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“I’m trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief.”

— Philip Pullman, author of *The Golden Compass*

Millions of people are sure to flock to see *The Golden Compass*, an “exhilarating fantasy adventure set in an alternate world” produced by New Line Cinema (*The Lord of the Rings* trilogy) and starring Oscar winner Nicole Kidman, Sam Elliott and Daniel Craig. The movie is based on the bestselling and award-winning first novel in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy. But is the movie harmless entertainment, or does it carry a deeper message? Peter Hitchens called Pullman “the most dangerous author in Britain” (*Mail on Sunday*). Is this critique justified? Author Tony Watkins (*Dark Matter: Shedding Light on Phillip Pullman’s Trilogy His Dark Materials*) discusses Pullman’s work.

Why does Pullman’s work excite people to such strong feelings?

Watkins: 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. . . . 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.

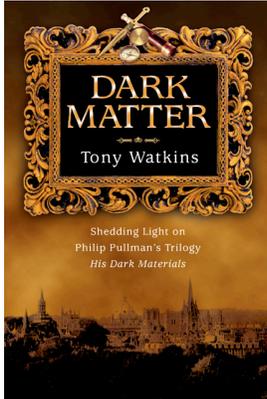
What is the significance of dæmons in The Golden Compass?

Watkins: Pullman uses the dæmons to great effect within *His Dark Materials*, but the idea isn’t entirely original to him. These companion animals help and guide humans, as well as encourage them toward wisdom. Not quite an externalized soul and not quite a guardian angel, the dæmon does represent something about the human. Human and dæmon are fuzzy, overlapping parts of the same thing, two facets of one being.

Given Pullman’s antipathy to Christianity, the great irony of his invention of the dæmon is that he has constructed a rather good model of the Trinity of God. . . . When you first read *The Golden Compass* the connectedness of Lyra and Pantalaimon (and Pan’s shape-changing abilities) seems extraordinary. As we discover more about the way they are two parts of one being, the harder it becomes to understand but the more normal it seems.

Q&A

AUTHOR INTERVIEW



*Dark Matter:
Shedding Light on
Philip Pullman's
Trilogy "His Dark
Materials"*

224 pages, paper,
978-0-8308-3379-5,
\$15.00

What is Pullman's problem with Christianity? Why does he want to "undermine belief"?

Watkins: His deep antipathy toward Christianity does not seem to have come about as a result of a negative personal experience of the church. . . . Pullman acknowledges that God may be out there somewhere, but insists that he has seen no evidence for his existence. In talking about this, Pullman has said, "All I know is that if there is [a God], 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."

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.

What would you say to those who think the trilogy and the movie are harmless, escapist fiction?

Watkins: Pullman is a master storyteller. He loves life, and through his stories he urges all of us to engage with it. However, Pullman's writing tends to blur the boundary between fiction and reality. Consider what he has said in one interview:

The most important questions of all are the big religious ones: Is there a God? What is our purpose? And so on. . . . If there are lessons to be learned in the fantasy world, we have to see how to put them to use in our real lives . . . the theme, if you like, of *His Dark Materials* is the search for a way of looking at . . . big religious questions which might be called republican. My own belief is that God is dead, but that we need heaven nonetheless; and since it's no longer possible to believe in a Kingdom of Heaven, we shall have to create a republic.

The ideals of the republic of heaven (celebrating and making the most of this world, responsibility, wisdom, moral behavior, selflessness) sound great, but the underlying framework—the myth—is a worldview of materialist determinism with no genuine freedom and a destiny of oblivion, however much it is dressed up in mythical ideas.