

Pullman review, Dust, Manichaeism (SPOILERS)

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

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Adam Stephanides — 25 May 2001, 18:03

on 5/24/01 2:56 PM, Alice Turner at akt at attglobal.net wrote:

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 pointing this out. I agree it's a very perceptive review. I think Moloney has put his finger on the basic flaws of the ending, though he's wrong to state as a definite fact that Will and Lyra do no more than kiss. (I'd also dispute his claim that atheists can't write fantasy, but that's another issue.)

Interesting that such a sympathetic review appears in First Things, which I think of (possibly mistakenly) as quite conservative, both theologically and socially. Moloney does say that if Pullman's anti-Christian propaganda had been presented more effectively, then he would have advised parents to keep their children away from the books.

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)

Dust doesn't seem too hard to explain, at least in broad outline; in fact, Pullman pretty much lays it out in HDM, especially TAS. Dust is matter that has begun to become conscious of itself (TAS, 31), matter and spirit being one in Pullman's metaphysics (TSK, pb, 249) Dust is both produced by conscious beings (TAS, 491) and sustains consciousness in these beings (don't have a specific page reference at the moment, but I clearly recall it being stated that if the Dust goes out of the universe so will consciousness). I'm not so clear about the Specters; in particular, their being created whenever the Knife is used seems contrived by Pullman to keep Will and Lyra apart. (And why, after presenting his Church as evil for suppressing scientific investigation, does he throw in this man-was-not-meant-to-tamper-with-the-unknown stuff?)

(On the subject of Dust, I think it was a mistake of Pullman's to identify Dust with dark matter. It seems that a lot of fantasy writers whose stories are set in, or cross over with, our world give in to the temptation to identify their MacGuffin with whatever unexplained scientific phenomenon is currently au courant. Not only does this mix genres, it will date their books horribly when the phenomenon is discovered either to have a perfectly mundane explanation, or worse yet, not to exist after all.)

in terms of

Manichaeism Light and Dark and a logical world-view (pretty damned hard

to do when there are infinite worlds).

I'm not sure what you're referring to when you talk of Manichaeism. There's no evil Supreme Being in Pullman's books, any more than there is a good Supreme Being. The Authority is evil, but only in the sense that Hitler was evil, not in the sense of an evil Principle. And Pullman's characterization certainly isn't Manichaean, as you're undoubtedly aware; viz. the harpies, who have been evil and serving the Authority for thousands of years, but are converted to good (a darn sight too quickly, if you ask me).

And Mani also posited a radical dualism between matter and spirit, something Pullman rejects.

Incidentally, for those interested in Gnosticism, I discovered a website on Gnosticism called the Gnosis archive. It includes translations of the Nag Hammadi writings and some of the Corpus Hermeticum, as well as a links page, and is maintained by believing Gnostics. It's at www.webcom.com/~gnosis/welcome.html

And today I found the "fan fiction" site of His Dark Materials.
[...] Of 60 entries on these pages, fully 55
explore, in Borski-esque variants, the fate of Will and Lyra, some in
poetry.

Except that the fan fiction writers know they're making it up (sorry, couldn't resist).

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?

Do your moral and religious objections refer to Will and Lyra's separation, or to the whole idea of Lyra being the new Eve, whose love for Will saves the universe? If the latter, I agree that "the Eve thing" is very weak as a resolution to the plot (Pullman does provide a sort of explanation, though a weak one, on TAS p. 478), but it fits with the theme of innocence vs. experience, a major theme of the book (though my sense is that it's not developed as effectively as it could have been). The Church, identifying experience with original sin, wants to keep everybody innocent. The Dust is attracted to experience, since the experienced--adults--are more conscious than the innocent--children. This is why the Church thinks Dust is connected to original sin, iirc. Pullman is in favor of experience, because it increases consciousness--an interesting reversal on the usual attitude in children's and young adult books that childhood = goodness and adulthood = corruption (even if Pullman doesn't carry it through consistently: despite the bad children in Cittagazze, most of the children in HDM are good and most of the adults are either corrupted or at least morally ambiguous, though there are some exceptions). So in choosing experience over innocence (without consciously realizing she is doing so), Lyra is coming down on the right side of the book's major dualism.

--Adam

Spectacled Bear — 30 May 2001, 11:33 · follows Adam Stephanides

At 00:03 2001-05-26, Adam Stephanides wrote:
on 5/24/01 2:56 PM, Alice Turner at akt at attglobal.net wrote:

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And even more wrong to describe the moment as "maudlin" and "banal". Were he and I reading the same book?

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Another reason for children to like this more than adults is that are are too young for the idea of lifelong commitment to appeal. Which is more or less what you said:

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Spectacled Bear.