



PREFACE

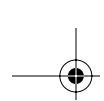


His Dark Materials is one of the most engaging stories I've ever read—it instantly drew me into its magical world and I quickly came to love its cast of vividly drawn characters. I found the gripping plot almost unrelenting in its demand that I keep on reading. The power and scope are quite simply breathtaking, and it seemed inevitable to me that *His Dark Materials* would become a huge influence in popular culture. But with such depth in the issues with which it grapples, and with such a range of sources from which Pullman drew inspiration, it was also clear that it would not simply become a bestseller but would also stimulate endless discussion. And it combines so many of the subjects I love—literature, physics, philosophy and theology—that I could not sit back and let other people contribute to the growing discourse without pitching in myself.

There are already two very helpful books on Philip Pullman and *His Dark Materials*—by Nicholas Tucker¹ and Claire Squires²—but I am coming at Pullman's work from a distinctively different perspective from them. I am unashamedly a fan, but I also take issue with Pullman on the question of his attack on God and Christianity.

In the chapters that follow I want to help you to understand and appreciate Pullman's work more fully, and also to analyze his underlying ideas and worldview. I do not assume or expect that you share my own Christian perspectives, but I do believe that it's helpful for all fans of Pullman's work—Christian or otherwise—to *understand* a Christian perspective on it. That





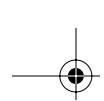
does not mean there is an obviously Christian angle right through this book, or that it is consistently negative. And I am not presenting this book as the definitive way in which to read Pullman's work, so I don't expect you to agree with everything. As Pullman himself says:

The last thing I want to say is you've got it wrong. Because then you enter a kind of fundamentalist mode where you're saying you've got to understand it this way, not that way . . . that's dreadful. People are at perfect liberty to find in my story whatever they want to find and I wouldn't dream of saying to someone they've got it wrong. I'm just very flattered and happy that lots of people are reading my books.³

In part one, I look at some of the background to Philip's writing: the things that have shaped Pullman himself; his career as a storyteller, including a brief look at his other work; and the major influences not just on *His Dark Materials* but on his wider thinking. In part two, I look in more detail at the narrative world of *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, *The Amber Spyglass* and *Lyra's Oxford*, to try and tease out some of the key strands of the story. In part three, I look at some of the big themes and issues that play a prominent part in the story: dæmons and the whole business of growing up; the nature of Dust and its connection with "original sin," the Fall and consciousness; truth and integrity; and finally the church, God and the republic of heaven. There's also an appendix on two aspects of the science that Pullman weaves into the story—my background as a physicist couldn't let that opportunity pass by. There are many omissions: themes I don't develop, wonderful passages from *His Dark Materials* that I don't even mention, perspectives I apparently ignore, great quotes from Pullman or others that are left behind, added to which I have given Pullman's other work only a fraction of the attention that it deserves and that I intended to give it. Restriction on space is a hard taskmaster and it makes a writer necessarily ruthless.

You will find some additional material, including a transcript of my interview with Philip Pullman, articles and study guides on some of his books, at www.damaris.org/pullman. I owe my sincere thanks to many people for





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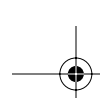
their help while I was writing this book, not least Philip Pullman himself. He has been gracious in giving time to both talk with me and correspond by e-mail, and in allowing me to quote extensively from his work. I'm also grateful for his practical assistance in giving me a lift back to my mother-in-law's stranded car after it had suffered a puncture on my way to visit him. I'm sure contending with Oxford's rush-hour traffic was the last thing Philip wanted at the end of a busy day, but he was quick to volunteer and saved me a major headache.

I am grateful for the opportunity to engage with many groups and individuals on the subject of Pullman's books. Particular thanks to Wade Bradshaw for the first invitation to lecture on *His Dark Materials* at EAbri in Hampshire, and to Alex Aldous for inviting me to sharpen my ideas with an audience of young fans at Oakham School. The CultureWatch Group (Damaris Study Group) in Southampton; Above Bar Church, Southampton; and various other groups around the country have also stimulated, challenged and shaped my thinking over the last two years. Thanks also to the enthusiasts who maintain various *His Dark Materials* websites—they have been an invaluable source of information. I must make particular mention of Merlyn and the rest of the team at Bridgetothestars.net, which was my first port of call on the Internet on many of my writing days.

Specific snippets of information came from many sources—my thanks to the many others who have not been mentioned here and my apologies for not mentioning you by name. Having valued David Wilkinson's books on science and faith over several years, I am particularly grateful for his time in bringing me back up to speed on cosmology. Thanks also to Gillian Hansford for information on South American shamans; David and Pippa Trollope, and Ruth Armstrong for transcribing my interview with Philip; and to Roger Eldridge and Richard Stuckey for photographs on the book cover.

Very special thanks must go to the team at Damaris for bearing with me in the months of working from home rather than in the office. Peter Williams and Caroline Puntis both made valuable comments on various sections of the manuscript of this book, and both have taken up some of the





slack while I have devoted my energies to writing, as have others in the team. Caroline in particular has taken on the role of assistant CultureWatch editor in the last four months, which has been an enormous help. Of all the Damaris team, it is Steve Couch who earns most gratitude and admiration for editorially steering me to completion with his gentle prodding rather than beating me with a stick, and with metaphorical—though still edible—carrots (Turkish Delight, Stilton, good wine . . . time to start the next book!) to spur me on from stage to stage. He has been a model of encouragement, patience and (almost) impeccable pedantry. Pullman's editor David Fickling has three golden rules for editors: first, the author isn't always right; second, the book is the author's, not the editor's; third, neither rule works all the time. Steve has obeyed these rules to the letter and with great spirit. And finally, more thanks than I can express to my dearest friend—my wife, Jane, and to my three boys, Charlie, Oliver and Pip, who have endured my absorption in this project over months.



Tony Watkins
July 2004

Throughout this book, references to *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, *The Amber Spyglass* and *Lyra's Oxford* are given as abbreviations. All page numbers refer to the paperback editions published by Dell Yearling in 2001 (*The Golden Compass* and *The Subtle Knife*) and 2003 (*The Amber Spyglass*), except for *Lyra's Oxford*, which is the hardcover edition published by Knopf in 2003. All URLs for articles on the Internet, which are referenced in the notes, were accessible in October 2005.

