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# Dodger

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**Discworld** has sales of 65 million plus, he's got a knighthood, a devoted following and a Carnegie Medal, so Terry Pratchett can afford to take a few chances: deploying real-life historical figures in an unlikely fiction, for example; or indulging a personal enthusiasm, reflected in this novel's dedication to Henry Mayhew. The latter's endlessly fascinating **London Labour and the London Poor** reported his meetings with hundreds of the mid-Victorian underclass, speaking in their own words (Mayhew claimed) about lives lived within the shadows of sickness, poverty, the workhouse, and a pauper's grave. Some of those street people appear in this novel, named as they were in Mayhew by occupation rather than in person. By contrast we also meet, very much in person, Mayhew, his friend 'Charlie' Dickens, Sir Robert Peel, young Ben Disraeli, John Tenniel, the redoubtable Angela Burdett-Coutts and, for good measure, the fictional Sweeney Todd. Pratchett loves a game, so every now and then Charlie reaches for his notebook to jot down the odd phrase which could come in useful some day - 'great expectations?', 'bleak house?' or 'our mutual friend?', perhaps. When Charlie and Henry run across jack-the-lad Dodger, we can easily guess where he'll be reincarnated for posterity.

Dodger is a tosher by trade, working beneath the mean streets of London searching for coins, jewellery, and whatever else might find its way down the drains and into the sewers. Above ground, he also serves as a moral watchman, which is how he gets caught up in the affairs of a lovely young German princess, who one dark night is dumped out of a coach before Dodger's outraged eyes. From this moment, the tosher's fortunes rise so rapidly that within days he is a local hero, hob-nobbing with Disraeli et al over dinner and employed by the government as an international spy.

Pratchett fans won't like this (they'll dismiss it anyway), but he does not entirely pull off this risky fusion of fancy and fact. The usual Pratchett qualities are there - the tirelessly comic voice, the coy scatological humour for which sewers and drains provide a fertile habitat. Sometimes the setting and his research seem to take over, leaving the plot to limp along. For example, several pages involve Joseph Bazalgette, the engineer who redesigned London's crumbling Roman sewers; yet you could remove Bazalgette from the book entirely and little would be lost from the plot. There are references which are there for their own sake, it seems, such as those to Karl Marx, which allow readers to celebrate another 'Ah, yes, I know where that fits?' moment. Some of the games stem from Pratchett's idiosyncratic enjoyment of language, though it seems lazy rather than comic to employ phrases like 'smarmy old gits' in a Victorian context; or to

use 'OK', which was around in America by then, but surely not in London. Likewise, it seems facile to use, several times, a device which allows Pratchett to write, 'Dodger had never heard the word 'surreal' but would have used it when?'; or, for that matter, to give Dodger, who is quick as a whip but has no formal education, the easy use of words like 'egregiously'. There's even a dog called Onan (now that is a risk, especially as Pratchett never says why ' a private joke, maybe), who pees, craps and stinks its way through the novel. Fans will say, 'Ah, that's all part of Terry's fun/genius/daring'. I suppose you love him or you don't - you pays your money and you takes your choice ' but at £18.99, that's certainly a decision.

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