

## PHILIP PULLMAN Displaying his brilliant material

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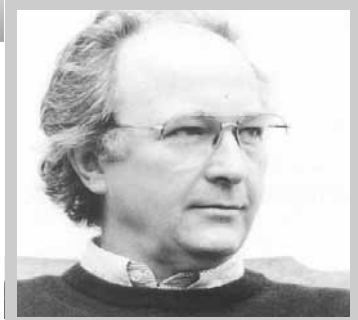
**B**ritish children's book author Philip Pullman shot to fame when he won the 2001 Whitbread Award. He writes bravely and speaks loudly. Carina Diedericks-Hugo takes a look at one of Britain's most prolific, yet controversial authors.

At the bottom of a garden in Oxford, England stands a shabby shed, peeping through an overly-zealous ivy web. Inside, an interesting array of clutter: a six-foot tall stuffed rat, thousands of yellow Post-it notes, apple cores, dust, a heater, two comfortable chairs, an old computer, spider's webs, a saxophone, pencils, a cobblestone from Prague, splashes of Mont Blanc and Cape Cod wine and a large table. Somewhere, on the table to be precise, is a small, uncluttered space with a few blank pieces of paper neatly stacked together and a broken pencil lying on top. An exorbitantly expensive Danish tilting-in-all-directions or thopaedic gas-powered swivelling chair pushed under the table completes the picture. It is on this exact spot that British children's book author Philip Pullman worked for seven years to create a work which has catapulted children's literature into a new dimension.

'I have a high enough opinion of my readers to expect them to take a little difficulty in their stride...

We are all stupid, and we are all intelligent. The line dividing the stupid from the intelligent goes right down the middle of our heads. Others may find their readership on the stupid side: I don't. I pay my readers the compliment of assuming that they are intellectually adventurous.'

Philip Pullman has done the impossible. Believing that his readers are, in fact, intellectually adventurous, he has gone and created a 1 500 page trilogy tackling themes such as quantum physics, the origin of sin and the concept of good and evil. Critics from famously sceptical and blasé



publications such as the **New York Times Literary Supplement** and the **Washington Post** have hailed Pullman's *His dark materials* as 'very grand indeed', 'morally complex' and a work of 'extravagant wonders'. One even went as far as saying 'it was the moment that literature for the young finally came of age'.

*His dark materials* consist of **Northern lights** (published as **The golden compass** in the United States of America), **The subtle knife** and **The amber spyglass**. The story is set in a world as we know it, a world slightly different to ours, and worlds parallel to ours, but unlike anything we know. It follows the tale of 11-year-old Lyra Belacqua as she sets out to accomplish a task that awaits her.

In **Northern lights** Lyra journeys to the far and cold North in search of her father and to save her best friend and other children from lethal scientific experiments. Will Parry, a boy from our world, meets Lyra in **The subtle knife** and as they discover a secret, their lives are intertwined and their journey continues to fulfil their tasks. Finally, in **The amber spyglass**, both Lyra and Will have to make great personal sacrifices and face tremendous danger in an earth-shattering war of the worlds.

There is a hint of the past and a trace of legend, historical references and a folklore flavour. From the familiar streets of Oxford the reader is taken to the far North where armoured bears, fierce and sensual witches, angels, miniature people and fearsome phantoms or 'Spectres' await. 'You soar into the metaphorical and the

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metaphysical, but never stoop to the supernatural', described one critic. And the intricate, yet paradoxically simple narrative is masterfully crafted by an author who exhumes brilliance.

In comparison, other children's literature now seems feeble and frivolous. One critic described Pullman's *magnum opus* as 'a sparkling addition to the canon of great children's fiction that leaves poor Harry Potter helplessly stranded in the comparative banality of his Platform 9<sup>3/4</sup>'.

But it wasn't only the critics who swooned - academics and prize committees joined the chorus of approval and made *His dark materials* the most acclaimed British children's book ever. **Northern lights** was awarded the Guardian Children's Fiction Award in 1996, the British Book Award and the prestigious Carnegie Medal. In 1998 **The subtle knife** clinched the United Kingdom Reading Award and was short-listed for the FCBG Children's Book of the Year Awards. It really was the concluding volume, **The amber spyglass**, which caused a stir though. Pullman walked away with numerous prizes, including the 2001 Whitbread Children's Book of the Year and the overall Whitbread Book of the Year - an unprecedented first. He was also long-listed for the Booker Prize. Again a first for any children's book.

Pullman is no stranger to storytelling or writing. Born in Norwich in 1946, the son of a Royal Air Force pilot, he lived in Australia before settling down in North Wales at the age of 11. It was here where he started gathering stories in a time when children could still wander freely to play and roam about and let their imaginations do the same. After reading English at

Exeter College, Oxford, Pullman taught at various middle schools. He wrote many school plays - some of which were later transformed into novels such as **The ruby in the smoke**. He returned to Oxford with his wife, Jude, and two sons - this time as lecturer at Westminster College. He taught courses on the Victorian novel, the folk tale and a specialist course examining how words and pictures fit together. Spending more and more time writing, Pullman decided to start writing full-time.

His first published attempt was a novel for adults, but he soon began writing for children. Some of his works include **The shadow in the north**, **The tiger in the wall**, **The tin princess** and **I am a rat!** He relishes the fact that writing for children means writing *stories*. In his acceptance speech for the Carnegie Medal he said: 'In a book for children, you can't put the plot on hold while you cut artistic capers for the amusement of your sophisticated readers, because, thank God, your readers are not sophisticated. They've got more important things in mind than your dazzling wordplay. They want to know what happens next.'

Similarly to what JK Rowling has accomplished with Harry Potter, Pullman is luring not only children, but also adults to his stories. And the success in doing so has made him sceptical of labels. In an interview on Scholastic's website, he negates the idea that *His dark materials* was written solely for children. 'I don't know about this business of writing "for" this audience or that one. It's too like labelling the book as fantasy - it shuts out more readers than it includes. If I think of my audience at all, I think of a group that includes adults, children, male, female, old, middle-aged, young - everyone who can read. If horses, dogs, cats, or pigeons could read, they'd be welcome to it as well. I don't want to shut anyone out.'

It is not only Philip Pullman's success as author that has seen his name appear in the media. For Church and State alike (and others) his name rings a controversial bell.

His first clash came with religious parties who objected to the atheist stance of the trilogy, which redefines the traditional Christian perspective on aspects such as the Temptation and the Fall. But giving an alternative viewpoint was exactly what Pullman set out to do. *His dark materials* depicts the Temptation and Fall not as the source of all woe and misery...but something to be celebrated, not lamented. And the Tempter is not an evil being like

Satan...but a figure who might stand for Wisdom'.

This stance has caused some religious critics to name Pullman as the 'most dangerous writer in Britain'. (No mean feat considering that Britain is home to authors such as Jeffrey Archer.) Nevertheless, in response to the criticism, a sardonic Pullman told a newspaper 'if you find that you inadvertently become a Satanist (when reading *His dark materials*), you can write to the publisher and get your money back'.

On a different level Pullman made headlines in Britain when he criticised government guidelines on the teaching of English in primary schools in an article he wrote for the **Times Educational Supplement**. Calling the guidelines 'half-baked drivel slapped down in front of us like greasy food on a dirty plate' he said the national literacy strategy (which aims at improving literacy levels in Britain) is smothering creativity and does nothing to nurture a child's enjoyment of books. The department for education has dismissed his criticisms saying, 'More children (can) have the reading and writing skills that they need for their future learning.'

Pullman's most controversial comment though, was directed against one of England's best-loved authors and theologians, CS Lewis. At a conference at Cambridge University in August 2001 and later in an extensive article in **The Guardian**, Pullman attacked Lewis' *Narnia* books. He first read a *Narnia* book, **The voyage of the dawn treader**, as a boy but 'felt slightly queasy, as if I were being pressured to agree to something I wasn't sure of'.

Later, having read the whole *Narnia* series as an adult, he was 'angered and nauseated by the sneakiness of that powerful seductive narrative voice, that favourite-uncle stance, assuming my assent to his sneering attitude to anything remotely progressive in social terms, or to people with brown faces, or to children who don't seem like his own favourites'. Quite ironic, seeing that Pullman's work has been compared to Tolkien and especially CS Lewis.

Pullman is not the only one who is critical of what they believe is Lewis' patriarchal, paternal and morally overt writing style. In **A natural history of make-believe** (1996), John Goldthwaite compares Lewis to a type of teacher who tries to befriend the bullies of the school by mocking the children the bullies would have victimised anyway. These are strong words in an emotional debate, but one we have not yet seen the end of.

There can be no doubt that Philip Pullman has established himself in a relatively short space of time as a prolific author and a controversial figure. For the time being though, Philip Pullman would like to move out of the limelight and settle back into his routine of sitting in his shed at the bottom of his garden in Oxford, writing norm-transcending novels and rushing back to watch his favourite soap-opera, *Neighbours*, because everybody needs a good story. Or, as Philip Pullman himself would say, 'Stories are the most important thing in the world. Without stories, we wouldn't be human beings at all.'