

more Phillip Pullman

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 18 Apr 2001

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Matthew Freestone — 18 Apr 2001, 20:49

Just to take up a few points raised:

His Dark Materials, and comprises three volumes:
The Golden Compass; _The Subtle Knife_; and
The Amber Spyglass.

The UK edition of The Golden Compass is entitled Northern Lights (or at least the one I have is so entitled). The Golden Compass fits better with the series though. Pullman has written novels before HDM too - though I have to say I've not read them.

(from William Ansley)

In _The Amber Spyglass_ the whole works just blows up in your face. The plot clanks; endless needless complications and characters are introduced.

I would say that's a bit strong. Certainly the last book is not so well controlled as the earlier ones, but I don't think all the new complications and characters are needless by any means. I found most of the book very satisfying - the war against heaven, the sequence in the land of the dead. I'll give you the sections about the creatures on wheels though - didn't do much for me.

The characters, at least some of them, including major ones, start acting unlike themselves.

I'm wondering who you are thinking of - if it's Mrs Coulter then I have to disagree - but I won't go any further down that route in case that's not who you're thinking of.

And Pullman evidently regards the success of the first two volumes in the series to be a license to turn parts of the third book into a virulent anti-Catholic screed (thinly disguised but unmistakable). I consider myself agnostic, but this aspect of the book made me uncomfortable. A certain anti-church bias is evident in the first two books as well, but nothing like what comes out in the third.

Here I've got to disagree strongly - the anti-religious bias is explicit and obvious from the start. The first book largely concerns a branch of the church running a torture centre for children let's not forget. You can like or dislike this, but it's not fair to Pullman to say he used his success as a platform for his views - they were in the work from the very start.

In short, I might recommend this series on the merits of the first two volumes, but only to someone who is not likely to be offended by a very anti-Christian message. (This seems to be a real bugaboo for Pullman. He apparently gave an interview some time ago in which he attacked C. S. Lewis and the Narnia books, which garnered him much ill will from their fans.)

Probably the Interzone interview with Elizabeth Counihan in IZ 161 (11/00). Quoting briefly, "I don't like his (Lewis's) fiction and especially detest his children's fiction. I think his Christian apologetics are dishonest. (...) He has some very sensible ... things to say about writing fiction and writing for children in particular, but his work is dedicated to propaganda in the service of a form of religion I find poisonous and damaging."

You could reasonably argue that HDM is propaganda in the service of the form of religion (essentially humanism) that Pullman finds wholesome and rewarding. But it's also a good story, with interesting characters. I've read most of the Harry Potter books and enjoyed them, but HDM is a work on a much more ambitious level, which succeeds more than it fails imho.

It's also supposed to be based on the structure of Paradise Lost. I haven't read that, so I can't really comment. Anyone?

(typical - my first post for over a year, and probably my longest ever, and it's not even about Gene Wolfe!)

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Matt Freestone - matthew at axiomatic.org.uk

www.axiomatic.org.uk SF: www.concatenation.org work: www.mercator.com

William Ansley — 18 Apr 2001, 22:52 · follows Matthew Freestone

Very good, Matthew. You have provided a reply which nicely balances my message. Certainly don't let me discourage anyone from reading the books and making up their own minds about them.

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I found the sequence in the land of the dead to be the weakest part of the book by far. It destroyed the logical cohesion of the multiple worlds idea, as far as as I am concerned.

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I'm wondering who you are thinking of - if it's Mrs Coulter then I have to disagree - but I won't go any further down that route in case that's not who you're thinking of.

Primarily Mrs. Coulter, yes. I am thinking of some others too, but I would have to reread the book to remember exactly who now.

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very start.

To me, he seem to be obsessed with the anti-religious message of the book in the last volume in a way that he wasn't in the first two. But, I agree that this aspect of the books was quite obvious from the start.

In short, I might recommend this series on the merits of the first two volumes, but only to someone who is not likely to be offended by a very anti-Christian message. (This seems to be a real bugaboo for Pullman. He apparently gave an interview some time ago in which he attacked C. S. Lewis and the Narnia books, which garnered him much ill will from their fans.)

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I would go so far as to say that you cannot reasonably argue that HDM* is not such propaganda. Let me try to be clear. I also thought very highly of HDM. As I said, some of the anti-religious material made me uncomfortable, but that was only a very small part of why I was disappointed in *The Amber Spyglass*. I made a big deal out of it because it apparently bothered some people a good deal (judging by some reader reviews I have seen posted) and I felt a warning was in order. For the record I have also read and enjoyed the Narnia books by C. S. Lewis. But, Lewis's propagandizing in these books also made me uncomfortable at certain points; I was much more aware of this when I re-read the books after several years had gone by.

My primary complaint about HDM is that it didn't fulfill the promise of the first two in many ways. I felt Pullman violated the logical framework he set up in the first two books in many ways. The revelation of the nature of "dust," such as it was, fell flat for me. I don't want to go into any more detail here so as to avoid spoilers.

I entirely agree that HDM was a better and certainly a much more ambitious series than the Harry Potter books. Frankly, I think J. K. Rowling is becoming a victim of her own success. I felt her fourth book was weaker than the third and she still has three more to go. Then again, I am really being unfair to Rowling; she hasn't even concluded her series and I'm trashing it.

I think I'm in a rut. I don't like the third volume of HDM or the Short Sun books and I am afraid I will not enjoy the conclusion of the Harry Potter series. Well, conclusions are very, very hard. Perhaps I should be a little more forgiving.

Matt Freestone - matthew@axiomatic.org.uk

www.axiomatic.org.uk SF: www.concatenation.org work: www.mercator.com

William Ansley

*His Dark Materials, the overall title of the series.