

# Digest urth.v030.n119

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 24 May 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2664>

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Alice Turner — 24 May 2001, 15:56

Said the Bear:

At 18:51 2001-05-24, alga wrote:

"An Almost Christian Fantasy," the review by Daniel Maloney in the Catholic journal First Things of Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy is

up. Intelligent analysis, I think, not just religious but literary.

<http://print.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0105/reviews/moloney.html>

Thanks for that, alga! I finished the series just last night, and I'm glad to see I wasn't the only one who didn't consider it entirely satisfactory. The plot of the third book is somewhat loose, but with so much wonderful writing and emotional power I could overlook that, provided there was a proper resolution. I couldn't understand why the Dust stopped flowing away just because of Will and Lyra's love; it feels right emotionally, but at least a hint of a rationale would have been nice. Her prophesied destiny as some sort of Eve comes to absolutely nothing that I could see. As for them being parted, well! That was just horrible. It really upset me. Why did he have to do that?

Oh, boy. I have thought of this so many different ways, since I am trying to figure out a way of writing about this series that sticks to a point, and of course Dust sort of has to be the point. Pullman is currently writing a short "reference book" to be called -The Book of Dust-, but I see no particular reason to wait for him. Virtually everyone--no, strike that, every grown-up person--feels the failure of the third book. We're trying to make it work, and I am specifically struggling with how to explain Dust (and the Specters) in terms of Manichaeian Light and Dark and a logical world-view (pretty damned hard to do when there are infinite worlds).

But let me tell you something really fascinating. Kids \*love\* the third book. Crowley told me it was the favorite of his daughter Hazel (just 14). And today I found the "fan fiction" site of His Dark Materials. This is something for you grown men to take a gander at, all of us who think we're so smart, in fact. Of 60 entries on these pages, fully 55 explore, in Borski-esque variants, the fate of Will and Lyra, some in poetry. I have to assume that most of them are written by girls about Hazel's age. Not a single poem about Iorak Birninsen! (Though elsewhere Serafina Pekkala has something of a fan club--include me in; I'll be a charter member of the Mrs. Coulter club, too.)

<http://www.fanfiction.net/index.fic?action=story-listfiles&Page=1&CategoryID=632&sort=DatePublished&GenreID=0&LanguageID=1>

Bear, the Eve thing is very difficult to figure in a truthful, honorable way. I waver, but mostly I feel that it was a mistake on Pullman's part, both in a moral and in a religious sense. The kids seem to adore it in a tearjerker way. Is that because my daemon has settled and theirs have not?

-alga

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Spectacled Bear — 25 May 2001, 16:58 · follows Alice Turner

At 20:56 2001-05-24, algawrote:

Virtually everyone--no, strike that, every grown-up person--feels the failure of the third book. We're trying to make it work, and I am specifically struggling with how to explain Dust (and the Specters) in terms of Manichaeism Light and Dark and a logical world-view (pretty damned hard to do when there are infinite worlds).

[waves to Copperhead thread!]

It doesn't need to be Manichean, does it? The Authority doesn't have the power of Creation that he claims, after all. The Spectres are kind-of believable, as is Dust leaking into the abyss through the windows. I'm not sure a strictly logical world-view is helpful, because then you might wonder whether Dust could cross between worlds (and if so, how) or if not, why the window from the land of the dead couldn't open onto a world without intelligent inhabitants. It will be interesting to see how the Book of Dust copes with all this!

But let me tell you something really fascinating. Kids *\*love\** the third book.

This is a considerable relief, as my son has just started reading Northern Lights (the UK name for The Golden Compass). I've been very worried, since it hit me so hard. And he isn't reading it at bedtime (I'm reading him Mrs Pepperpot stories! How's that for a contrast? Children are wonderfully versatile), so the night-ghasts will probably be okay. I found the Spectres too abstract to be properly frightening. I was much more worried by the Harpy (he has a very vivid imagination) but the story takes care of her very nicely indeed. Dodgy plot or not, it is still an exceedingly good book. I was pleasantly surprised, in fact, after opinions voiced here - I liked the mulefa, for example.

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Another loose end is the super-Dickensian-and-Wolfian-put-together degree of coincidence required for the plot of The Subtle Knife. Will just happens to find that window? Then happens to walk into the one room in a deserted city in the particular world where Lyra is hiding? Clearly not coincidence, but I don't recall anything being said about it - apart from them remarking on the unlikelihood! It must be something like the shaman summoning Lee, or Bilbo finding the Ring, but it would be nice to be told.

The kids seem to adore it in a tearjerker way. Is that because my daemon has settled and theirs have not?

I suspect it's because they don't have as much experience of loss as adults, and don't feel the full force of it. It *\*is\** enjoyable in a tear-jerking way, and I would have loved it if it had come in the middle of the book but they got together at the end. There's that tantalising hint about imagining yourself into other worlds - not the same thing as pretending, we are told explicitly, and the angels employ it as a practical means of travel - but it isn't followed up. Will is told he knows someone who can help him with it, and he doesn't even ask who it is, though it could hardly be anybody else but Mary. That's confirmed by Pullman himself at the readerville site Adam

posted, in the message that breaks off "She is the one who will tell him how to imagine his way into o". It's quite an interesting site. He says that Will and Lyra have to be parted, and some readers agree that it brings closure to the story. It certainly avoids him having to worry about the consequences of traffic between the worlds. Leaving everything more or less as it was before, only better, is characteristic of children's fantasy [one more reason to admire Alan Garner's \_The Moon of Gomrath\_, which doesn't]. Here I think it serves the didactic purpose of encouraging us to build the republic of heaven where \*we\* are: it isn't Will and Lyra who would spend all their time searching for a second window - they would have a private one, hidden in the back of a wardrobe - it is us.

Hey, I convinced myself!  
But I'm still cross.

Spectacled Bear.

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eli+ — 25 May 2001, 15:22 · follows Spectacled Bear

Spectacled Bear wrote:

At 20:56 2001-05-24, alga wrote:

But let me tell you something really fascinating. Kids \*love\* the third book.

Interesting. I wonder whether the difference is that they don't feel the flaws that many adults do, or that they feel certain strengths more strongly.

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Retargeting a bit, what about leaving everything more or less like it is in our world, whether it started that way or not? Oooh, this can get my dander up, and it's not just children's fantasy either. Some authors write as if I can't bring anything home from the book unless it reads right up to my door, and slams the door behind me to boot.

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That didactic purpose I can appreciate, but he weakens it by forcing the story. He tried to set up "Cold Equations"-style plot mechanism which threatens global disaster to \_coerce\_ Will and Lyra's decision -- rather than letting us see what their own wisdom leads them to decide. That's a lesser story.

I remember that my reading experience when I hit this was not one bit high-mindedly didactified, but was on the same mechanical level as his setup: but but but the Dust ecology is not at risk, because brief openings don't leak on the scale of the natural influx we've seen, and creating Specters is no problem with a little help, since the angel has said she can deal with those. If it had occurred to Will and Lyra that the obstacles were not absolute, they could have gone on to ask more interesting questions: what if everybody did it? are we special, to justify it? And the question Pullman didn't dare to ask them: even if we can, should we?

In a way, he did quite right. I don't know that they would have answered the way he wanted.

The honest story, I want to call it though I really shouldn't, might be a tragedy.

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