

OT: Amber Spyglass (again)

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 16 Jul 2001

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Tony Ellis — 16 Jul 2001, 09:22

My first post after months of absence, and it's both off-topic out of date. Sorry about that, but pleased as I was to see the name of Philip Pullman causing a little controversy in the list earlier this year, back then I hadn 't read the all-important final volume. I've only just finished it now.

A quick glance at the reader reviews on Amazon.com shows that even Pullman's fans are divided over whether this is THE BEST! BOOK!! EVER!!!! or a let-down. Well, it's not the best book ever, but for me it was certainly the best of the trilogy. It had me on the edge of my seat, it brought a tear to my eye, and it made me care. I also find Pullman's brand of subversion amusing: gay angels indeed, and priestly absolution granted in advance for murder! The portrayal of God as a senile, frightened old man was particularly striking. It's good to know that there is a book like this out there which is accessible to children.

Did I find the ending unsatisfying? Yes, but only in terms of a failure of the author's imagination. I think the principle behind Will and Lyra's separation - that we must look for love and happiness in the real world instead of escaping to some fantasy land - is a sound one. It's just the way the author rigs events to enforce this that fails to convince.

Final thought: much mention has been made of the influence of the biblical and Gnostic stories of Genesis, but it was Paradise Lost, which Pullman actually cites as an influence, that I found myself drawing comparisons with. Ending, as it does, with one of the most memorable, bittersweet exiles in english literature:

...They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

"Hand in hand", you notice. But Adam and Eve are leaving Eden to be mere pawns in the predestined future Milton's nasty, totalitarian God has already mapped out. It's tempting to see Will and Lyra's going it alone as a reflection of the hope that 'this time, we'll make our own fate'.