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The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 08 Aug 2001

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 08 Aug 2001, 09:47

To Alga:

You're doubtless right about everything you say. Pullman's use of the word `_is_` correct. And as a sometimes-writer myself, I agree that the unexpected use of a word can be extraordinarily effective.

Pullman `_is_` an extraordinary writer. I will remind you that the first substantive thing I said about TGC is that it is "a marvellous `_novel_`. The characters and action are just plain overwhelming." I stand by that, and TSK (approximately 2/3 through) continues at that level. The only reason I am going to wait to buy a paperback of TAS is so I can shelve them together; I shelve pb's and hc's somewhat differently.

None of which bears directly on what you were responding to. I was in turn reacting to Tony Ellis's original comment that a child reading this book would be interested to learn that the Christian churches have repurposed a word meaning "spirit" to mean "evil spirit," and what I claimed and claim is that few, if any, children will learn that from TGC.

I originally stated that I believed Pullman's choice of the word was motivated by his anticlerical agenda. Indeed, I believe that many of the weaknesses of TGC and TSK are due to his serving his agenda preferentially to serving the work.

Theodore Sturgeon once remarked of an entirely different writer that he had "sold his birthright for a pot of message." While I don't think Pullman has sold his birthright, I believe he has allowed something of a lien on it. TGC and TSK have, in my opinion, too damn much `_power_` to squander it on didactics.

In other words: I am not condemning Pullman; I am praising him, albeit with faint damns.

To John Bishop:

That your "actual child (now 11)," approximately at the same place with Pullman, "had no problem whatsoever with 'daemon'," is a good sign for that child. That he "figured out quickly that it was unrelated to 'demon'," is a bit more problematic, since it `_is_` in fact related (if only etymologically) to "demon," and, as Alga points out, "spirit" is simply a legitimate, if somewhat-disused, meaning for the standard word.

I believe that Pullman `_wants_` your child to make that connection, and chose the word (out of many possible alternatives) specifically for its propensity to offend the less literate sort of Christian. The few quotes from Pullman I've seen on this list tend to reinforce this impression: he's a Christian-baiter, and not a very subtle one.

BTW, he far prefers Lemony Snicket's series to Pullman.

I saw those for the first time this weekend while I was picking up my TSK. Should I bother?

To Tony Ellis:

If the word 'daemon' is at some point "revealed to mean something like an externalized soul", right at that point the child -knows- that a word with Christian connotations of evil is being used to mean something as harmless as 'spirit'. If she's spared my lesson in political etymology, fine. She's still being given something to think about, which was my original argument.

Well, no, it wasn't. You actually wrote, I would hope that a child reading Pullman's book might be very interested to learn that a word used by Christianity to mean an incarnation of evil originally meant something as harmless as "spirit", and might wonder what other little misappropriations and mistakes may have taken place over the years.

While the sense of "being given something to think about" is certainly in there, your original argument seems to have been, precisely, that the child would receive and be "interested" in the "lesson in political etymology."

To Pippen:

Regarding Hamilton's "Night's Dawn" trilogy (which, by the way,

I recommend highly), you wrote:
The storms that rage around the planet are called "armada storms"
One Earth dweller gives the derivation as coming from chaos theory.
"If a butterfly flapping its wings in China can create a hurricane off Florida, what could an armada of butterflies accomplish?"

I did feel a twinge of recognition, though when I read that bit in Hamilton. Obviously, the man knows his Bradbury

Ummm... no, he knows his chaos theory, or at least the pop version of it. The "butterfly in China" is a standard rhetorical trope of chaos theory, and to the best of my knowledge is unrelated, except perhaps by accident, to the Bradbury yarn. The basic idea is that weather is a chaotic system, where small changes in initial conditions (where, again, "initial conditions" simply means "the conditions at the time the difference first appears, or when we first begin monitoring") can have arbitrarily large or small -- in short, unpredictable -- consequences. Thus, the small disturbance in the air caused by a butterfly's wings flapping in China may, through a series of interactions with other air motions, be a contributing cause of a hurricane in Florida six months later; if that damn butterfly had just sat still, there'd have been a snowstorm in Appalachia instead.

Or not. The sensitivity of the weather "system" to something _this_ small is highly questionable, but it stands as a dramatic, if not melodramatic, example of "sensitivity to initial conditions."

--Dan'l