

The Man Who Dared Make Religion the Villain; In British Author's Trilogy, Great Adventures Aren't Pegged to the Great Beyond

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Six months ago, the British author Philip Pullman got a letter from a reader, along with a picture of a winsome little squirrel. "I want you to admire this squirrel," the letter said. "Now that you've admired the squirrel, please think about your book which the world has spent so long waiting for. Now, put those two things together. Finish your book, or the squirrel will die."

Perhaps Mr. Pullman's reputation has not yet swelled to J. K. Rowling-esque proportions, but there is no question that he has a growing following of impassioned admirers who take a personal interest in his publishing schedule. And with the long-awaited publication of "The Amber Spyglass" (Knopf), the last book of a trilogy that began with "The Golden Compass" in 1995, Mr. Pullman has done more than appease his eager readers (and spare the squirrel, presumably). He has produced a thrillingly ambitious tale inspired by Milton's "Paradise Lost" with a radical view of religion that may well hold the most subversive message in children's literature in years.

Interviewed recently in London, Mr. Pullman said that his story, which tells of a boy and a girl from different worlds who grapple with profound philosophical questions of existence while having amazing adventures, was the most important thing to him, even more important than the books' underlying meaning.

"The story has been coming to me for a long time, the idea of a very big story that would be free from the constraints of superficial realism," he said. "But when you tell a story, there's got to be a worldview that's consistent throughout, and this is mine. I dare say there might be a certain amount of controversy, which places me in a slightly difficult position because I have not written a sermon or a treatise or a book of philosophy -- I have written a novel."

The trilogy contains many of the familiar elements of fantasy and adventure novels aimed at the class of readers loosely classified as young adults: child

heroes who undergo life-threatening and character-building trials; an epic struggle between good and evil, between love and hatred, between free will and submission; a cliffhanging, imaginative narrative that in this case glides among various worlds, from a strange city populated by adult-eating specters to a world of the dead full of pitiful souls who long more than anything to taste the air again and then escape into nothingness.

It is full of singular characters, too. There are huge polar bears, proud, fierce and fair, who wear expertly hewn armor that they happen to have made themselves. There are angels of immense spiritual purity whose fatal flaw -- and most aching regret -- is their lack of corporeal existence. There are tiny creatures called Gallivespians, who are very easy to offend, make excellent spies and carry lethal poison in their spurs. There are good witches, forlorn ghosts and terrifying harpies whose fate brings an element of unexpected joy. And there are humans from a world very much like -- but not quite the same as -- our own, whose souls manifest themselves as animal daemons who stay with them always.

But the books, which have been read by adults as avidly as by teenagers and younger readers, defiantly confound the expectations of their genre. For one thing, the lines between good and evil are muddy and shifting, so that the most wicked characters are capable of startling acts of heroism and sacrifice. More important, and shockingly, Mr. Pullman, a 53-year-old former schoolteacher, has created a world in which organized religion -- or, at least, what organized religion has become -- is the enemy and its agents are the misguided villains.

In this way, Mr. Pullman's book offers an explicit alternative to C. S. Lewis's "Chronicles of Narnia," with their pervasive Christian message. In the Narnia books, nestled inside the delightful stories of talking animals, heroic challenges and whimsical scenes, the meaning is clear: the heroes find true happiness only after death, when their spiritual superiority buys them passage to heaven.

It is a conclusion with which Mr. Pullman thoroughly disagrees. "When you look at what C. S. Lewis is saying, his message is so anti-life, so cruel, so unjust," he said. "The view that the Narnia books have for the material world is one of almost undisguised contempt. At one point, the old professor says, 'It's all in Plato' --

meaning that the physical world we see around us is the crude, shabby, imperfect, second-rate copy of something much better."

Instead, Mr. Pullman argues for a "republic of heaven" where people live as fully and richly as they can because there is no life beyond. "I wanted to emphasize the simple physical truth of things, the absolute primacy of the material life, rather than the spiritual or the afterlife," he said. "That's why the angels envy our bodies -- because our senses are keener, our muscles are stronger. If the angels had our bodies and our nerves, they'd be in a perpetual state of ecstasy."

At a time when even the Harry Potter books have been accused of promoting black magic and Satanism, it seems unlikely that Mr. Pullman's theology could fail to provoke. Already, *The Catholic Herald* in Britain has condemned the trilogy as "truly the stuff of nightmares."

But many critics have reveled in it. Writing in *The Times* of London, Erica Wagner said she hoped that younger readers would understand the philosophy underpinning the story, whose text is peppered with allusions to Milton, Blake, Coleridge, Ruskin and the Bible, among others. "One can only hope that where Pullman leads they will follow, and discover the dissenting tradition from which these books spring," she said. "This is remarkable writing: courageous and dangerous, as the best art should be. Pullman envisions a world without God, but not without hope."

Mr. Pullman's trilogy has been compared by some to Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" and by others to the best writing of Ursula K. Le Guin. And, in a review of "The Subtle Knife," the second volume, Michael Dirda argued in *The Washington Post* that the books deserved a place alongside such children's classics as Madeleine L'Engle's "Wrinkle in Time" and Philippa Pearce's "Tom's Midnight Garden."

"Actually," Mr. Dirda wrote, "Pullman's book is more sheerly, breathtakingly all-stops-out thrilling than any of them."

The author grew up in Wales listening to the fantastical stories of his maternal grandfather, an Anglican priest bursting with imaginative energy. "I think he would be shocked by some of the things in the story," said Mr. Pullman, who was

raised a Protestant but became an atheist as a teenager. "But given his broad humanity and his ability to find human and moral truths, he would understand the feelings that the book celebrates."

Mr. Pullman studied English at Oxford and taught secondary school for years. He has been publishing books since 1972 ("The first one was so bad, I'm not even going to tell you the title," he said) and has written a number of acclaimed novels for older children, including a quartet of adventure stories set in Victorian London. The idea for the trilogy that he has called "His Dark Materials" -- the name is from Milton -- came some time ago when he and his literary agent found themselves discussing their shared passion for "Paradise Lost" over a lunch of sausages and mashed potatoes.

"It occurred to me that Milton was using the apparatus of fantasy -- the cosmology, the people with wings, and so on -- at a time when he knew full well that the universe wasn't constructed like that," Mr. Pullman said. "He was aware that the geography of paradise didn't actually correspond to the real world. But it was a space inside of which he could say certain important things about states of mind, about psychological truth.

"And I thought maybe I could take it as an inspiration, a starting point, to use the apparatus of fantasy to say something psychologically true. Or at least as true as I could see it."

He hopes the trilogy will be read for its gripping plot, first and foremost. That's certainly how Kirkus Reviews read the latest volume, as indicated by its glowing advance review. "What matters at the last are the stories, and the truth of their telling," the review said. "Readers will be chastened -- and warmed -- and sorry to see the last page."

Mr. Pullman hopes that children will draw their own conclusions.

"We all negotiate the meanings of things as we read them," he said. "My reading of the book, while no less valid than anybody else's, is no more valid. If I were to say, this means that, or you must read it in that way, this would seem to have a particular authority that I don't want." Coming back to the republic of heaven, he said, "the republican thing to do would be to stand back and not take a position."