

NAVIGATING
THE
GOLDEN
COMPASS



RELIGION, SCIENCE
AND DÆMONOLOGY IN
HIS DARK MATERIALS

EDITED BY
GLENN YEFFETH



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MICHAEL CHABON



Dust & Dæmons

This piece first appeared in *The New York Review of Books* in 2004.

1.

Pity those—adventurers, adolescents, authors of young adult fiction—who make their way in the borderland between worlds. It is at worst an invisible and at best an inhospitable place. Build your literary house on the borderlands, as the English writer Philip Pullman has done, and you may find that your work is recommended by booksellers, as a stop-gap between installments of Harry Potter, to children who cannot (one hopes) fully appreciate it, and to adults, disdainful or baffled, who “don’t read fantasy.” Yet all mystery resides there, in the margins, between life and death, childhood and adulthood, Newtonian and quantum, “serious” and “genre” literature. And it is from the confrontation with mystery that the truest stories have always drawn their power.

Like a house on the borderlands, epic fantasy is haunted: by a sense of lost purity and grandeur, deep wisdom that has been forgotten, Arcadia spoilt, the debased or diminished stature of modern humankind; by a sense that the world, to borrow a term from John Clute, the Canadian-born British critic of fantasy and science fiction, has “thinned.” This sense of thinning—of there having passed a Golden Age, a Dreamtime, when animals spoke, magic worked, children honored their parents, and fish leapt filleted into the skillet—has haunted the telling of stories

from the beginning. The words “Once upon a time” are in part a kind of magic formula for invoking the ache of this primordial nostalgia.

But serious literature, so called, regularly traffics in the same wistful stuff. One encounters the unassuageable ache of the imagined past, for example, at a more or less implicit level, in American writers from Cooper and Hawthorne through Faulkner and Chandler, right down to Steven Millhauser and Jonathan Franzen. Epic fantasy distills and abstracts the idea of thinning—*maps* it, so to speak; but at its best the genre is no less serious or literary than any other. Yet epic fantasies, whether explicitly written for children or not, tend to get sequestered in their own section of the bookstore or library, clearly labeled to protect the unsuspecting reader of naturalistic fiction from making an awkward mistake. Thus do we consign to the borderlands our most audacious retellings of what is arguably one of the two or three primal human stories: the narrative of Innocence, Experience, and, straddling the margin between them, the Fall.

Any list of the great British works of epic fantasy must begin with *Paradise Lost*, with its dark lord, cursed tree, invented cosmology and ringing battle scenes, its armored angelic cavalries shattered by demonic engines of war. But most typical works of contemporary epic fantasy have (consciously at least) followed Tolkien’s model rather than Milton’s, dressing in Norse armor and Celtic shadow the ache of *Innocence Lost*, and then, crucially, figuring it *as a landscape*, a broken fairyland where brazen experience has replaced the golden days of innocence; where, as in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, it is “always winter and never Christmas.”

A recent exception to the Tolkienesque trend is Pullman’s series of three novels, *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass* (with a promised fourth, *The Book of Dust*), which reshuffle, reinterpret, and draw from Milton’s epic both a portion of their strength and their collective title: *His Dark Materials*. Pullman, who was a student at Oxford in the 1960s, has just served up a new volume, a kind of tasty sherbet course in the ongoing banquet, entitled *Lyra’s Oxford*.

There are broken lands in *His Dark Materials*—there are entire broken universes, in fact, whose vital stuff is leaking from them into the Miltonic abyss at a frightening rate. But the central figuring of Innocence and the Fall Pullman accomplishes neither through the traditional mapping of a landscape nor, as in Jack Vance’s classic *The Dying Earth*,¹ through

¹ Originally published in 1950 in a cheap paperback edition by the comic-book publisher Hillman Periodicals; currently available, with its three sequels, in the omnibus *Tales of the Dying Earth* (Tor Books, 2000).

NAOMI WOOD



Dismembered Starlings and Neutered Minds

Innocence in His Dark Materials

Many people, when asked, say that childhood's most appealing trait is innocence. Associated with purity, with truth and with goodness, innocence is an essential part of all we say we value, something to be cherished, nurtured, protected. In the book of Genesis, innocence was irrevocably lost when Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, however, asks not only that we re-evaluate our understanding of what innocence is but also our assumptions about what it means, whether it is, in fact, a quality to be valued.

In a 1997 review of Blake Morrison's book *As If* (an account of the pre-teen killers of the toddler James Bulger), Philip Pullman describes in horrifying detail how a gibbon at the zoo caught and tore apart a screaming starling, unemotionally, clinically: "I can't forget the crackings and snappings, the tough white sinews, the lolling shrieking head, and most of all the curious innocent concentration of the ape." By describing the ape's concentration as "innocent," Pullman highlights another aspect of innocence that few adults consider: its amorality. Although the ape may be said to be innocent in the sense that it has no moral consciousness to offend, its obliviousness does not negate the pain of the starling. The question raised for the human observer is the status of human consciousness, of conscience. When do humans become fully responsible for their actions? What does it mean to be innocent, to have experience? What makes humans human? Pullman's *His Dark Materials* explores these questions by asking readers to re-examine their notions

of innocence in order to promote an alternate vision of the good from the one generally promoted by those who seek to preserve childhood innocence at any cost.

Although children have always been with us, the notion of childhood innocence—much more the notion that childhood innocence ought to be inviolable—is relatively recent. Puritans, after all, saw children, like adults, as irredeemably flawed by original sin and in as great a need of divine intervention as the most hardened criminal. In the seventeenth-century Puritans thought that human beings had been created good; however, Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden irrevocably marred all humanity. In the words of the *New England Primer*, "In Adam's Fall / We sinned all." With the rise of Enlightenment rationalism and Romanticism, new ideas about children became current. With John Locke, rationalists asserted that children were "tabula rasae," "blank slates," while Romantics such as Rousseau contended they were inherently good; both positions assumed children were marked for evil by their environments rather than their natures. By the time William Wordsworth wrote the *Intimations Ode*, asserting that children come into the world "trailing clouds of glory" dimmed only by the "prison-house" of experience, children and their innocence had become almost divine. Victorians went one step better than the Romantics by legislating childhood innocence and condemning those children deemed "not-childlike" as monstrous. These monstrous not-children tended to be those who had the misfortune to have their innocence destroyed because of their vulnerable socio-economic or racial status.

George Boas has traced this history of the "cult of childhood" and shown how it connects with anti-intellectualism, reactionary politics, and religious fervor. Judith Plotz has shown that in defining children as a species set apart from adults and childhood as a "vocation," some Romantics and Victorians created a terrible predicament for children such as Hartley Coleridge, son of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Hartley's unenviable situation was to know that the farther he progressed away from the delightful "innocence" of his babyhood, the less appealing he was to his father. He appears to have spent the rest of his life trying to remain the spontaneous fairy-like baby his father had loved and celebrated in "Christabel," with inevitable contradictions splitting his psychic and physical identities as his body matured and experience told upon him.

As a student of Romantic and Victorian literature and the author of historical fiction set during the Victorian period (the Sally Lockhart series, among others), Philip Pullman is aware of the ways in which Vic-

DON DEBRANDT



His Dark Pharmaceuticals

Drug-related Themes and Imagery in the His Dark Materials Trilogy

Philip Pullman, the author of *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*, was born in 1946. A graduate of Oxford, he currently lives in England.

This means that in 1967—the Summer of Love—he was presumably a twenty-one-year-old university student living a short drive away from London.

Hmmm.

Now, I don't mean to imply he was some sort of counter-culture, tie-dyed, drug-crazed freak—but even in the cloistered environs of Oxford, he must have *known* a few. London was a pretty swinging place in those days, and I'm sure he spent a weekend or two immersed in the *zeitgeist* of his time.

From all reports it was pretty good *zeitgeist* . . . freely available, gave you a real strong buzz, and usually laced with all sorts of questions about the nature of reality.

The question is, did it influence his writing—and if so, how?

Light My Fire, Feed Your Head

“If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: infinite.”

—WILLIAM BLAKE, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Blake is one of the influences Pullman mentions in the acknowledgements for *The Amber Spyglass*. This quote is where the psychedelic band the Doors got their name, and was also used as a title by Aldous Huxley. The “doors of perception” are clearly the senses, but what it means for them to be “cleansed” is open to discussion. . . and if you were talking to Jim Morrison, that discussion would probably be about the best way to get high.

There’s plenty of historical precedent for using drugs as a perception-altering tool—and it’s exactly that approach, that drugs are a tool, that Pullman uses throughout *His Dark Materials*.

Smokin’ in the Old Boy’s Room

In the very first chapter of *The Golden Compass*, we have a reference to something known as “leaf.” It’s valuable enough for the butler to swipe some . . . but eventually, it becomes apparent from context that this is the equivalent of tobacco. I say “eventually,” because it’s not *obviously* tobacco; Pullman does introduce both tobacco and “tabaco” later on, as well as cigars, cigarettes, and cigarillos. So why doesn’t he just identify it up front?

Two reasons. First, he’s establishing cultural differences between parallel worlds; Lyra’s world uses one term for the substance, Will’s world uses another, and a third world just changes the spelling.

Second, he’s teasing us. He knows perfectly well the conclusion many adults will leap to, and he lets us make that jump. The reference is deliberate, and so are the ones that follow—meaning that Pullman’s agenda may be more subversive than simply taking an adversarial stand against organized religion.

Even socially accepted drugs take on a counter-culture significance when applied to children. Lyra shows off her rebellious nature in *The Golden Compass*, when she and two “brat companions” pass a stolen cigarette between them, “blowing out the smoke ostentatiously.” The detail helps establish Lyra’s outlaw nature, both her adventurousness and disdain for other’s rules.

Mother’s Little Caffeinated Helper

Will’s character is illustrated in the same way, but with a different drug: he’s shown drinking coffee, which makes him seem more adult and re-

SARAH ZETTEL



Dust to Dust

The Destruction of Fantasy Trope and Archetype in His Dark Materials

I stumbled across *The Golden Compass* by chance, which I suppose is appropriate. I picked it up in the bookstore. I liked the cover, I liked the blurb, I really liked the little bit I read standing in front of the display. I took it home and was quickly enraptured. The story was exciting, the characters gripping, the heroes complex and the villains really, really villainous.

It was not until I'd read the two sequels and considered the work as a whole that I understood some of what Philip Pullman had done to make the first book in particular so special. He tackled head-on a number of the most pervasive fantasy tropes and archetypes and took them apart. In fact, he ground some of them into Dust.

For an author there is a risk in doing this. The reason trope and archetype exist is that they are well-understood by the reader, they have a strong emotional resonance, or both. For an author to successfully take them apart, they must provide something strong and clear for a replacement. Otherwise, the story is going to be emotionally confusing and dissatisfying. Unfortunately, Pullman does not entirely succeed in this last, vital task with his story and it weakens the whole of this ambitious work.

Pullman is at his best when dealing with some of the weakest and least examined fantasy tropes. He starts with one of my least favorites: the Girl-Animal Telepathic Bond.

You know, in some ways I shouldn't be a fantasy fan. I have never once—not in my private musings, not in my juvenile writings—fantasized about having a telepathic bond with an animal. I have never

wanted a horse, hawk, cat (you notice, it's never a dog?) or wolf who instantly knew everything I was thinking and feeling. For one thing, do you actually want your cat to know what you're thinking when you boot it across the room because it's on the table licking the butter again? Or, worse, do you want to know what your *cat* is thinking at this moment?

Of course, fantasy telepathic animals are never really animals. They're furry people, and that, to me, makes the whole trope even more disturbing. Another person in my head? All the time? No privacy, no chance to think or feel for myself? No secrets?

No way.

Yes, I read and loved Anne McCaffrey's dragons of Pern with their mental and emotional bonds to their riders—until I stopped to think about them. In McCaffrey's work you are completely out of control. The dragon chooses you, whether you want it or not. Of course, no one in her stories would possibly turn down this magnificent bond, 'cause of course, you're not going to be chosen unless you're really destined for it, which is all part of the fantasy. But the control of self and body goes even further, because when your dragon is ready to have sex, you are going to have sex with the human partner of whatever dragon they end up mating with. Your ability, your very desire to say no is completely eradicated. Of course, all dragon riders are nice people, and there don't seem to be any sibling or parental combination problems here. If there are, the author is not talking about it.

But I can't help thinking about it, and as soon as I do there goes the fantasy.

Now, Pullman's version of the bond removes all the above problems. Instead of shackling two independent beings together because of some greater destiny, he presents the bond as two portions of the same soul. The *dæmon* is not only the conscience of the human; it is the manifestation of self-love. The *dæmons* love their humans and are loved in return. In Lyra's world not even the poorest street child is completely alone and unloved. They have their *dæmon* to love them, advise them, be with them when there is no one else. Thus, the depth of the horror that Mrs. Coulter and the others perpetrate removes from these children that last and greatest love.

Pullman also beautifully remakes the cliché of the Talking Animal. Fantasy is loaded with talking animals. Fantasy animals are downright chatty! This is understandable, as fantasy's roots are in fairy tales, and in fairy tales, animals talk. In fact, in a traditional fairy tale, if you don't listen to the talking animal you can end up very dead.

ROBERT A. METZGER



Philip Pullman, Research Scientist

We take such comfort from labels.

Before me are the volumes that make up Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy. Picking them up and thumbing through, I can't help but catch key words and phrases, those that should help me label just what these books are all about: *dæmons*, angels, a subtle knife, armored bears, Gobblers and witches.

Witches.

Even a quick scan clues me in that these aren't twenty-first-century witches, those who live in Manhattan, practice the art of aromatherapy and make the pilgrimage to upstate New York in the comfort of their Land Rovers during the summer solstice, where upon arrival they'll run about naked in an apple orchard as they feel the mud squish between their toes. Not Pullman's witches—these are of the pine branch-riding variety who chop up cliff ghosts.

Can there be any doubt as to what sort of books I have before me? I'm looking at fantasy here. And if any doubt at all remained, the back cover of my edition of *The Golden Compass* should put that to rest, proclaiming that what I hold in my hand is a "modern fantasy classic."

Okay.

The label has been applied—but not just to the books.

A label has also been applied to me—the reader of these books. Who am I? What am I? You see me walking through the bookstore with Pullman's His Dark Materials tucked beneath my arm and you think here is someone who appreciates fantasy at its finest—the fantastic mixed with overtones of literature.

That would be true.

But you might be surprised as to what else I am. I'm also a scientist and a science fiction writer. Are there a few eyebrows being raised? Does that not quite fit into your world view of a fantasy reader? Not so sure how to label me? Do scientists read "modern fantasy classics"? Can a science fiction writer's interest be held through 1300 pages of a "modern fantasy classic"?

Perhaps I'm not the sort of scientist and science fiction writer that the label generator in your head has conjured up. Afraid not—I'm probably dead-on. I've spent decades in research labs and universities mucking around with hulking stainless steel vacuum vessels, power supplies pumping out enough juice to carbonize a wayward limb, toxic chemicals that could peel flesh to the bone—and all of this in the quest of inserting atoms of specific flavors into just the right atomic locations of a growing crystalline lattice. I was a scientist from a tender age. What comes to mind when you think of the high school senior who is given an award at graduation for being the best science student in a class of 1,200 kids? That was me.

I'm sure it's not a pretty picture.

I can imagine the picture in your head—pocket protector bristling with pens, tweezers, miniature screwdrivers and little doodads with mirrors and claws. There are probably Coke bottle-thick lenses inserted in the black plastic-framed glasses slipping down a nose. And I have no doubt that this individual's pants legs are short by an inch or two so as to show an ample swatch of sock about the ankle, and hair style oscillates between that of a flattop buzz or an Einstein comb-free bush.

Oh, yes.

I know what you're thinking. And while I'd like to think that I've acquired enough of the social graces to pass in public as an insurance salesman or even a high school history teacher, I will admit that in times past I may have sported a few of the stereotypical science-geek traits.

And then add insult to injury.

I write science fiction, and not just any old science fiction, but that at the far end of the science fiction spectrum: hard sf, the type where one might expect the neutron stars and warp drives in the tales to have more personality than the characters, the type where key plot developments turn on the hero's ability to recite mathematical constants to better than a hundred significant digits.

So what is a science/sf geek doing reading *His Dark Materials*?

It's because I figured out a few things while toiling away in the world of science.