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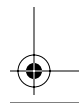
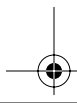
THE ONCE UPON A TIME BUSINESS

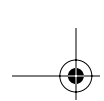


“Pullman is a brilliant writer,” wrote Nicholas Tucker, adding that he is “capable of lighting up the dullest day or greyest spirit with the incandescence of his imagination.”¹ The British newspaper *The Observer* asked, “Is he the best storyteller ever?”² London’s *Sunday Times* called him “inexhaustibly versatile” and a “prodigiously gifted author.”³

But according to Peter Hitchens, Philip Pullman is “the most dangerous author in Britain.”⁴ The *Catholic Herald* is often quoted as saying that Pullman’s books are “far more worthy of the bonfire than Harry Potter . . . and a million times more sinister.” It is a reputation in which Pullman revels. He even stuck Hitchens’s article on his study wall, saying, “It’s a great compliment to me, isn’t it?”⁵ and, “Of course, I sent him a warm card of appreciation and thanks.”⁶ Controversy is good for a book’s visibility—and sales. But Pullman enjoys comments like this for another reason. He openly admits, “I’m trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief.”⁷ Hitchens recognizes this and it distresses him. Leonie Caldecott, the *Catholic Herald* writer, recognizes it too, but her tongue was firmly in her cheek when she wrote the now infamous comment about bonfires. She was not actually saying that *any* books are worthy of the bonfire, but rather that the heated opposition to Harry Potter in some Christian circles in America was directed at a fairly insignificant target compared to what Pullman was writing.⁸

Why does Pullman’s work excite people to such strong feelings? Most obvious is the sheer quality of his writing with its enchanting inventiveness,





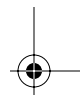
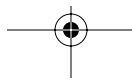
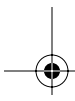
rich use of language, striking and well-honed phrases, vivid characterization and fast-paced, exhilarating plots. *Publishers Weekly* praised Pullman for being “a master at combining impeccable characterizations and seamless plotting, maintaining a crackling pace to create scene upon scene of almost unbearable tension,”⁹ while Robert McCrum wrote in *The Observer*, “As well as giving his readers stories that tick with the precision, accuracy and grace of an eighteenth-century clock, he also writes like an angel.”¹⁰ According to Andrew Marr, the trilogy is destined to become a classic: “*His Dark Materials* will be being bought, and pulled dog-eared from family bookshelves, in 100 years’ time. That is so because of a quality of writing that makes one think in turn of Milton . . . but also of Dickens and Tolkien.”¹¹ Pullman is constantly compared with Tolkien, and also with C. S. Lewis. For many people *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Chronicles of Narnia* are the greatest British fantasy stories of the twentieth century. Pullman cannot bear either series, but to be considered at the same level shows how highly people think of him.



PARADISE RETOLD

Philip had already found success and acclaim as a children’s author before anyone had heard of *His Dark Materials*. Fifteen of his books and two plays had been published before *The Golden Compass* hit the shelves in 1995. Since then, he’s written six more books, besides *His Dark Materials* and *Lyra’s Oxford*. He’s become a major force in the literary world and in 2004 was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire for his services to literature.¹² Two years previously he won the Eleanor Farjeon Award for his “crusading advocacy” of the children’s book world. Pullman said: “I’m delighted by this prize because it’s unlike other awards—it’s not for a single book, but for something more long-term than that; and I’m honoured to be following in some highly distinguished footsteps. It’s nice to get an award that doesn’t always go to a writer, too—a general children’s book world recognition.”¹³

But in 1993, Philip had a conversation with his editor, David Fickling, then with Scholastic Publishing, which would eventually lead to Pullman’s life being transformed. When he told Fickling that he wanted to do Milton’s





Paradise Lost for teenagers, his editor immediately encouraged him to develop the idea. Pullman says:

Off the top of my head I improvised a kind of fantasia on themes from Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*. And [Fickling] got quite excited because he loves *Paradise Lost* as well. By this time I knew the kind of thing I wanted to do—I knew the length, I knew it was going to be in three volumes and I knew it was going to be big and ambitious and enable me to say things I'd never been able to say in any other form.¹⁴

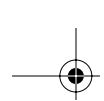
He began work on the first volume, *The Golden Compass*, and many ideas came together easily. But something about it was still not working as he re-drafted the first chapter again and again, until “one day I found myself writing the words ‘Lyra and her dæmon’ and that was the key.”¹⁵ The first part of the story was published in 1995 as *Northern Lights* in the United Kingdom and as *The Golden Compass* in the United States.¹⁶

It was a huge success with readers and critics alike, attracting readers of all ages and in many countries. *The Guardian* describes it as “an eye-widening fantasy, a scorching thriller and a thought-provoking reflection on the human condition.” Pullman was already hard at work on the second volume, *The Subtle Knife*, which followed two years later. By this time many fans were desperate to get their hands on the third volume of the trilogy,¹⁷ *The Amber Spyglass*. Eventually one of them sent Pullman an anonymous letter with a picture of a squirrel and a note saying:

I enclose a picture of a very cute squirrel.
Please admire it.
Now that you have admired it, I want you to remember your book,
which the world has spent eons waiting for.
Please admire the squirrel again.
Cute squirrel, isn't it?
Now, release your book or the squirrel dies.

Pullman finished the first draft of *The Amber Spyglass* in 1999, and it was



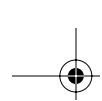


published the following year. During a promotional tour following publication, Philip often told audiences about the letter. Several people approached him claiming to be the author of the note, or to be the author's friend. He didn't believe any of them until a teenager named Sophie spoke to him and asked why he had misquoted her letter—he had substituted the words “so long” for “eons” as he thought the word might not mean much to younger members of the audience. She presented him with a plastic squirrel with a knife through it, which he keeps on a shelf in his study.¹⁸

This shows the level of devotion that some people feel to Pullman, and especially to *His Dark Materials*. There is a global army of loyal fans—adults as well as teenagers—and a number of Internet fan sites delivering news, background information, discussion boards, fan art and more.¹⁹ Then there are *His Dark Materials* related role-playing games²⁰ and fan sites in other languages (French, German, Portuguese and Russian at least).

Thanks to *His Dark Materials*, Pullman has become one of the most significant writers in the English-speaking world—a far cry from the obscurity of being a teacher in Oxford. He has sold more than seven million copies in thirty-seven languages as well as in audio books. BBC Radio 4 broadcast a major dramatization to considerable acclaim in 2003, and London's National Theatre staged an extraordinary two-part adaptation in late 2003 and 2004,²¹ which the archbishop of Canterbury called “a near-miraculous triumph.”²² In the BBC's 2003 poll of Britain's favorite book, *The Big Read*, *His Dark Materials* came in at third place—the highest position for any living author.²³ *The Golden Compass* won the Guardian Children's Fiction Award and the Carnegie Medal.²⁴ *The Amber Spyglass* won the Children's Book of the Year²⁵ and the Whitbread Prize for 2001—the first time that a children's author had won this major literary award. Jon Snow, chair of the Whitbread judges' panel, said: “The wind was against Pullman, possibly because you feel that a literary prize is going to be for something exceptional, and you don't necessarily think of the children's genre as doing that.”²⁶ But it only took the judges two minutes to unanimously agree that *The Amber Spyglass* deserved to win the overall prize. Boyd Tonkin, literary editor of *The Inde-*





pendent, said that “those two minutes will resonate in British publishing and literature for many decades.”²⁷

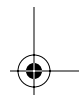
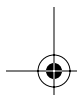
ALL-ENCOMPASSING

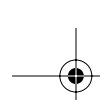
A key element in the appeal of *His Dark Materials* is the dazzling breadth of Pullman’s story and its complexity. He weaves into the narrative powerful themes and big philosophical issues that engage any active mind: growing up, wisdom, separation, misuse of authority, freedom, responsibility, consciousness, God, the meaning of life and more besides. Millicent Lenz says:

His Dark Materials interweaves an engrossing, breath-taking adventure story with a deeply felt examination of existential questions, such as Mrs. Coulter’s anguished plea to know whether God is, as Nietzsche asserted, “dead,” or why, if he still lives, he has grown mute. In his bold willingness to take on this and other “big” questions . . . Pullman differs from more timid contemporary writers.²⁸

It has often been suggested that what marks out a literary novel is ambiguity—not tying everything up in a neat plot resolution, having gray areas as well as black and white. *His Dark Materials* delivers ambiguity in abundance. Think for instance of Lord Asriel’s character, or even of Mrs. Coulter’s in *The Amber Spyglass*; think of the veil Pullman draws over the grove where Lyra and Will express their love for each other; the mystery still surrounding Dust; or the questions about dæmons that persist even at the very end of the trilogy. For older readers there is plenty to reflect upon with these and many other issues.

The less satisfying elements are when Pullman leaves no ambiguity. The example most frequently commented on is his portrayal of the church as unremittingly awful. In London’s *Sunday Times*, Nick Thorpe drew attention to “the almost pantomime evil of his churchmen, who are conspicuously lacking in . . . redeeming features.”²⁹ Related to this, several critics have complained that *The Amber Spyglass* gets bogged down in the philosophical issues, and crosses the line from storytelling into propaganda for Pullman’s





atheistic worldview. Peter Hitchens commented that after the first two “captivating and clever” books, *The Amber Spyglass* is “a disappointing clunker . . . too loaded down with propaganda to leave enough room for the story.”³⁰ Sarah Johnson called *His Dark Materials* “the most savage attack on organised religion I have ever seen.”³¹ Minette Marin sides with Pullman in calling herself a “godless scientific materialist,” but laments, “This third book is frostbitten in parts by the freezing fingers of didacticism; overt didacticism is death to art; the magic of stories is too elusive for moralising.”³²

MIXED MESSAGES

Pullman denies that he is trying to communicate a moral or philosophical message:

It’s a story, not a treatise, not a sermon or a work of philosophy. . . . I’m showing various characters whom I’ve invented saying things and doing things and acting out beliefs which they have, and not necessarily which I have. The tendency of the whole thing might be this or it might be that, but what I’m doing is telling a story, not preaching a sermon.³³

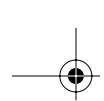
On his own website, Philip writes:

As a passionate believer in the democracy of reading, I don’t think it’s the task of the author of a book to tell the reader what it means. The meaning of a story emerges in the meeting between the words on the page and the thoughts in the reader’s mind. So when people ask me what I meant by this story, or what was the message I was trying to convey in that one, I have to explain that I’m not going to explain. Anyway, I’m not in the message business; I’m in the “Once upon a time” business.³⁴

But he does admit that he is attempting to explore the big issues:

In the hearts of many, many people there is a longing for significance, for meaning, for answers to the question, “Why? What’s it all about? Why are we here? What have we got to do?” and so on. “What hap-





pens when we die?” and so on. In writing [*His Dark Materials*], I was not trying to give answers to these questions, but to give expression to the questions. . . . Clearly this resonates with a lot of people.³⁵

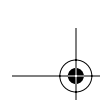
These protests highlight a tension in Pullman’s comments on his work. On the one hand, he denies having a message; on the other, his uncompromising antireligious stance is far more explicit in *His Dark Materials* than in any of his previous books.

I think the resolution of this tension is probably to be found in the fact that writers always communicate their worldviews whether they intend to or not (unless, perhaps, they make a deliberate attempt to write from the perspective of another worldview). So Pullman, having decided to explore some of the great themes that were important to him from *Paradise Lost*, William Blake and other sources, wrote a story about a little girl who grows up *in the context of* a cosmic struggle against the idea of God. As the plot progresses, this becomes less of a background feature and more part of the plot itself. It is almost inevitable that Pullman would express some of his own animosity toward religion through the mouthpiece of his characters. He may not have *intended* to do so in such a blatant fashion, but he has nevertheless ended up with a story that expresses his worldview very clearly.

THE MAN WHO KILLED GOD

But who is the man behind the stories? Philip is tall, balding and middle-aged and still has the look of a teacher about him with his spectacles, sports jackets and penchant for vividly colored socks, shirts and ties. He and his wife, Jude, a former teacher turned hypnotherapist, have been married for over thirty years. They have two grown-up sons—Jamie, a professional viola player, and Tom, currently doing postgraduate studies in linguistics at Cambridge—and a grandson, Freddie. Philip is an unassuming, mild-mannered and genial man with a sharp mind and a lively curiosity about all kinds of things. It is partly this breadth of interest that makes his books so enjoyable. His enthusiasm is infectious when talking about something that particularly fascinates him.





When I talked with him we disagreed about a number of subjects, but he gave the impression of relishing the intellectual cut and thrust of our discussion. His deep antipathy toward Christianity does not seem to have come about as a result of a negative personal experience of the church. In childhood, at least, it was quite the reverse. Philip considers his grandfather, a Church of England rector, to be the most important influence on his life. In childhood he accepted everything his grandfather believed. But in time Philip lost any confidence he had in this: “As I grew up and began to look around and see how other people thought about things, and read books and so on, naturally I began to question this, as people do. And I eventually came—after a lot of swinging this way and that, and trying things out—to the position I hold now.”³⁶

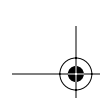
Pullman acknowledges that God may be out there somewhere, but insists that he has seen no evidence for his existence:

I’m caught between the words “atheistic” and “agnostic.” I’ve got no evidence whatever for believing in a God. But I know that all the things I do know are very small compared with the things that I don’t know. So maybe there is a God out there. All I know is that if there is, he hasn’t shown himself on earth.

But going further than that, I would say that those people who claim that they do know that there is a God have found this claim of theirs the most wonderful excuse for behaving extremely badly. So belief in a God does not seem to me to result automatically in behaving very well.³⁷

This conviction that God is at best irrelevant to life, and that religious people have used their beliefs to justify intolerance and cruelty, drives much of the plot of *His Dark Materials* as well as at least part of Philip’s real life—he is a supporter of the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society. To say that Philip’s naturalist worldview “drives much of the plot” suggests that I *do* see this as one of the central messages that come through *His Dark Materials*, despite Pullman’s protests.³⁸ His comment quoted above





that he is “trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief” would tend to confirm this, as would his statement “My books are about killing God.”³⁹

This is important in our reading, not just of *His Dark Materials*, but of Pullman’s other works too, because it helps us as readers to see how Pullman expresses *himself*.⁴⁰ But it is equally important not to focus on this issue to the exclusion of others. I have already listed several themes that will be addressed in this book, and it is vital to let Pullman speak for himself on these issues rather than simply force them into the grid of his “anti-Christian agenda.”

It is important that we allow Pullman’s values to be seen—many of them, it turns out, are quite consistent with a Christian worldview. Philip says: “We must be cheerful and not go round with a face like a mourner at a funeral. It’s difficult sometimes, but good will is not a luxury: it’s an absolute necessity. It’s a moral imperative.”⁴¹ Here he shows that, unlike many contemporary writers, Pullman is not a moral relativist. The centrality of values like these makes *His Dark Materials* a very life-affirming story in many ways. Another moral imperative for Pullman is to be hopeful. His optimism about people shines through: “When you look at the news sometimes, you despair. But then you look at the achievements of the human race and you feel optimistic again. . . . I think I’m 51 per cent optimistic. I think I have to be. . . . It’s a moral duty, isn’t it, to be optimistic?”⁴²

