

His Dark Materials_ (Skirting spoiler territory)

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 25 Apr 2001

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David Lebling — 25 Apr 2001, 09:53

I thoroughly enjoyed the first book, enjoyed the second, and finished the third. That seems to match Mr. Ansley's and Mr. Bishop's experience. (My evaluation of C. S. Lewis's space trilogy is similar.)

The segments with the bears and the witches in the first book were truly excellent. The bear civilization was well-realized and very bearish. The witches reminded me of the witches in the Kalevala, which is a nice change from the usual witches one meets in fantasy. The concept of the daemons was well-done and well-elaborated, with some unexpected but well-thought-out twists in the later books (e.g., why do we not have daemons?).

Unfortunately, starting even in the first book, but getting worse in the second and still worse in the third, Pullman lets his fantasy get out of control. What many authors of fantasy forget is that if anything is possible, nothing is interesting. Eventually so many rabbits are pulled out of so many hats that the dramatic tension in the story just vanishes, and all you are doing is following the plot to see how it works out. (The SF equivalent, I suppose, is the "inventing a space-drive using the contents of your junk drawer" story, or any Star Trek episode).

I will say that the resolution of the problem of the "subtle knife" itself was appropriate and how it ties into the ultimate fate of the protagonists was excellent (not going to spoiler here, those who have read it know what I mean).

Unfortunately much that came before, especially in the third book, was more or less gratuitous. I wouldn't want to go much more deeply into the details for fear of igniting all the spoiler alerts, but the part of the story that paralleled Milton was resolved so easily, considering the build-up and the stakes, that I just didn't buy it. I will say that thinking about it carefully, Mrs. Coulter's behavior makes more sense, but not as much sense as it should, and the sense it makes doesn't make me like her any more than when I first met her.

As an aside, I bought The Golden Compass when it first came out in paperback, but was unable to get past the first few pages, which I found amazingly slow moving and uninteresting. Then it appeared on a reading list for my daughter, who is 12, so I gave it to her to read. She asked me questions about it, but I hadn't actually read it yet, so I borrowed it back and read it, finding that after those first few pages it picked up really quickly and was in its own way a page-turner. Then I read the other two volumes in rapid succession. She's working on The Subtle Knife now, and has found both books relatively hard going. My still-younger daughter, 10, is reading The Golden Compass now. Mr. Pullman autographed our copies.

Dave Lebling
aka vizcacha

Adam Stephanides — 25 Apr 2001, 18:22 · follows David Lebling

on 4/25/01 8:53 AM, David Lebling at dlebling at ucentric.com wrote:
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Or the protagonist suddenly discovering he can travel in spirit to other planets? <g>

--Adam