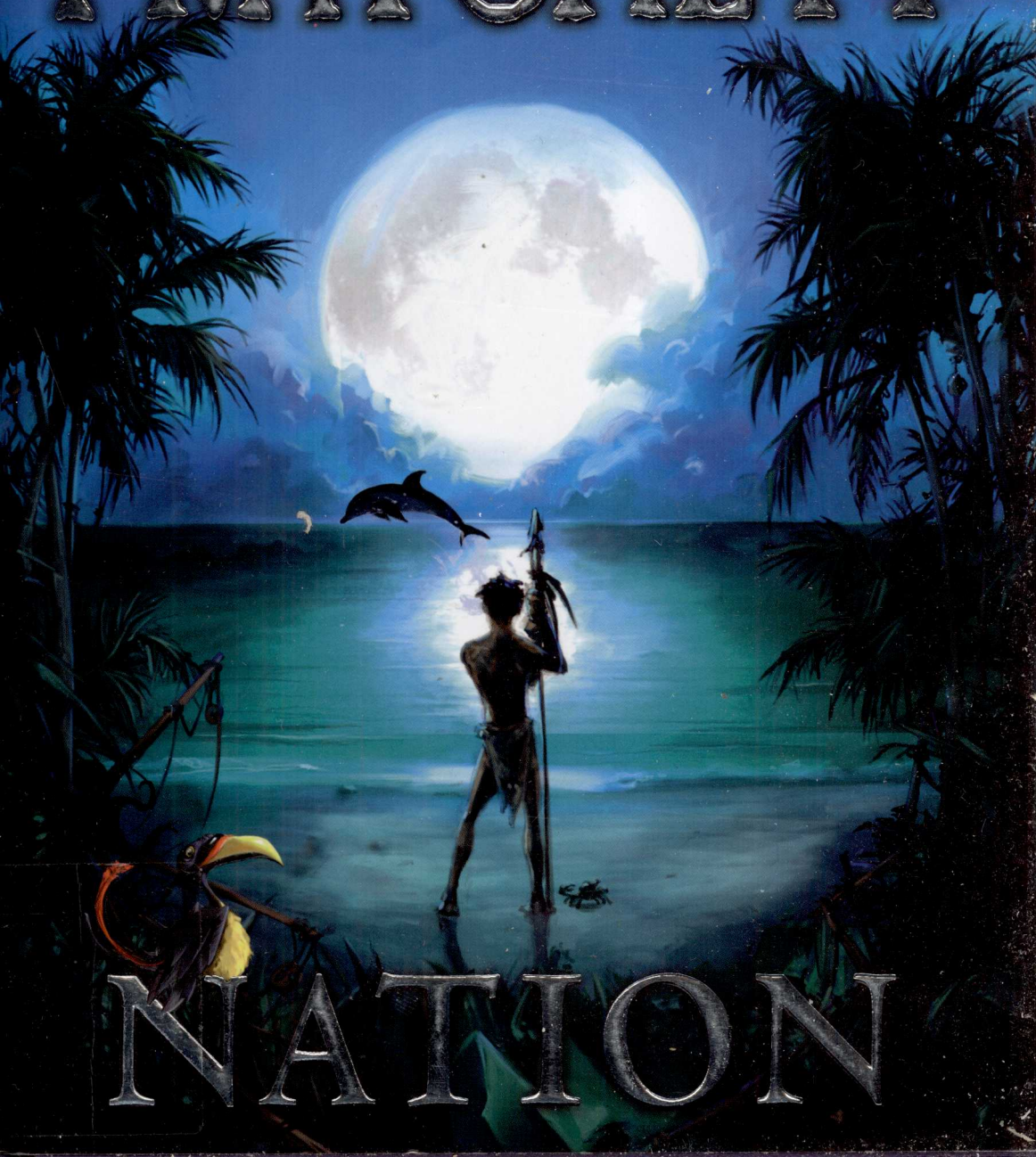


CARNEGIE MEDAL-WINNING AUTHOR

# TERRY PRATCHETT



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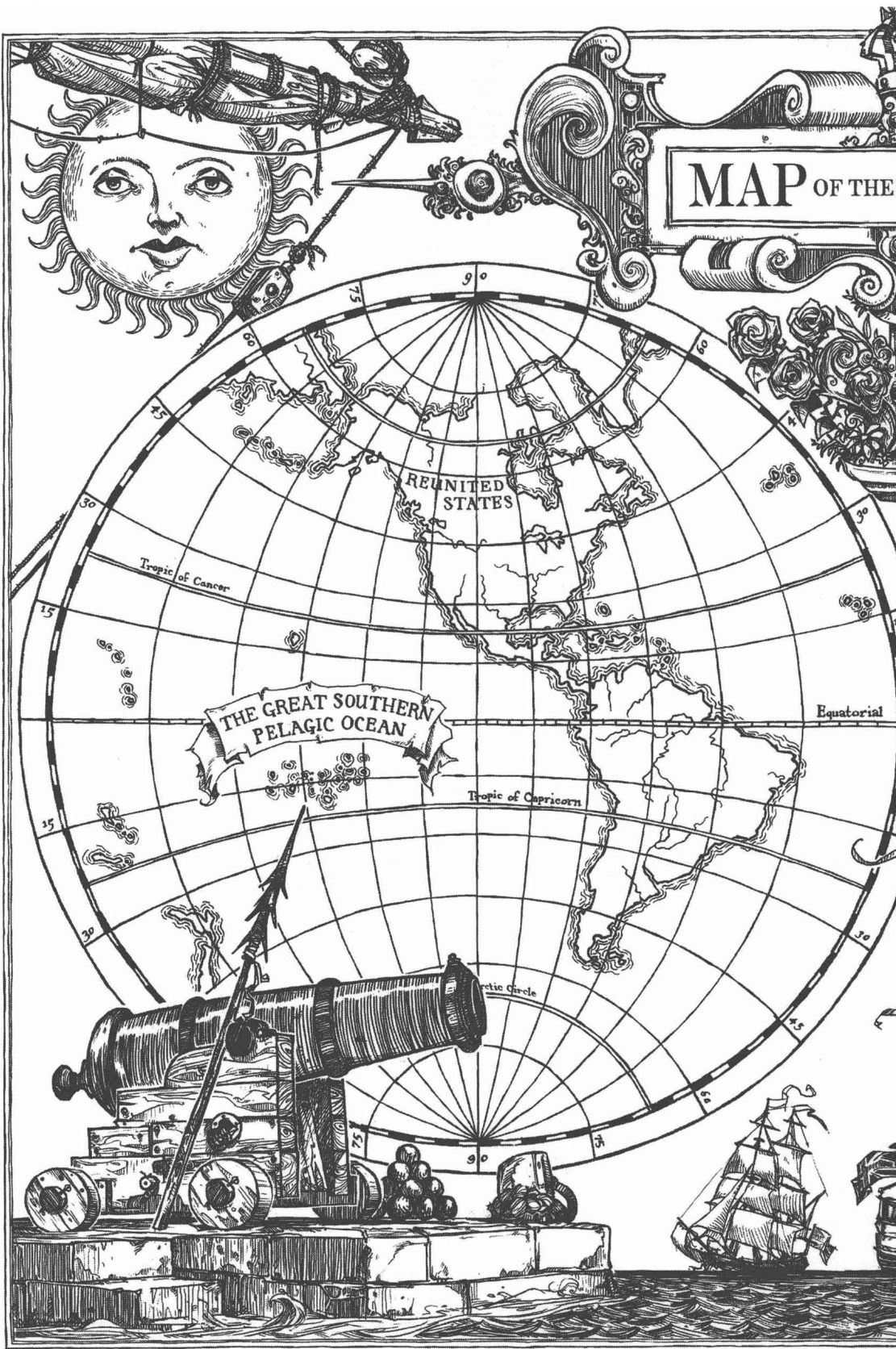
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For Lyn

# NATION



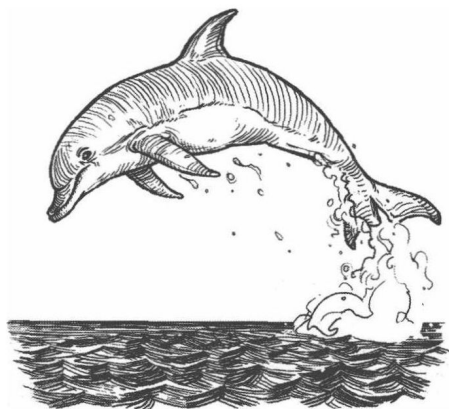




WORLD







## HOW IMO MADE THE WORLD, IN THE TIME WHEN THINGS WERE OTHERWISE AND THE MOON WAS DIFFERENT

**I**mo set out one day to catch some fish, but there was no sea. There was nothing but Imo. So he spat in his hands and rubbed them together and made a ball of sea. After that he made some fish, but they were stupid and lazy. So he took the souls of some dolphins, who at least had learned to speak, and he mixed them with clay and rubbed them in his hands and changed their shape and they became people. They were clever but they could not swim all day, so Imo dug some more clay and rubbed it in his hands and baked it in the fire of his fishing camp, and that was how the land was made.

Soon the people filled all the lands and were hungry, so Imo took some of the night and rubbed it in his hands and made Locaha, the god of death.

Still Imo was not satisfied, and he said: I have been like

## NATION



a child playing in the sand. This is a flawed world. I had no plan. Things are wrong. I will rub it in my hands and make a better one.

But Locaha said: The mud is set. People will die.

Imo was angry and said: Who are you to question me?

And Locaha said: I am a part of you, as are all things. So I say to you, Give me the mortal world, and go and make your better one. I will rule here fairly. When a human dies, I will send them to be a dolphin until it is time for them to be born again. But when I find a creature who has striven, who has become more than the mud from which they were made, who has glorified this mean world by being a part of it, then I will open a door for them into your perfect world and they will no longer be creatures of time for they will wear stars.

Imo thought this was a good idea, because it was his own creation, and went off to make his new world in the sky. But before he did this, and so that Locaha would not have things all his own way, he breathed into his hands and made the other gods so that while the people should die, it would be in their right time.

And this is why we are born in water, and do not kill dolphins, and look towards the stars.



## CHAPTER I

# THE PLAGUE

**T**he snow came down so thickly that it formed fragile snowballs in the air, which rumbled and melted as soon as they landed on the horses lined up along the dock. It was four in the morning and the place was coming alive and Captain Samson had never seen the dock in such a bustle. The cargo was flying out of the ship, literally; the cranes strained in their efforts to get the bales out as quickly as possible. The ship *stank* of the disinfectant already, stank of the stuff. Every man that came on board was so drenched in it that it dribbled out of his boots. But that wasn't enough; some of them had squelched aboard with big, heavy spray cans, which spat an acid-pink fog over everything.

And there was nothing he could do about it. The agent for the owners was right there on the dockside with his

orders in his hands. But Captain Samson was going to try.

‘Do you really think we’re infectious, Mr Blezzard?’ he barked to the man on the dock. ‘I can assure you—’

‘You are not infectious, Captain, as far as we know, but this is for your own good,’ shouted the agent through his enormous megaphone, ‘and I must once again warn you and your men not to leave the ship!’

‘We have families, Mr Blezzard!’

‘Indeed, and they are already being taken care of. Believe me, Captain, they are fortunate, and so will you be, if you follow orders. You *must* return to Port Mercia at dawn. I cannot stress enough how important this is.’

‘Impossible! It’s the other side of the world! We’ve only been back a few hours! We are low on food and water!’

‘You will set sail at dawn and rendezvous in the Channel with the *Maid of Liverpool*, just returned from San Francisco. Company men are aboard her now. They will give you everything you need. They will strip that ship to the waterline to see that you are properly provisioned and crewed!’

The captain shook his head. ‘This is not good enough, Mr Blezzard. What you are asking – it’s too much. I— Good God, man, I need more authority than some words shouted through a tin tube!’

‘I *think* you will find me all the authority you need, Captain. Do I have your permission to come aboard?’

The captain knew that voice.

It was the voice of God, or the next best thing. But although he recognized the voice, he hardly recognized

## THE PLAGUE



the speaker standing at the foot of the gangplank. That was because he was wearing a sort of birdcage. At least, that's what it looked like at first sight. Closer, he could see that it was a fine metal framework with a thin gauze around it. The person inside walked in a shimmering cloud of disinfectant.

'Sir Geoffrey?' said the captain, just to be sure, as the man began to walk slowly up the glistening gangplank.

'Indeed, Captain. I'm sorry about this outfit. It's called a salvation suit, for obvious reasons. It is necessary for your protection. The Russian influenza has been worse than you can possibly imagine! We believe the worst is over, but it has taken a terrible toll . . . at every level of society. *Every* level, Captain. Believe me.'

There was something in the way the chairman said 'every' that made the captain hesitate.

'I take it that His Majesty is . . . isn't—' He stopped, unable to force the rest of the question out of his mouth.

'Not only His Majesty, Captain. I said "worse than you can possibly imagine",' said Sir Geoffrey, while red disinfectant dripped off the bottom of the salvation suit and puddled on the deck like blood. 'Listen to me. The only reason the country is not in total chaos at this moment is that most people are too scared to venture out. As Chairman of the Line, I order you – and as an old friend, I beg you – for the sake of the Empire, sail with the devil's speed to Port Mercia and find the Governor. Then you will— Ah, here come your passengers. This way, gentlemen.'



Two more carriages had pulled up in the chaos of the dockside. Five shrouded figures came up the gangplank, carrying larger boxes between them, and lowered them onto the deck.

‘Who are you, sir?’ the captain demanded of the nearest stranger, who said:

‘You don’t need to know that, Captain.’

‘Oh, don’t I, indeed!’ Captain Samson turned to Sir Geoffrey with his hands open in appeal. ‘Goddammit, Chairman, pardon my French, have I not served the line faithfully for more than thirty-five years? I am the captain of the *Cutty Wren*, sir! A captain must know his ship and all that is on it! I will not be kept in the dark, sir! If I cannot be trusted, I will walk down the gangplank right now!’

‘Please don’t upset yourself, Captain,’ said Sir Geoffrey. He turned to the leader of the newcomers. ‘Mr Black? The captain’s loyalty is beyond question.’

‘Yes, I was hasty. My apologies, Captain,’ said Mr Black, ‘but we need to requisition your ship for reasons of the utmost urgency, hence the regrettable lack of formality.’

‘Are you from the government?’ the captain snapped.

Mr Black looked surprised. ‘The government? I am afraid not. Just between us, there is little of the government left at the moment, and what there is is mostly hiding in its cellars. No, to be honest with you, the government has always found it convenient not to know much about us, and I would advise you to do the same.’

‘Oh, really? I was not born yesterday, you know—’