



The Subtle Knife

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

In this, the eagerly-awaited second part of Pullman's allegoric trilogy, three universes overlap. Will, leaving home to find the real reason for his father's long absence, thinks he has killed a man. Just outside Oxford, he notices, and goes through, a gap in the transparent boundary into another world. There, in a dreary town haunted by mind-numbing vampires, he meets Lyra, the forthright, deceitful heroine of **Northern Lights**, and her daemon.

They are also adrift. The children's separate quests join as they seek the subtle knife, the last powerful symbol of the ancient philosophers and the only threat to the Spectres. It allows the true bearer to part and reseal the thinning membrane between all worlds. After a near-mortal combat, Will is recognised as the knife-bearer whose inexorable responsibility is to be strong against the dark forces of evil. Lyra, her consciousness extended by Will's acceptance, knows her first task is to help him to find his father. The reader is guided through the strong, flexible cat's-cradle of the plot by the author's narrative spell-binding, and by the *sigillum*, a location symbol on each page.

After the experience of **Northern Lights** readers expect a series of surprises as part of the structure. Although here there is nothing quite the same as the titanic bear fight, nor the skin-crawling gruesomeness of the silver guillotine, the inventions of suspense never flag. There is more, deeper, thought-action. Lyra's awareness of Will's concern for others lessens her egocentrism. She discovers mutual trust and learns to intuit Will's responses. (He has no visible daemon to demonstrate them.) The wise air-borne guardians are constantly watchful, but we feel their power is diminishing; or rather, it has passed to the heavenly intelligences. There are threads to be gathered up; a computer lady has followed the trail, perhaps.

The dimensions of Pullman's project for **His Dark Materials**, its fully epic structure, emerge clearly from this novel as something more extensive, profound and resonant than anything the present generation of young readers, including those from the Star Wars annexe, has yet encountered. Pullman accepts and responsibly transforms the inevitable didactic of writing for children: to make them strong enough, wise enough, to encounter the consequences of their actions and feelings, good or evil, as they anticipate their future. The sublime has long been out of fashion in literature, especially for children. Like Milton, whose epic poem lies behind this enterprise, Pullman has little time for fugitive and cloistered virtue. One needs to draw a longer critical breath to do justice to all his subtleties, but I have seen the effect on young readers who, in his company, go further than they ever thought they could.

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