



# Lirael; Abhorsen

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Readers of **Sabriel**, the first of 'The Old Kingdom' trilogy, will have been waiting impatiently for the second and third volumes. **Lirael** moves us on a generation from **Sabriel's** youthful exploits in The Old kingdom and sets in motion the desperate struggle (recorded in these two books) to contain the evil which, unharnessed, will bring the Kingdom to destruction. The shifting interplay between the four characters who confront the great powers of Death itself generates the energy which drives the narrative: 'the young and uncertain Prince Sameth; Lirael, the equally uncertain young woman who, to her astonishment, discovers she is the Abhorsen-in-waiting, charged with mighty responsibilities; and two creatures who are anything but what they seem, The Disreputable Dog and the white cat, Mogget.

The Dog and Mogget are brilliant, unique inventions, at once spirits from ancient time and yet essence of dog and essence of cat. At one moment, they might be trafficking with elemental spirits, at the next, sniffing for rabbits or catching fish. Where The Dog is utterly loyal, Mogget is utterly ambiguous. Through them, Nix weaves a strong and often endearing strain of comedy within the high seriousness of his theme, and thus avoids the highfalutin'. And while Sam and Lirael are discovering their powers as a Wallmaker and as Abhorsen, they are also discovering their human adulthood.

Philip Pullman praised **Sabriel** for its 'fantasy that reads like realism'. Exactly so. Nix sustains a solidity of landscape, character and adventure throughout. There is a self-consistency also about the systems of magic at work, often in opposition to each other; you never feel that a trial will be easily surmounted through the arbitrary exercise of a spell. There are some marvellously inventive devices; for example, the Abhorsen's bandolier of nine bells, each with a different power to be deployed judiciously and with respect. And I know of no writer of fantasy who manages battles and skirmishes so graphically and with such pace.

To attempt to summarise adventures of such a scale and complexity would be to trivialise. Enough to say that throughout the two books the different groups of players in the epic drama move across the landscape inevitably towards each other and a resolution; throughout **Abhorsen**, the pace gathers steadily, driving characters and reader on to a climax which is worthy of the whole trilogy. That reader may assume success for our heroes, but may also fear the cost

will be intolerable. Such narrative excitement and the treatment of the great archetypal themes will satisfy adults as well as youthful readers. In the States, there has long been less self-consciousness about adult pleasure in fantasy writing and, like 'His Dark Materials', **Abhorsen** stood high on the **New York Times** bestseller lists. It has taken the critical and financial success of Tolkien, Pullman, Rowling *et al* to validate the appeal of such writing in the UK.

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