

## 2003/Oct PHILIP PULLMAN - Publishing News

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy is that publishing Holy Grail: not only a bestseller, but also a critical success. The final part, *The Amber Spyglass*, published in 2000, put the cherry on the cake when it became the first children's book to win the main Whitbread Prize a year later and, for those of us who've been infected by its magic, that has been our lot. *Fin*, as it used to say at the end of movies.

That is until earlier this year, when word rushed round the Bologna Children's Book Fair, like a small child on tartrazine, that there would be a new story, albeit a short one. The book was, Pullman explains, originally planned as a guide to Oxford for anyone who might be interested. Not necessarily interested in ambling about the actual place - something the bound-in illustrated map would indeed help you do - but just for people with a fascination with Lyra's Oxford. Which, as it happens, is the title of the small, cloth-bound delight due out in early November.

"In many corners of the trilogy, I found there were a lot more things I had to say than I had room for in that story," says Pullman, "and because I didn't want to fill up the book with extra bits, which I think can be a bit of a makeweight thing to do, I needed to wait until I could incorporate [the ideas] into a story. And the story in this book is one of the very, very few times I've written something short that I'm satisfied with...it does have an internal coherence, a beginning, a middle and an end, and it also looks back as well as forward."

*Lyra's Oxford* is never less than a completely satisfying read, a new jewel in the *HDM* crown. But it also tantalises the reader with glimpses of advertisements and brochures and incomplete things we'll probably never get to see all of - like a page torn from the *Baedeker's Guide* which Pullman admits he probably won't ever have the time to write. But everything, as Lyra says in the new story, means something and the book appears to be full of clues - clues, you are left wondering, to what? Well, quite possibly to what is coming next, which is an extensive project, and one he says he's always had in mind, titled *The Book of Dust*.

It was ten years ago that Pullman first had the idea which was to become *His Dark Materials* and went to see David Fickling, then Publisher at Scholastic, to talk about the possibility of writing a fantasy. Fickling, as we now know, liked the notion. “I started with a great sense of freedom because I’d never written a fantasy before - it was like discovering a new musical talent which you didn’t know you had. You want to play with it, but inevitably you can’t play all the time and you have to get organised and find out where you’re going...start with a theme and gradually discover the story.”

One theme running through the trilogy is Pullman’s obvious aversion to organised religion, something which has grown gradually, after years of watching the world. Churches, he says, attract many good people and provide them with a channel for their energies, such as caring for others. “But churches also have the unfortunate effect of providing a means for narrow-minded and prejudiced people to channel those prejudices. Because of the God business, these people think that their prejudices and anger, fears and hatreds, are divinely sanctioned, which gives them enormous psychological power.”

Anything which has “the answer” is a problem, he continues, pointing out that for a time, in the early 20th century, it looked like Communism had the answer; it seemed to be working, even if in reality it wasn’t for those under its heel, and from the outside it looked like history was sweeping that way. “The fanatical zealotry of committed Marxists has the same origin as any religion...it arms people with a certainty that they can go out and convert and kill without being blamed for it because they’re doing the work of history or of God or whatever. It’s terrifying because these beliefs give an extraordinary force, which is almost irresistible. Woolly-minded liberals like us can’t match that force, so we have to find other ways...we have to criticise, I’m afraid.”

Whilst the trilogy can be read as a critical analysis of the ways of organised religions, it is primarily a panoramic, multi-dimensional adventure, but then it’s also a deeply sad love story. Was that latter aspect of it - which grows over time to a quite shattering climax - always his

intention? “A strand in Lyra’s path was one going towards a love story, and one thing I always knew, with the very greatest clarity, was the last scene, the parting on the park bench.” He wrote it drenched in tears, he says, and that is, almost inescapably, how you read it.

If his books are filled with characters you come to love - and miss - like good friends, he has also produced one of literature’s great villainesses: Mrs Coulter. She is, he says, a creation he’s very proud of, and also the one he was most astonished by. “She constantly took me by surprise, and I was never quite sure what she was going to do. Some characters do what you expect, but with her I was never entirely sure. I had to treat her with great diplomacy, cover her with unctuous flattery, rather I like Disraeli and Queen Victoria. She was an extremely dangerous woman...and I’m thrilled that Patricia Hodge is going to be playing her in the theatrical version the National Theatre is doing. She’s brilliant.”

Adapted by Nicholas Wright into two plays, and directed by the National’s new saviour, Nicholas Hytner, the epic production features Anna Maxwell Martin, who was in *The Hours*, as Lyra, and Dominic Cooper, from *Band of Brothers*, as Will. It runs from December until March next year. Robert Butler’s book, *The Art Of Darkness: Staging the Philip Pullman Trilogy*, which follows those involved in the project over the six months leading up to its first night, will be published in early January ‘04.

Talk to Pullman for just a short while and you begin to realize the remarkable breadth of his interests, the depth of his knowledge and the ease with which he communicates his ideas. It is one of the wonders of the trilogy that a work so complex is quite so easy to read. Alternate universes, alternative technologies, new and different worlds, each thought out from the ground up - geology, geography, plants, life forms and societies - and populated with real, believable characters...the man is, in his books, the Creator and the true Master of Dust. He is, you feel, revelling in the sheer visionary power it gives him, able, from his position high above, to oversee it all.

Storytelling is this man’s passion, clearly evinced by the royal basting he gave the Government’s national literacy strategy in the *Guardian Education*

supplement recently - a strategy, he says, more likely to create a generation of children who actively dislike reading than to foster a lifelong love of it. He is scathing about how writing is being taught in an atmosphere stifled by rules and tests, and totally lacking in enthusiasm and delight.

So, having provided us, in *Lyra's Oxford*, with what he calls "a stepping stone", when will Pullman be revealing the next installment? "I haven't started writing it yet because I'm working on another book, a fairytale called *The Scarecrow and His Servant*, which is coming out next year. It's along the lines of my last fairytale, which was called *I Was a Rat*. It's a form and length I like very much, and this story is in its final stages. When I've finished it, and dealt with all the publicity [for *Lyra's Oxford*], I'll start working on *The Book of Dust*." But don't hold your breath, it won't be anywhere near a bookshop for some time to come.

There is, says Pullman, a very clear distinction between the story in the first three books and the world in which they're set; the story is about Will and Lyra and for the moment, as far as he knows, that's over. "I say it's finished 'as far as I know' because I can't see further than *The Book of Dust*. But I do know that other stories about Lyra are there waiting to be told, as well as other stories about the past of characters we've already met. One story I'd very much like to tell, if I could find the right context for it, is how the Texan balloonist Lee Scoresby and the bear, Iorek Byrnison, first met when they were young."

Pullman feels liberated when he writes about Lyra's world, a place full of parallels which allow him to gently satirise, poke fun at and criticise aspects of the one we exist in - although turning the Oxford University Press into The Fell Press was in no way maligning it, he says. "Dr Fell, the origin of the rhyme 'I do not like thee Dr Fell, the reason why I cannot tell, but this I know, and know full well, I do not like thee Dr Fell', was one of the original directors of the Oxford University Press and I named it after him. But you may read it as you like. Everything has meaning!"

The cover and 64 pocket-sized pages of *Lyra's Oxford* are beautifully decorated with John Lawrence's dark, woodcut-style engravings, resonant echoes of the small chapter-opening illustrations Pullman himself produced

for the first two volumes of the trilogy. But why not the third? “There was a simple reason for that, which was time. I was still writing the book at the end of August, [Scholastic] wanted it out in the shops in October and there were thirty-plus chapters. I’m not an illustrator, although I’ve always drawn, but not in a disciplined enough way, and each picture would have taken me about a day, because I have to get it right. So for the third book we decided to preface each chapter with a quotation, which allowed me to point to some of the sources I’d stolen from and pay tribute to some of the writers I admire, such as Emily Dickinson.”

Pullman is also a fan of comics and graphic novels, in particular the work of Art Spiegelman, Hergé and the whole Belgian ‘clear line’ movement. “Hergé is an extraordinary storyteller and artist who can distinguish between fifty different, instantly recognisable characters by giving them different features - and furthermore, even though they always look like themselves, they can have a range of expressions. That is so difficult hardly anyone can do it. He was a genius.” Pullman would love to do the whole thing himself - script and pictures, too - but he doesn’t think he’s good enough. He does let slip, though, that a picture book might not be totally out of the question at some point in the future.

The whole idea of having a daemon of your own is so magical and extraordinary, it was something of a shock to discover, near the end of our allotted time, that *His Dark Materials* began life without them. “I knew there was something missing, but I didn’t know what it was. Then one day I took another piece of paper and wrote ‘Chapter I’ for the sixteenth time and found myself writing the words ‘Lyra and her daemon...’.” By the end of the chapter he’d discovered that the whole story was about growing up and the difference between adults and children, innocence and experience. “I still remember the very stone I was standing on when I had the idea that it was children’s daemons that change and adults’ that become fixed,” says Pullman, smiling, “and I thought ‘That’s it, this is the best idea I’ve ever had in my life!’” Well, we’ll just have to wait and see if that’s true, won’t we.