



An Interview with Philip Pullman

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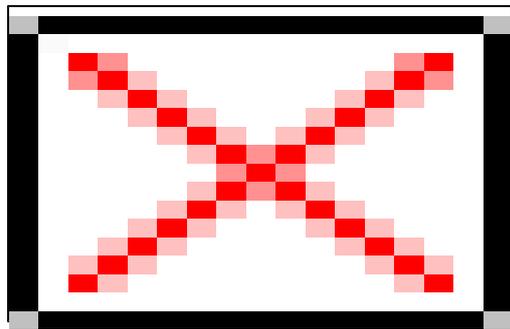
[Nicholas Tucker](#) [1]

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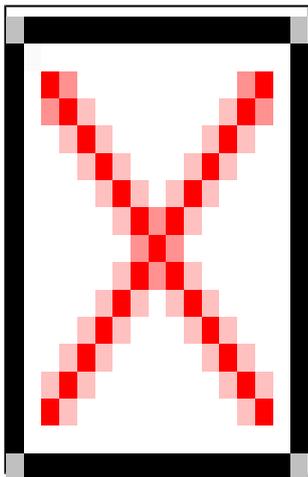
Philip Pullman interviewed by **Nicholas Tucker**

Nicholas Tucker talks to **Philip Pullman** as the literary world waits for the publication of **The Book of Dust**.



Nicholas Tucker: It's some time since you wrote **His Dark Materials**. Do you often find yourself looking back to it now it is going to be newly televised by the BBC?

Philip Pullman: I do, constantly, because I am writing the successor to it, **The Book of Dust**, and I have to keep checking facts, like what was so and so's name and what sort of dæmon did they have. But also because I want to regain



some of the energy I had when I was writing it. I well remember coming to the end of the first book and my normal practice had been to write three pages a day by hand on A4 narrow lined paper. But I was running out of money. I had almost got through my publisher's advance and things were getting a bit desperately tight. I was still working part time at Westminster College, but I did have this sense of urgency. So I decided to up my output to five pages a day and what's more punish myself by not drinking any alcohol during the last hundred pages or whatever it was. It was a hot summer and I was in a state of suspended animation really. That was a period when I probably worked more intensely than any time before or since. But it was a good state to be in and I think about it now trying to get back to something like the same state 25 years later.

NT: You have said recently that you are reading more William Blake. What are you finding there?

PP: Blake once wrote these words to his friend Thomas Butts:

Now I a fourfold vision see,

And a fourfold vision is given to me:

?Tis fourfold in my supreme delight

And threefold in soft Beulah?s night

And twofold always, may God us keep

From single vision and Newton?s sleep!

Now single vision in Newton?s sleep is the sort of deadly scientific reductionism that says everything can be explained by the movement of impersonal particles. Twofold vision is when we see things as human beings do, viewing everything through a penumbra of memories, hopes, associations, and so on, reacting in an essentially human way. Threefold vision is what he meant by poetic inspiration and fourfold vision is what I think he meant by mystical ecstasy ? a moment of intense identification with the natural world. And following Blake, I believe that all four ways of reacting can be used by a writer according to what they are trying to achieve at different moments.

NT: Have you ever got to fourfold vision yourself?

PP: Once when I was a boy, in a storm on the beach. And another time, when I was newly married, I remember coming home from my work as a library assistant going to our little flat in Barnes. And everything seemed to be double, everything seemed to have a parallel somewhere else. I remember seeing a group of people standing in a circle around a busker and the next thing I saw was a newspaper placard showing a picture of more people standing in a circle round a hijacked plane in Jordan somewhere. That sort of doubling I saw all the way. It was as if the whole universe was connected, leaving me in a state of gibbering excitement. Those were the only two times I have felt what Blake I think was referring to as fourfold vision. It is important never to rely entirely upon single vision. We must use all our faculties and senses always. Single vision is death.

NT: What about innocence? Should we always be in a hurry to leave this state behind us in order to work towards wisdom instead?

PP: I have never wanted to extirpate innocence. I don?t want to thrust the facts of life on children of four or five. What I?m against in a quite visceral, loathing way, is the sentimental vision of childhood you get in books written in the so called Golden Age of children?s literature. Peter Pan, who thinks it?s better always to stay a child, some of A.A. Milne?s verses, I can?t bear them, they make me sick! Children don?t want to be children ? they want to be grown up. The games they play are about being adult. Recalling my own adolescence, and encountering sexuality and intellectual excitement was all part of an extraordinary wonderful, glorious awakening. The whole universe began to sing. So when you get people like C.S. Lewis in the **Narnia** books lamenting the fact that children have to grow up it makes me very angry.

NT: What about religion? Have your own feelings about it changed over the last decade?

PP: Well in a way they have. When I was writing **The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ** I read the gospels right through making lots of notes. And what struck me was how different the accounts were of Jesus according to who was telling the tale. That for some people makes the whole story more convincing because that divergence of views over what actually happened is exactly what you hear as members of a jury when witnesses are telling you what they thought they saw at the time. I see their point but I don?t agree with it.

And if you look at all the other apocryphal gospel accounts, as the Biblical scholar as well as ghost story writer M.R. James once pointed out, you can see exactly why they were left out because they are bloody awful and don?t work as stories. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are easily the best told of the lot. And there are wonderful fictional moments

within them. Who saw Satan coming to Jesus in the desert? No one did. It's obviously fiction. When Jesus was alone in the garden of Gethsemane when all the disciples were asleep, how do we know he said: 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by.'? It must have been an invention but it is also an extraordinary moment of imaginative and emotional power.

When you look at the four gospels as a storyteller, you can see exactly how well they work.

So I think a bit more subtly now about the Christian story. I can't also deny how good some religious people are. They set about doing good a lot of the time for reasons I don't believe in but which are satisfactory for them. I have always felt that a measure of goodness is not what you believe but what you do. And religion can supply a sense of community to some people. I once put this to Richard Dawkins: if you had a little girl who was terribly ill and knew she was soon going to die, do you tell her the stark facts of her oncoming death? Of course you don't! You tell her a fairy tale about going to heaven. What else can you possibly do?

NT: So when did you start doubting the Christianity that you had been brought up in?

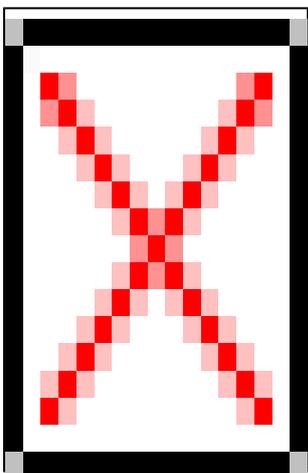
PP: I think the first thing I read that made me start thinking in a contrary way was Colin Wilson's once famous book **The Outsider**. And that pointed me at people like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and got me thinking in a new way. After that I got interested in existentialism and all that stuff and poor old God just got shuffled away. I floated in and out of various other beliefs in my twenties. I was a Buddhist for a bit and then got interested in the occult and astrology. But they all fell away. I still remain very interested in the esoteric but not as a believer. But people like Dawkins, who dismiss religion entirely as utter foolishness, I think are simply wrong.

NT: **His Dark Materials** starts with a child who by the end is turning into a newly sexualised young adult. This is in contrast to many other children's books where characters often seem to stay the same age from start to finish.

PP: That's one of the main themes of the whole trilogy. When Lyra and Will kiss for the first time they don't have to do anything more than kiss. But if you can't remember what your first kiss was like I feel sorry for you.

NT: Broadly speaking almost all children's and young adult novels have endings that if not always entirely happy at least make moral sense. Do you feel this applies to **His Dark Materials** too?

PP: Well, such endings happen more frequently than we might think with adult books too. She marries him; the murder is solved or whatever. Books that are popular and read and talked about usually have endings that actually satisfy in a moral sense whether they are happy or not. The ending of **His Dark Materials** made lots of people cry - it made me cry too. But it was also satisfying, I hope, because it didn't offer easy options after so much that had gone before.



This is an extract from [Darkness Visible: Philip Pullman and His Dark Materials](#), [3] by Nicholas Tucker, published by Icon Books, 978-1-7857-8228-2, £8.99 pbk.

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