

**This is a collection of gleanings off of the Internet about the movie The Golden Compass and the trilogy behind it, His Dark Materials.**

These materials are not yet well organized or well documented. They are provided here just to give the interested reader a taste of what is being written and spoken about these works.

Check back on this website in a few days for more information in more digestible and better documented form.

# **The Golden Compass (His Dark Materials book 1)**

by Philip Pullman

Reading Level: Young Adult

Reviewed by Kathy on August 02 2006 19:25:30

## **Parental Advisory!**

Lyra Belacqua is a young girl who grows from curious mischief-maker to fierce heroine. A journey across the world takes her head to head with gobblers, witches, and ruthless scientists. Accompanied by gypsy helpers, an enormous armored polar bear, her personal daemon Pan, and a mysterious gadget known as an alethiometer, Lyra uncovers secrets of her past while discovering a "mystery" of the universe. The Golden Compass is not your average book. The plot is thick and intricately woven, full of deception, magic, betrayal, loyalty, suspense, terror; and a cloud of controversy surrounds it all.

Lyra and her assorted companions are out to defeat the "gobblers" (representatives of the church) who steal children's Daemons (the outer, animal manifestation of a human soul). Daemons and humans are intertwined with a sort of invisible umbilical cord; the two cannot be parted without certain death. Pullman, a professed atheist presents the church of the day (in the sequels it is God) as the evil. He manipulates The Bible by including his own re-written passages of Genesis that explain the origin of Daemons. Additionally, there is disturbing violence and murder of adults and children, and the heroine habitually and convincingly lies. Pullman is making it no secret he is anti-God.

His Dark Materials is not simply a work of fiction-it's a mockery of Judeo-Christian beliefs. It's troubling to think the world has embraced this book through various awards and glowing reviews, and even an adaptation of The Golden Compass to the big screen; New Line Cinema plans a projected release date Holiday Season, 2007.

Lies, disconcerting violence, false doctrines, blasphemy, and several powerfully disturbing scenes; what's a parent to do with a book like this?

You do your job. Protect your kids. Choose wisely what your family reads and teach your young adult children to do the same. Anyone who takes offense to the misrepresentation of God should not read Pullman's books. That leaves our family out of his pool of readers.

C.S. Lewis fans in particular should read the link below.

Related website: <http://www.facingthechallenge.org/cslewis.php>

**In the week that a children's writer who claims God is dead and the Church is wicked wins a prestigious literary prize...**

## This is the most dangerous author in Britain.

**Philip Pullman is being hailed as the new C. S. Lewis after being awarded the Whitbread Book of the Year prize for his latest novel aimed at children: *The Amber Spyglass*. The judges described it as visionary, but PETER HITCHENS reveals that the author appears to have his own sinister agenda...**

The atheists have driven God out of the classroom and off the TV and the radio, and done a pretty good job of expelling him from the churches as well. But one stubborn and important pocket of Christianity survives, in the Narnia stories of C. S. Lewis. Now here comes an opportunity to dethrone him and supplant his books with others which proclaim the death of God to the young.

If you are wondering why the children's author Philip Pullman has collected a major prize and why such a huge fuss is being made of him, now you know. He is the anti-Lewis, the one the atheists would have been praying for, if atheists prayed.

Children instinctively like Lewis's enthralling stories and often do not even notice their religious message, though it frequently goes deep into their minds and emerges later. How infuriating this is for liberal but literate parents, the sort of people who work for the BBC and want all the advantages of a Christian culture without the tiresome bother of having to worship a God they think they are too smart to believe in. Spotting this trend, Lewis's publishers last year toyed with producing 'sequels' without any Christian references, but retreated under a barrage of thunderbolts from Lewis supporters.

Until now, liberal, atheist parents have had to buy the Narnia books, reading them out loud to their young between clenched teeth, hoping the messages of faith, forgiveness, grace and resurrection do not get through. Now at last they have an alternative and an antidote, the supposedly brilliant Pullman, who - according to the reviewers - is a new Lewis and a new Chekhov rolled into one.

Of his three famous children's books, the first two, *Northern Lights* and *The Subtle Knife*, are captivating and clever, but the third, which took the Whitbread prize, is a disappointing clunker with some gruesome and needlessly nasty scenes. This is probably because *The Amber Spyglass* - in which God dies - is too loaded down with propaganda to leave enough room for the story. None of the trilogy is a patch on any of the Narnia chronicles. You can't help wondering if the praise and the prizes, handed out by reliable, liberal establishment sorts such as Channel 4 News's Jon Snow, are because of Pullman's views as much as his writing. For Pullman has said: 'I hate the Narnia books, and I hate them with deep and bitter passion, with their view of childhood as a golden age from which sexuality and adulthood are a falling-away.'

He knows perfectly well what he is doing. He openly and rightly believes storytelling can be a form of moral propaganda: 'All stories teach, whether the storyteller intends them to or not. They teach the world we create. They teach the morality we live by. They teach it much more effectively than moral precepts and instructions... We don't need lists of rights and wrongs, tables of do's and don'ts: we need books, time and silence. "Thou shalt not" is soon forgotten.'

Pullman has said many times that he thinks God is dead. Since he cannot know if this is true, it raises the question of whether he also hopes that God is dead.

He told an Oxford literary conference in August 2000: 'We're used to the Kingdom of Heaven; but you can tell from the general thrust of the book that I'm of the devil's party, like Milton. And I think it's time we thought about a republic of Heaven instead of the Kingdom of Heaven. The King is dead. That's to say I believe the King is dead. I'm an atheist. But we need Heaven nonetheless, we need all the things that Heaven meant, we need joy, we need a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives, we need a connection with the universe, we need all the things the Kingdom of Heaven used to promise us but failed to deliver.'

None of this makes sense. If there is no God, then who makes the rules of the supernatural world which Pullman creates, in which people have visible souls called daemons; magic knives cut holes between the worlds and spectres devour life? How is it that the dead live on in a ghastly underworld of unending misery and torment, yet there is no Heaven?

In his worlds, the Church is wicked, cruel and child-hating; priests are sinister, murderous or drunk. Political correctness creeps in leadenly. There is a brave African king and a pair of apparently homosexual angels. The one religious character who turns out to be benevolent is that liberal favourite, an ex-nun who has renounced her vows and lost her faith. Even so, she sets out on a perilous journey when ordered to do so by angels, who speak to her through a computer.

Pullman, like Lewis, lives in Oxford, though a long way from the outlying suburb where the creator of Narnia once dwelt and is now buried. A good thing, probably. The sound of Lewis chuckling from his grave at the idea of angels speaking to a renegade nun through a computer might get on Pullman's nerves.

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Pullman has made no secret of his hatred of the works of C S Lewis. He describes them as:

“One of the most ugly and poisonous things I have ever read, with no shortage of nauseating drivel.”

## **Philip Pullman & C S Lewis - Pullman criticizes Lewis for writing with a purpose**

Pullman told an audience at the [Guardian's Hay Festival](#), made up largely of children, that when he first read Lewis's Narnia series, he

...realized that what he was up to was propaganda in the cause of the religion he believed in.

But of course, this is exactly what Pullman himself is doing. 'His Dark Materials' is the story of a campaign to destroy the rule of God and bring in the republic of heaven. You can see this (like a snake eating its own tail) as an allegory of what Pullman himself is setting out to do through the story.

The [Whitbread Prize](#) judges clearly recognized Pullman's agenda. TV Newscaster Jon Snow, one of the judges, said:

We are more taken, it has to be said, with the [agnostic] Pullman's view of God than Lewis's.

Mark Greene, writing in the Institute for Contemporary Christianity's 'e.g.' magazine, said:

This year's Whitbread prize-winner Philip Pullman is, as you might expect, a fine writer and he's a fine writer with a cause. His cause, as he himself has made clear, is to destroy Christianity and to liberate the world from any faith in the Christian God.

So it is strange (and rather dishonest) that Pullman should criticize Lewis for having an agenda, when Pullman so clearly has one of his own.

How could either Lewis or Pullman do anything else? Anyone who writes seriously (that is, not just to entertain) has an agenda in their writing. There is always some persuasive purpose that they are seeking to achieve. Even someone who is only setting out to entertain, cannot help writing on the basis of what they believe about the world.

# Philip Pullman & C S Lewis - Pullman criticizes Lewis for being racist and sexist

Pullman says of C S Lewis's writing:

It is monumentally disparaging of girls and women. It is blatantly racist. One girl was sent to hell because she was getting interested in clothes and boys.

There are three things we can say about this:

- First of all, some of Pullman's charges are simply untrue. For example, how is C S Lewis's work racist?
- Secondly, Lewis certainly had a different view of women from what is commonly accepted today, but that is not the same as being 'disparaging of girls and women.' How could his view not be different? He was writing fifty years ago. Not only that, but he was a professor of Mediaeval literature, saturated in the knightly ideals of honor and valor. Of course his view of women was different from ours. Lewis was a child of his time, just as Pullman is a child of his. In fifty years, what will people criticize Philip Pullman for?
- Thirdly, Pullman is using crass propaganda here. Racism and sexism have become such large problems in contemporary culture that the words have almost stopped having any objective meaning. They are just dirt-words, to throw at anyone whose opinions you do not like, in the hope that some mud will stick.

However, Pullman is a much better story teller than he is a propagandist. His propaganda is far too 'in your face' to be effective:

By setting out to do the opposite of Lewis, Pullman's own work is propaganda. Moral ambiguity is written into the text, but he is far less ambiguous in his attack on the church and priests. Put simply, he would be a far better children's writer if he ceased trying to recruit children for the National Secular Society. (Andrew Carey, writing in Church of England Newspaper, June 13th 2002)

## Philip Pullman & C S Lewis: Pullman criticizes Lewis for celebrating death

I think [Lewis] was actually dangerous because these books celebrate death. As an end-of-term treat the children are killed: that to me is disgusting. (Philip Pullman in the Sunday Telegraph, January 2002)

The Narnia books lead up to a view of life so hideous and cruel I can scarcely contain myself when I think of it. (Philip Pullman in The Times, January 2002)

To reply to this criticism, we need to understand Pullman's own view of death, and how he presents it. In 'His Dark Materials', there are two different stories about death:

- [The Underworld](#)
- [Dissolving into the cosmos](#)

To respond to Pullman's criticism of Lewis, we need to deal with a more fundamental question: what is really true? What happens when we die? Is there an after life? If so, what form does it take? Is heaven a reality? Or just wishful thinking? Whether you value Lewis's vision or Pullman's is likely to depend on what you believe about this basic question.

This is a question of truth and reality, not just of opinion. There are many different opinions about what will happen after we die, but they cannot all be true. The reality is either that we cease to exist, or there is a possibility of heaven or hell, or something else...

If there is a personal life after death, CS Lewis's vision is the one that really holds out hope, and Pullman's vague pantheism and misleading hopefulness is, by comparison, an empty vision.

## Philip Pullman & C S Lewis: The Underworld

In 'His Dark Materials, Philip Pullman presents two different stories about death:

First, there is a kind of 'underworld', where the dead go as prisoners. This is a prison camp established by God (see p. 35 of 'The Amber Spyglass'). It is a place where the harpies torment the ghosts of the dead. Pullman deliberately paints this in the most ghastly terms:

On a great plain where no light shone from the iron-dark sky, and where a mist obscured the horizon on every side. The ground was bare earth, beaten flat by the pressure of millions of feet, even though those feet had less weight than feathers; so it must have been time that pressed it flat, even though time had been stilled in this place; so it must have been the way things were. This was the end of all places, and the last of all worlds. (The Amber Spyglass, page 9)

Pullman makes one of the characters, who had been a committed follower of Jesus Christ who was martyred for her faith, say:

The land of the dead isn't a place of reward or a place of punishment. It's a place of nothing. The good come here as well as the wicked, and all of us languish in this gloom for ever, with no hope of freedom, or joy, or sleep or rest or peace. (The Amber Spyglass, page 336)

This, then, is the world of the dead. And Lyra decides to set the ghosts free from it. But there is another story about death in Pullman's works.

## Philip Pullman & C S Lewis: Dissolving into the cosmos

This is the second kind of death in 'His Dark Materials', which reflects what Pullman really believes happens when we die. Our atoms disperse into the universe, and we are absorbed into the cosmic all:

When you go out of here, all the particles that make you up will loosen and float apart, just like your daemons did. If you've seen people dying, you know what that looks like. But your daemons aren't just nothing now; they're part of everything. All the atoms that were them, they've gone into the air and the wind and the trees and the earth and all the living things. They'll never vanish. They're just part of everything. And that's exactly what'll happen to you, I swear to you, I promise on my honor. You'll drift apart, it's true, but you'll be out in the open, part of everything alive again. (The Amber Spyglass, page 335)

When Will and Lyra eventually set the ghosts free...

The first ghost to leave the world of the dead was Roger. He took a step forward, and turned to look back at Lyra, and laughed in surprise as he found himself turning into the night, the starlight, the air... and then he was gone, leaving behind such a vivid little burst of happiness that Will was reminded of the bubbles in a glass of champagne. (The Amber Spyglass, page 382)

The first important thing to notice is that the reality, in this view, is that there is no continued personal existence beyond death - our personalities disappear, and our atoms are dispersed throughout the cosmos.

The second important thing to notice is the verbal sleight-of-hand by which Pullman imports into this the idea of continuing to be:

Even if it means oblivion... I'll welcome it, because *it won't be nothing*, we'll be *alive again* in a thousand blades of grass and a million leaves, we'll be falling in the raindrops and blowing in the fresh breeze, we'll be glittering in the dew under the stars and the moon *out there in the physical world which is our true home* and always was. (The Amber Spyglass, page 336)

This is dishonest. What he is talking about is ceasing to be. Yet look at the propaganda words he uses to describe it: - sweet, free, promise, light, joy, happiness:

That was the strangest thing. They took a few steps in the world of grass and air and silver light, and looked around, their faces transformed with joy - Mary had never seen such joy - and held out their arms as if they were embracing the whole universe; and then, as if they were made of mist or smoke, they simply drifted away, becoming part of the earth and the dew and the night breeze. (The Amber Spyglass, page 455)

To know that after a spell in the dark we'll come out again to a sweet land like this, to be free of the sky like the birds, well, that's the greatest promise anyone could wish for. (The Amber Spyglass, page 532)

So the reality (in Pullman's view) is that when you are dead, you are dead. You cease to be, in any meaningful personal sense. The only sense in which you can be said to continue to exist is through your atoms, dispersed throughout the cosmos.

But then, Pullman cheats. (How else can you describe what he is doing here?) He tries to import a sense of hope and meaning and value into a worldview that has none. This is fundamentally dishonest.

Our worldview matters tremendously. Pullman hates Lewis because, in Pullman's own worldview, death is the end of any meaningful personal existence. The here and now is all there is.

If you believe that, then of course, death is to be feared and rejected more than anything else. Of course it seems miserable to kill off your heroes at the end of the story. But CS Lewis didn't believe that. For him, there was a heaven to look forward to, and life there was going to be infinitely better than anything this world has to offer. Death really was the gateway to a great reward.

# A labour of loathing

*Peter Hitchens on the worship of Philip Pullman, who has set out to destroy Narnia*

Whatever the atheist equivalent of canonization is, they are doing it to the children's author Philip Pullman. The full power of secular liberalism is being deployed to magnify his glorious name. Last year he won the Whitbread Prize, normally reserved for adult authors. Now Radio Four is handing over three of its precious Saturday afternoons for an adaptation of his trilogy, *His Dark Materials*. Nicholas Hytner is preparing Pullman's works for the stage of the National Theatre, and Hollywood is hoping to do for him what it did for Tolkien. In early March he will be beatified through an interview with Melvyn Bragg on the South Bank Show. Why is he suddenly so important?

Here is the reason: Philip Pullman is the man who may succeed in destroying a country that the liberal intelligentsia loathe even more than they despise Britain. That country is Narnia, discovered long ago by millions of English-speaking children, and still beloved by many of them. Narnia is a conservative sort of place — religious, undecimalised, unmetricated, patriotic and hierarchical. But Narnia cannot be corrected, modernised, devolved or forced to join the euro. As a country of the mind, it remains defiantly independent for as long as the books are sold and read and their stories remembered. The creator of Narnia, C.S. Lewis, though dead almost 40 years, is the most influential Christian in modern British culture, not because of his faith but because his stories are so good. Parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts, seeking literate and well-crafted stories for their young, have been all but compelled to turn to this odd Ulsterman's works for the last half-century. They know that these gifts will actually be read, despite the archaic slang used by the 1940s children who are their heroes and heroines.

Most, regrettably, do not care or even notice that the seven Narnia books convey a Christian and conservative message, but among the enlightened classes many adults are unhappy about Lewis's confident and potent faith, unashamed and unfashionable, conveyed through parables and allegory and perhaps destined to stay with his readers all their lives. The cultural elite would like to wipe out this pocket of resistance. They have successfully expelled God from the schools, from the broadcast media and, for the most part, from the Church itself. They would much rather He was not sitting on the bookshelves of their offspring. Philip Pullman allows them to remove Him, and replace *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* with Pullman's very different country of the mind —rebel angels, friendly daemons and witches who are not wicked but good (though Pullman also has a wardrobe).

Pullman's stories are crammed with the supernatural and the mystical, and take place mainly in alternative worlds, most captivantly of all in an Oxford recognisably the same place while utterly different. But while Narnia is under the care of a benevolent, kindly creator, Pullman's chaotic universe has no ultimate good authority, controlling and redeeming all. God, or someone claiming to be God, dies meaninglessly in the third volume of his trilogy. There is life after death, but it is a dark, squalid misery from which oblivion is a welcome release. Pullman puts forward a complex theory of man's true destiny, and his stories are a powerful epic that everyone should read. But many who buy these books for children and grandchildren would be surprised, and even shocked, if they knew just how vehemently Pullman despises the Christian Church, and how much he loathes his dead rival, Lewis. He is, in fact, the Anti-Lewis.

He has described the Narnia Chronicles as grotesque, disgusting, ugly, poisonous and nauseating. Yet, as Michael Ward, an expert on Lewis, has pointed out, Pullman's saga begins just as Lewis's does with a girl hiding in a wardrobe and finding more than she bargained for. It is almost as if he wants to turn Narnia upside-down and then jump on it. While Lewis portrays rationalist atheists as comically ghastly and joyless, Pullman depicts priests as evil and murderous, drunk and probably perverted, and the Church as a conspiracy against happiness and kindness.

Challenged about his assault, Pullman professes enthusiasm for something called the Republic of Heaven, whatever that means. He also says that he draws many of his ideas from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. No doubt he does, but much of his thinking could also have been taken from the pages of the *Guardian*, or from politically correct staff-room conversation in a thousand state schools. Among the good characters in his trilogy are gypsies, an African prince, a homosexual angel and a renegade nun who abandons her faith but who willingly obeys orders from another angel (orientation unknown) who speaks to her through a computer screen.

The bad are to be found among the religious, the respectable and the well-off. A particular villain is discovered at his opulent home. Pullman writes with feeling, 'Everything Will could see spoke of wealth and power, the sort of informal settled superiority that some upper-class English people still took for granted.' Pullman has also assailed Lewis for being racist, a charge that simply doesn't stick. One of Lewis's noblest characters is the dark-skinned Calormene, Emeth, while the vilest is the White Witch. He also suggests that Lewis is monumentally disparaging of women. As Michael Ward points out, this, too, is absurd:

*Lucy Pevensie is unquestionably the most prominent and morally mature character in the narrator's eyes. Lucy is the first of the children to discover Narnia, and is described as more reliable and more truthful than her brother Edmund. She is the one who most often sees Aslan, the Christ-figure.*

His other angry charges against Lewis, that he sends Susan Pevensie to hell because she likes lipstick and nylons, and that he kills all the children because he prefers death to life, are equally questionable.

It is a sore pity that Lewis is not here to defend himself and Narnia against this angry foe and his supporters. In his absence, both sets of books will have to speak for their authors. In an age where most stories written for grown-ups are about nothing very much at all, Lewis and Pullman have addressed the great issues of this time and all time, and both deserve to be read by adults. But Pullman would have made better use of his dark materials if he had sought to co-exist with Lewis rather than to attack him. Narnia may have no weapons of mass destruction, but it has a powerful guardian, and I have a suspicion that it will find ways of defending itself.

*Peter Hitchens is a columnist for the Mail on Sunday.*

# The shed where God died

By Steve Meacham  
December 13, 2003

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**Once upon a time in an English garden, a little girl lived in a parallel universe ... and the comparisons began. But author Philip Pullman would rather be seen as a modern-day Jane Austen than the new Tolkien.**

He's been called the male J.K. Rowling. Constantly compared with J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Likened to literary lions such as Milton, Tolstoy, Blake, even Chekhov.

His best-known creation - a 12-year-old scruffy, disobedient, pubescent girl named Lyra, from a parallel universe - has been described as one of the most glorious female characters in modern fiction. Her adventures - detailed in the 1200-page trilogy collectively called *His Dark Materials* - were recently named among Britain's "favourite 100 books of all time" and have frequently outsold the *Harry Potter* stories.

The film rights have been bought by New Line Cinema, makers of *The Lord of the Rings*, who plan a similar blockbuster movie series. The distinguished playwright Tom Stoppard has already written the scripts.

And, in London next week, the curtain rises on the National Theatre's groundbreaking two-play production of *His Dark Materials*. Designed to be seen on a single day, the plays have been called the National Theatre's most ambitious project since *Nicholas Nickleby*, 20 years ago.

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/12/12/1071125644900.html>

If you haven't heard of Philip Pullman, you soon won't be able to escape his name. Due to readers' demands, a companion guide to Lyra's parallel universe, *Lyra's Oxford* (Random House, \$29.95) was released in Australia in October. Pullman couldn't resist including a short story about Lyra, which he promises is "a foreword to the big book which I'm going to begin next year".

All of this excitement was conjured up in Pullman's garden shed, where the former Oxford lecturer escaped to do his writing, away from the strains of a violin-playing son. Alas, says Pullman, as he pours himself a glass of wine at the other end of the phone, he no longer owns the shed. Thanks to Lyra, he and his wife have moved to a larger house on a hill overlooking Oxford, with a suitably grand study.

For the uninitiated, *His Dark Materials* is Pullman's modern reworking of Milton's classic 17th-century poem *Paradise Lost*, disguised as a children's adventure story. On a superficial level, it relates the adventures of two children, Lyra Silvertongue (who comes from "a universe like ours, but different in many ways") and Will Parry (who comes from the world we know), as they are caught up in the battle to decide who rules Heaven.

Along the way, they encounter some of the most magical creatures ever devised: Iorek, king of the "armoured bears"; Lee Scoresby, the gas balloonist-aeronaut; Stanislaus Grumman, the shaman; Baruch and Balthamos, the homosexual angels; Chevalier Tialys and Lady Salmakia, the dragonfly-riding Gallivespian spies.

There are foul-smelling "cliff ghosts", kidnapping "gobblers", harpies, renegade "gyptians", love-'em-and-leave-'em witches. A rich tapestry of characters with only one common quality: in the moral maelstrom of Pullman's multiple worlds, you're never sure who is on whose side.

No doubt Pullman's imagination is the reason why the three books - *Northern Lights*, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass* - are so popular with children. Adult readers, however, are drawn by two other qualities. The beauty of his writing (he won the 2001 Whitbread Prize for *The Amber Spyglass* after the rules were altered to allow "children's fiction" in an "adult" competition); and the profundity of the philosophy that underpins the trilogy: essentially, the heretical notion that there was once a war in Heaven, and the wrong side won.

In Pullman's trilogy, Lyra is the new-age Eve, and Will is the modern-day Adam. God is a wizened spent force of an "Authority". And "The Fall" is to be celebrated as the defining moment of mankind, rather than the source of all worldly evil. Little wonder that *His Dark Materials* has been denounced by some religious zealots.

Pullman, though, expected more. "I've been surprised by how little criticism I've got. Harry Potter's been taking all the flak. I'm a great fan of J.K. Rowling, but the people - mainly from America's Bible Belt - who complain that Harry Potter promotes Satanism or witchcraft obviously haven't got enough in their lives. Meanwhile, I've been flying under the radar, saying things that are far more subversive than anything poor old Harry has said. My books are about killing God."

Pullman, the grandson of a rector, was born in Norwich in 1946. But he spent his childhood travelling the world with his father (courtesy of the Royal Air Force), including 18 months in Adelaide when he was slightly younger than Lyra. He remembers the excitement of the Melbourne Olympics, and discovering Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* - "still one of my favourite books of all time. Why? Because it's funny." Famously, he retains his Australian links by watching *Neighbours* every day - "I never miss it".

After studying English at Oxford University, he lectured student teachers in Oxford while his reputation as an author and playwright grew. Yet it wasn't until *Northern Lights* was published in 1995 that he cracked the big time, winning the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Award for children's fiction.

As a teenager, he fell in love with *Paradise Lost*. "Books I and II, when the angels have just been thrown into Hell after the war in Heaven. They plot a terrible revenge, to destroy, subvert and ruin the new world God has made."

At first it was the pure beauty of Milton's poetry that inspired him ("I can still quote whole passages"). Not that he started *His Dark Materials* with *Paradise Lost* in mind. "I began with the idea of a little girl hiding somewhere she shouldn't be, overhearing something she shouldn't hear. I didn't know then who she was, where she was, or what she overheard. I just started writing. Before too long I realised I was telling a story which would serve as a vehicle for exploring things which I had been thinking about over the years. Lyra came to me at the right stage of my life."

Essentially, the trilogy is about the transition of innocence to experience, the triumph of knowledge over ignorance. When we're introduced to Lyra, we're told the inflexible church authorities in her world are anxious to stem the spread of "Dust". Only later do we find that Dust is good - "the totality of human wisdom and experience" is Pullman's description. It's the religious zealots trying to prevent the spread of wisdom who are the bad guys, even if they wear clerics' robes.

Pullman has no qualms with critics who label his books sacrilegious, so how does he describe himself? "If we're talking on the scale of human life and the things we see around us, I'm an atheist. There's no God here. There never was. But if you go out into the vastness of space, well, I'm not so sure. On that level, I'm an agnostic.

"That's not to say I disparage the religious impulse. I think the impulse is a critical part of the wonder and awe that human beings feel. What I am against is organised religion of the sort which persecutes people who don't believe. I'm against religious intolerance."

Questioning religion is, of course, one of the rites of passage from childhood to adulthood, and it is crucial to the trilogy that both Lyra and Will are going through puberty. They're at an age, says Pullman, when they're not just going through physical changes and emotional fears and excitements, but suddenly discovering "the potential of science, mathematics, art or literature. Or becoming consumed by questions of social justice or inequality. It all happens at that alarming, frightening, glorious age."

His teenage Adam and Eve are encouraged into physical union by the most unlikely temptress, Mary Malone, a former nun turned scientist. But he rejects the critics who have accused him of advocating underage sex. "Nowhere in the book do I talk about anything more than a kiss. And as a child, a kiss is enough. A kiss can change the world."

Pullman has been compared so many times with Tolkien and Lewis, it galls him. "Despite the armoured bears and the angels, I don't think I'm writing fantasy," he says. "I think I'm writing realism. My books are psychologically real. So I would be most flattered if I was compared to George Eliot, Jane Austen or Henry James." There's a pause, and the tinkle of a wine glass. "But I don't expect anybody will."

[http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2007/11/philip\\_pullman\\_realizes\\_underm.html](http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2007/11/philip_pullman_realizes_underm.html)

Philip Pullman seems, perhaps wisely, to be backtracking a little bit on the whole atheism front. [On the Today show on Friday](#), Pullman denied to Al Roker that his books are anti-religious. "As for the atheism," he adds, "it doesn't matter to me whether people believe in God or not, so I'm not promoting anything of that sort," he wrote in response to a question from "Kim, Friday Harbor, Wash." But what did the author have to say on the issue six years ago, when asked by the *Washington Post* what famously Christian author C.S. Lewis would think of his books?

"I'm trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief," says Pullman. "Mr. Lewis would think I was doing the Devil's work."

And what did he tell the [Sydney Morning Herald](#) in 2003?

"I'm a great fan of J.K. Rowling, but the people - mainly from America's Bible Belt - who complain that Harry Potter promotes Satanism or witchcraft obviously haven't got enough in their lives. Meanwhile, I've been flying under the radar, saying things that are far more subversive than anything poor old Harry has said. My books are about killing God."

Boy, *that's* a change! Not that we object to Pullman's previous Devil's work; after all, we love the books, and in the battle of [Hollywood vs. Christmas](#), we're going with Christmas. But it's a little curious that Pullman is suddenly out there backpedaling, just a month before New Line releases the first film in a megamillion-dollar fantasy trilogy based on Pullman's books, huh? We wonder who at the studio was given the unenviable task of calling Pullman and being, like, "Could you maybe cool it with the God-killing?"

**Earlier:** [Is 'The Golden Compass' Too Anti-Christian, or Not Anti-Christian Enough? Hollywood vs. Christmas](#)

[http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2007/10/is\\_the\\_golden\\_compass\\_too\\_anti.html](http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2007/10/is_the_golden_compass_too_anti.html)

## ***Is 'The Golden Compass' Too Anti-Christian, or Not Anti-Christian Enough?***

*Courtesy of New Line*

This winter's presumed megahit fantasy film *The Golden Compass* is an adaptation of the first book of Philip Pullman's wildly popular *His Dark Materials* series, which has always sort of surprised us in its wide appeal. Like, we've wondered why people are always raising baloney complaints about witchcraft in *Harry Potter* when right under their noses is an intense children's book series loosely based on *Paradise Lost* about a couple of kids — **spoiler alert!** — trying to, you know, kill God.

Now that the first book has been filmed, people are finally starting to notice. But is the new movie anti-Christian, or is it not anti-Christian enough? The Catholic League [says it's anti-Christian](#); they've announced a two-month campaign of protest against the film and Pullman's work, calling it "atheism for kids." "We are fighting a deceitful stealth campaign on the part of the film's producers," League president Bill Donohue said in a release, pointing out that the film will surely turn children toward the books.

But wait! This weekend the *Observer* reports that Britain's National Secular Society — of which Pullman, apparently, is an honorary associate — is [protesting the film's watering-down](#) of the books' anti-Church vision. "It was clear right from the start that the makers of this film intended to take out the anti-religious elements of Pullman's book," said the Society's president Terry Sanderson. "In doing that they are taking the heart out of it, losing the point of it, castrating it." In particular, the Society is upset that the Magisterium — the

hypocritical, evil-doing stand-in for the Church in Pullman's books — has been redefined in the film as "a catch-all didactic authority," to use the *Observer's* words.

So, "atheism for kids"? Watered down and castrated? Whichever turns out to be true, it's gonna be a great winter for fans of impotent Hollywood protest campaigns! We hope both sides enjoy watching as this film makes ten gazillion dollars.

## A wizard with worlds

The long-awaited final part of Philip Pullman's trilogy puts his rivals in the shade

**Kate Kellaway**

**Sunday October 22, 2000**

[The Observer](#)

Philip Pullman is an extraordinary writer who shares his surname with a train when he ought to be represented by a fantastical, winged vehicle. At the moment, though, what he needs is a winged pen. It takes him an entire day, each week, to answer fan letters.

Adults and children alike have been bowled over by the first two books of His Dark Materials trilogy. His first book, *Northern Lights*, won the Carnegie Prize. His second, *The Subtle Knife*, was likened, in its ambition, to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. His work is demanding and unusual, children's literature at its best. His heroes make Harry Potter seem no more than a bumptious cartoon. J.K. Rowling encourages a jolly return to childhood; reading Pullman is not a 'return' to anything. He is sophisticated, metaphysical, unhackneyed.

*The Subtle Knife*, published in 1997, ended in suspense. Since then, there has been in Pullman-fixated households a sense of expectation tinged with despair as he has missed one publishing deadline after another. When would he get his act together and finish the trilogy? By the time I met him, I was no longer complaining. I congratulated him at once on *The Amber Spyglass*, published on 1 November.

It is a tremendous enterprise. Pullman country is no single place: he conjures parallel universes, like a possessed juggler. He is in command of the grand sweep and the tiniest of botanical details. I asked him about the world of the dead, which appears in the new book. Pullman proposes that each one of us has 'a death' that goes with us through life 'a meek, pale chaperone'. His world of the dead is a terrible, understated, monochrome place.

I told him that I was scared by it - I longed to get out. Did my reaction worry him? 'No,' he said, visibly pleased. He wants his readers to value life. His living worlds are iridescent, populated with marvellous, outlandish creatures: shaggy blue bison, foxes which can only understand the present tense, angels with a taste for Kendal mint cake. But none of this is at the expense of our world. There will eventually be a return to reality, a second, gloriously reconstituted Fall.

Pullman is an original but would be the last person to agree. He disarmingly claimed to have 'stolen ideas from every book I have ever read'. His heroes are Homer, Milton and Blake; Swift and Dickens are in there too. His landscapes tend to be romantic. His heroine, Lyra, is tomboyish, fearless.

I told him that Lyra's mother Mrs Coulter (one of the most fascinating villains in children's literature) was my favourite character. She turned out to be his favourite, too. But even Mrs Coulter cannot compete with his boldest invention: daemons. A daemon is an alter-ego, a soulmate, the outward manifestation of an inner life. It can take any form: a butterfly, a snowy leopard, a barn owl. Children's daemons change all the time. An adult has one fixed daemon. What would his own daemon be?

'You can't choose your daemon,' he replied hastily. 'You have to make the best of whatever you turn out to be.' His daemon would be a dolphin - for intelligence, agility - and also for a way of diving under subjects. In appearance, he could not be less like a dolphin. He looks like what he once was, a

schoolteacher: tall, balding, bespectacled, in his fifties, with a comfortable, lively face. How much of the trilogy did he plan in advance? He said he had a sense of its overall 'architecture' and its ending but 'did not know what was going to happen on the way. What I am given is the story. What I have to contribute is my telling of it.'

He was born in Norwich in 1946 in a service family. His father was in the RAF and posted abroad. 'We had no roots,' he said. He spent the early Fifties in southern Africa and Australia. But it was the travelling by boat across the world that helped to shape his imagination: it gave him a sense of the world on an epic scale. He savoured the remembered names: 'Las Palmas, Bombay, the Suez canal.' And he talked about the sea with gusto, almost as if it were in the room with us: 'It changes colour, the shapes of the waves change. That way of travelling is irreplaceable.'

He spent his teens in North Wales, read English at Oxford (where he still lives) worked for a while at Moss Bross, 'an extraordinary experience' which he promises himself he will write about one day. He also worked as a librarian before training to become a teacher. Until he was 40, he taught in an Oxford middle school. He used to delight in telling them Greek myths. He also wrote school plays which he later adapted into novels. He would have been a friendly, occasionally fierce, teacher. He is glad he no longer teaches, saying that the national curriculum and the failure to trust teachers had 'destroyed everything that made teaching a pleasure'.

Curiously, he describes himself as if he were not a writer either, but part of an oral tradition. He compares himself to a busking story-teller 'sitting on a carpet in a market place'. He likes to imagine people coming to 'sample' his stories. Those who enjoy them 'can stay and put coins in the hat'. He believes in the story-teller's power and told a tale to prove it.

About 13 years ago, on a family holiday, it was his job to keep his five-year-old son, Tom, amused by telling him The Odyssey while waiting for supper to arrive: 'I'd wind up neatly as soon as I could see the food coming.' By the end of The Odyssey, 'Tom was sitting with a glass in his hand like this [Pullman pressed hard on the sides of an imaginary glass]. At the climax, he was so galvanised he bit a chunk out of the glass. That's the power of story-telling,' he concluded calmly, adding: 'Thank you Homer.'

But not everyone who comes to sit on Pullman's carpet is inclined to put coins in his hat. He was described in the Catholic Herald as being 'far more worthy of the bonfire than Harry Potter' and 'a million times more sinister'. This is nonsense, but not a surprising reaction. Pullman is an atheist with a mission. He describes science as the 'most successful achievement of the human race'.

Earlier this year, he gave a remarkable speech called 'The Republic of Heaven' in which he succeeded in converting the words 'God is dead' into something positive. He refreshingly recruited Jane Eyre to his cause while giving Tolkien and C.S. Lewis the thumbs down for failing to salute the real world. He is not short of faith but it believes in humanity and in goodness, not in God. He believes we need this 'thing which I've called joy'. His is an engaging moral optimism. He laughs easily but has a stoical approach to everything that lies outside his control. The film rights for the trilogy have been sold. Did he fear his books would be ruined? 'No. Waste of time. Take the money and forget it. I have no power.'

I asked him if reality seemed lacklustre after returning from his imagined worlds? 'No, the real world is better than stories.' I asked if he was able to live in the present, as his invented foxes do? He replied adamantly: 'There is no elsewhere.' But surely it is hard? 'Yes, but I believe in the absolute preciousness of the here and now. Here is where we are and now is where we live.'