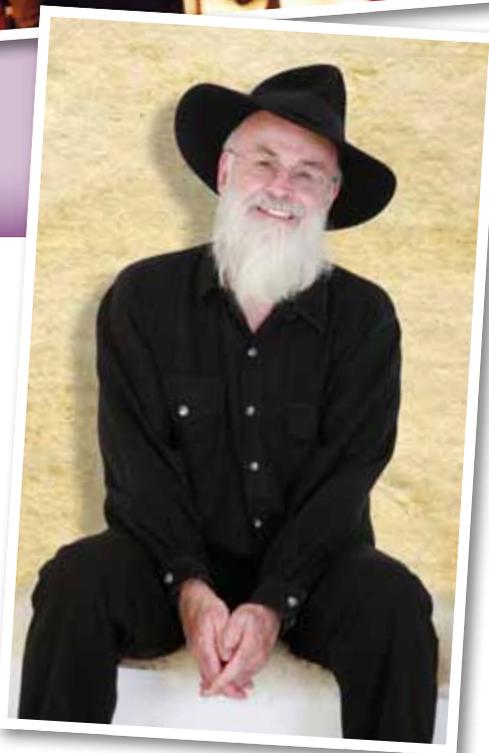
The title of the book *Sourcery*\* refers to a source of magic. I called it *Magický prazdroj* – using a word that describes a very old source and also alludes to Prazdroj, the magic spring of our country.

Another problem was the name of one of the popular characters – Death. The word "smrt" is feminine in Czech, but Death in Pratchett's books is obviously male. Calling



▲ Miroslav Táborský stars as a clown in the theatrical performance of 'Soudné sestry' at Divadlo v Dlouhé. (photo: M. Špelda)

Terry Pratchett ►



him Smrťák was out of question – Smrťák is the character in the film *Dařbuján a Pandrhola*. So I remembered the Czech saying “kde nic není, ani smrt' nebere” and called him Smrť.

In another of Pratchett's books, *Truckers (Na cestu)*, the first part of the Bromeliad Trilogy, gnomes need to force a man to drive their car. They cannot read well, so one of them makes a mistake and says that you have to point a “gnu” (instead of a gun) to force somebody to do as you please. This pun does not work in Czech, of course. So I used a pun with “garnát” and “granát” instead, and then I had to re-write a paragraph about gnu antelopes into a paragraph about prawns (garnáty).

In the last book I have translated, *Unseen Academicals*, one of the main heroes is named Nutt, but people often call him Nutts\*. I had to think of a similar word play in Czech. I named him Sráž and let people call him Sráč.

### When did you first encounter Pratchett's books and how did you happen to translate them?

I first encountered Pratchett's books in 1991, when Mr Talaš, the publisher from Talpress, brought them from England. It was the first two books of the Discworld series – *The Colour of Magic (Barva kouzel)* and *The Light Fantastic (Lehké fantastično)*. I liked them a lot and recommended them for publishing. Mr Talaš offered the translation to me, but I found the books difficult and told him to find a renowned, experienced translator. However, he could not

find anybody and eventually persuaded me to try. It has turned into a kind of an obsession for me: Will I be able to translate the books well? Judging by the number of readers and the long-term success of the series, I think it could have ended up worse.

### Which of Pratchett's books or characters do you like best?

I like Death because he often behaves more like a human than the humans themselves. And I like all the books with the witches. Nanny Ogg reminds me of my Moravian great-aunt Marie, who had a similarly optimistic attitude to life and kept a young soul even in her advanced age. If I should pick out one favourite book, I would waver between *Good Omens (Dobrá znamení)*, by T. Pratchett and N. Gaiman, *Reaper Man (Sekáč)*

and *Witches Abroad (Čarodějky na cestách)*. Probably *Witches Abroad* would win.

### Pratchett's books are extremely popular – do you think it is because of his sense of humour?

Yes, I think his humour is one of the main reasons. It is not cheap. It is a thoughtful and intelligent humour. On the other hand, he can parody everything, and nothing is sacred. Also, you often realize that what you are laughing at is in fact a very serious thing. For example, Vimes, the captain of the city watch, arrests two opposing armies because they are about to commit the biggest crime in the history of mankind – a war.

Another reason is the fact that Pratchett's stories are clever. When he writes about something, either he bases his writing on a personal experience or he has studied the topic thoroughly. He can work with the language in a great way, his puns are amazing even though they scare translators all around the world.

Besides that, people love the series and Pratchett has created a storyline featuring many characters sharing the same world, the Discworld. Each character has his or her fans. There are fans of Rincewind, of Death, of the Guards, of the Witches and so on. And the fans want to read all the books, not only those focusing directly on their favourite characters because the other books will surely at least briefly mention their favourites, too.

### You have met Terry Pratchett in person. What is he like?

I have met him several times and I am glad I did. He gives the impression of a very decent, modest man, with no prima donna behaviour, who devotes a lot of his time to his fans. He also does unexpected things without bragging about them. For example, he sends all his earnings from lectures and tours to the Orangutan Foundation, which protects and helps orangutans. When he was asked what gave him the idea, he said: “The orangutan (a magician turned into an orangutan who is a librarian at the Unseen University – one of Pratchett's popular characters) has helped me sell my books. So I think they deserve it.”

Zuzana Pernicová (CR)

### GLOSSARY\*

**rite** – a formal ceremony with a set of fixed words and actions; it is pronounced in the same way as “right” (therefore, the title *Equal Rites* is a pun on “equal rights”)

**sorcery** – a nonsense word created by blending the words “source” and “sorcery” (= magic)

**nutts** – a nonsense word using the play on words with the name “Nutt” and the word “nuts”: “Nuts” is an informal expression meaning mad, crazy.