

THE GOLDEN COMPASS

Lee Bracey, Executive Director
Woodburn Christian Children's Home

This article also available at:

www.wcchonline.org

(Please Reprint and Distribute)

260-632-5551

The Golden Compass, and the trilogy of which it is a part (**His Dark Materials** by Phillip Pullman) have received, individually and collectively, many awards and favorable reviews:

- “The most vividly imagined ‘secondary world’ in 20th-century children’s literature.” – The Washington Post
- “The trilogy as a whole is the work of transcendent genius...it delivers its truths in prose that soars and dazzles.” – The Globe and Mail (Toronto)
- “Magnificent...a fantasy-adventure that sparkles with childlike wonder.” – The Boston Sunday Globe
- “Destined to become a classic.” – Detroit Free Press
- “Masterful...This title confirms Pullman’s inclusion in the company of C.S. Lewis and Tolkien.” -- Smithsonian

The **Golden Compass** is the recipient of the Carnegie Medal (England). **The Subtle Knife** is the winner of the Parents’ Choice Gold Award. And the **Amber Spyglass** is a New York Times Bestseller. The series is also featured by Scholastic in school book fairs with lesson plans provided for classroom instruction. And Scholastic is co-producer of the movie.

Now, in spite of all these awards and recognition, the book and the series have also received their share of criticism. Some say they are anti-God. Others say they are harmless and that Christians are being predictably reactionary.

And so, I thought I’d do a little research. I read the trilogy (**His Dark Materials** by Phillip Pullman, comprised of the three books: **The Golden Compass**, **The Subtle Knife** and **The Amber Spyglass**). And I viewed the movie. The books are well written. The movie... sanitized and appealing.

Philip Pullman is a talented, masterful storyteller who brings us a tale full of adventure, mystery, courage, love, loyalty and betrayal. It’s a story of politics, science, war and religion told through the eyes of characters that are brought to life by Mr. Pullman’s vivid descriptions; characters that we FEEL for. Whether those feelings are fear, loathing, sympathy, happiness, love, anger ... we are swept along for the ride and caught up in their story before we even know it’s happening. It’s right where Pullman wants us to be and that’s just the beginning. The problem is that Pullman also uses the story and his characters to convey his anger toward the authority of God and the church and spread his atheistic worldview.

Now, it’s important to note that **The Golden Compass** is milder in its presentation than the rest of the books in the series. You almost feel the compulsion to say, “It’s a good book... with a few little problems, here and there.” Nevertheless, it begins to build the foundation for the trilogy. It is a foundation of humanism, distrust of religion and contempt for God’s authority. Since the theme is more fully developed in the books that follow and since Pullman has chosen to present his worldview through the dialogue of his characters, I think it’s only fair to take a look at what they have to say:

Concerning the Church (Referred to in the movie, only as “the Magisterium”):

*“Sisters,” she began, “let me tell you what is happening, and who it is that we must fight. For there is a war coming. I don’t know who will join with us, but I know whom we must fight. It is the Magisterium, the Church. For all its history—and that’s not long by our lives, but it’s many, many of theirs, it’s tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. And when it can’t control them, it cuts them out. Some of you have seen what they did at Bolvangar. And that was horrible, but it is not the only such place, not the only such practice. Sisters, you know only the north; I have traveled in the south lands. There are churches there, believe me, that cut their children too, as the people of Bolvangar did—not in the same way, but just as horribly. They cut their sexual organs, yes, both boys and girls; they cut them with knives so that they shan’t feel. That is what the Church does, and every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling. So if a war comes, and the Church is on one side of it, we must be on the other, no matter what strange allies we find ourselves bound to.” (Queen Ruta Skadi... of the witches) **The Subtle Knife***

Concerning God:

“Tell me, then,” said Will, “...what is the Authority? Is he God?” He sat down and the two angels, their form clearer in the moonlight than he had ever seen them before, sat with him. Balthamos said quietly, “The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty—those were all the names he gave himself. He was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves—the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more

about itself, and Dust is formed. The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie. One of those who came later was wiser than he was, and she found out the truth, so he banished her.” The Amber Spyglass

Concerning Heaven:

... no one spoke until a young woman came forward. She had died as a martyr centuries before. She looked around and said to the other ghosts; “When we were alive, they told us that when we died we’d go to Heaven. And they said that Heaven was a place of joy and glory and we would spend eternity in the company of saints and angels praising the Almighty, in a state of bliss. That’s what they said. And that’s what led some of us to give our lives, and others to spend years in solitary prayer, while all the joy of life was going to waste around us and we never knew. Because the land of the dead isn’t a place of reward or a place of punishment. It’s a place of nothing. The good come here as well as the wicked, and all of us languish in this gloom forever, with no hope of freedom, or joy, or sleep, or rest, or peace.” The Amber Spyglass

Concerning the Death of God:

“Well, where is God,” said Mrs. Coulter, “if he’s alive? And why doesn’t he speak anymore? At the beginning of the world, God walked in the Garden and spoke with Adam and Eve. Then he began to withdraw, and he forbade Moses to look at his face. Later, in the time of Daniel, he was aged—he was the Ancient of Days. Where is he now? Is he alive, at some inconceivable age, decrepit and demented, unable to act or speak and unable to die, a rotten hulk? And if that is his condition, wouldn’t it be the most merciful thing, the truest proof of our love for God, to seek him out and give him the gift of death?” The Amber Spyglass

Concerning Living a Life of Commitment to God:

“I used to be a nun, you see. I thought physics could be done to the glory of God, till I saw there wasn’t any God at all and that physics was more interesting anyway. The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that’s all.” “When did you stop being a nun?” said Lyra. “I remember it exactly,” Mary said, “even to the time of day. Because I was good at physics, they let me keep up my university career, you see, and I finished my doctorate and I was going to teach. It wasn’t one of those orders where they shut you away from the world. In fact, we didn’t even wear the habit; we just had to dress soberly and wear a crucifix. So I was going into university to teach and do research into particle physics....” “And I was so innocent—you have to remember that I’d been such a good little girl. I’d gone to Mass regularly; I’d thought I had a vocation for the spiritual life. I wanted to serve God with all my heart. I wanted to take my whole life and offer it up like this,” she said, holding up her hands together, “and place it in front of Jesus to do as he liked with. And I suppose I was pleased with myself. Too much. I was holy and I was clever. Ha! That lasted until, oh, half past nine on the evening of August the tenth, seven years ago.” (Dr. Mary Malone) The Amber Spyglass

Concerning Wisdom:

“... I met an angel: a female angel. She was very strange; she was old and young together,” she went on, forgetting that that was how she herself appeared to Mary (Dr. Malone), “Her name was Xaphania. She told me many things... She said that all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity. She and the rebel angels, the followers of wisdom, have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed. She gave me many examples from my world.” “I can think of many from mine.” “And for most of that time, wisdom has had to work in secret, whispering her words, moving like a spy through the humble places of the world while the courts and palaces are occupied by her enemies.” (Witch Serafina Pekkada) The Amber Spyglass

Now, those who defend the books and film will say...

“It’s just a book.”

“It’s got nothing to do with religion. It’s against corrupt authority.”

“What are you afraid of? Are you really so insecure in your faith that you feel you must shelter your children from ideas that are different from your own?”

“It gets our children reading. Don’t you support literacy?”

“Book-burner!”

Even the author has made the talk show circuit to reassure parents that there is nothing subversive in either the books or the film. But I prefer to trust his words from several years ago, when he was a little more transparent and he wasn’t trying to market a movie: *“I’m a great fan of J.K. Rowling, but the people - mainly from America’s Bible Belt - who complain that Harry Potter promotes Satanism or witchcraft obviously haven’t got enough in their lives. Meanwhile, I’ve been flying under the radar, saying things that are far more subversive than anything poor old Harry has said. My books are about killing God.”* (Phillip Pullman) Sydney Morning Herald 12/13/2003

Well ... what do you think? Will I be buying these books for my grandchildren for Christmas or taking them to see the movie? I think you know the answer to that. They are poison. I’d sooner buy them some of those brightly painted toxic toys from China.