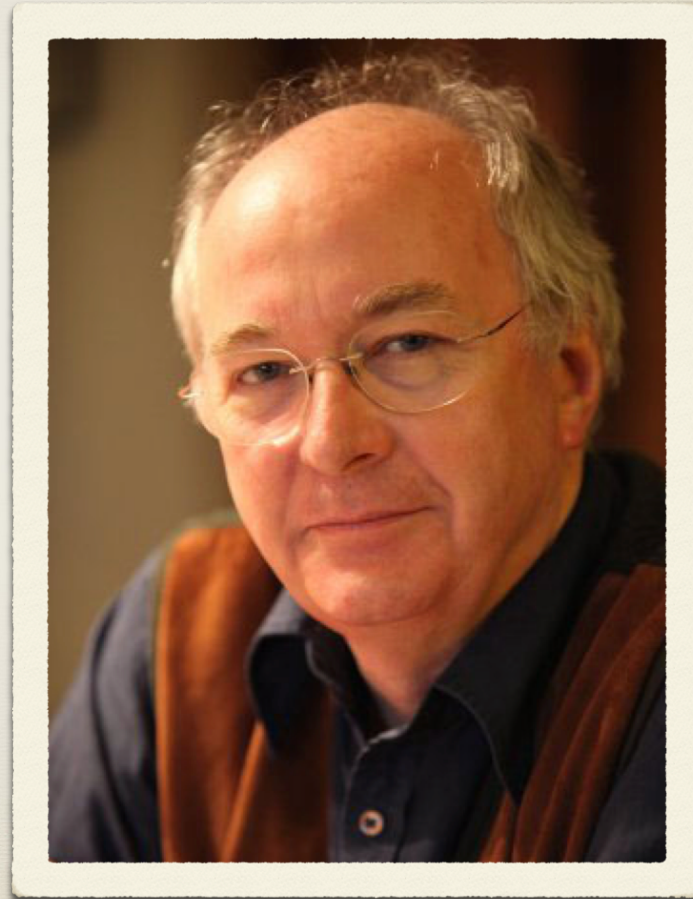




Philip Pullman's *His Dark
Materials* Trilogy

Philip Pullman

- * Born in Norwich in 1946
- * RAF pilot father died in plane crash in Kenya in 1953
- * Partly raised by his grandfather, an Anglican priest
- * Attended Exeter College, Oxford, and got third-class degree in English ('It was the year they stopped giving fourth-class degrees otherwise I'd have got one of those')
- * Became a teacher at Bishop Kirk Middle School and Westminster College



Writing *His Dark Materials*

- * Inspired as a teenager by John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the work of William Blake
- * Objected to what he saw as oppressive Christian moralisation in children's fantasy works, especially C. S. Lewis, citing themes of misogyny and racism
- * Wrote the trilogy beginning in 1993, concluding with the publication of *The Amber Spyglass* in 2000. After the success of *Northern Lights* in 1995, he retired from teaching in 1996 and became a full-time writer

Themes in *His Dark Materials*

- * Quest of the orphan hero
- * Anti-authoritarianism, resistance to oppression
- * Inverting the Biblical Fall of Man: higher knowledge, adulthood, sexual/romantic awakening is a cosmic good and a freedom worth rebelling against God to achieve
- * Prioritizing free thought: storytelling, scientific inquiry, academic study, exploration and travel, the making of useful and beautiful things
- * The value of self-knowledge, power of human consciousness and conscience, personified by daemons
- * Embracing growing up and adulthood
- * Humanism: the belief that humans can live ethical, fulfilling lives based on empathy for one another and commitment to social and moral responsibility without recourse to a deity and without the promise of an afterlife

The Republic of Heaven

“The kingdom of heaven promised us certain things: it promised us happiness and a sense of purpose and a sense of having a place in the universe, of having a role and a destiny that were noble and splendid; and so we were connected to things. We were not alienated. But now that, for me anyway, the King is dead, I find that I still need these things that heaven promised, and I’m not willing to live without them. I don’t think I will continue to live after I’m dead, so if I am to achieve these things I must try to bring them about – and encourage other people to bring them about – on earth, in a Republic in which we are all free and equal, and responsible, citizens.

Now, what does this involve? It involves all the best qualities of things. We mustn’t shut anything out. If the Church has told us, for example, that forgiving our enemies is good, and if that seems to be a good thing to do, we must do it. If, on the other hand, those who struggled against the Church have shown us that free enquiry and unfettered scientific exploration is good – and I believe that they have – then we must hold this up as a good as well.

Whatever we can find that we feel to be good – and not just feel but can see with the accumulated wisdom that we have as we grow up, and read about history and learn from our own experiences and so on – wherever they come from, and whoever taught them in the first place, let’s use them and do whatever we can do to make the world a little bit better.”

Astrophysics and Literary Symbolism

- * Up to 85% of the universe is made of something astrophysicists call 'dark matter', which is matter we cannot see or measure; most scientists think it is a new kind of elementary particle
- * Pullman reinterprets dark matter as an elementary particle called Dust, the substance of which angels are made; Dust particles are conscious, and interfered in human evolution as an act of rebellion, allowing us to grow and develop into rational beings
- * The Many Worlds Interpretation is a theory that seeks to explain observations in quantum mechanics, the study of physics at a subatomic level. The MWI posits that millions of parallel universes coexist, splitting off from one another
- * Pullman turns the MWI into a literary device, creating a world where multiple universes coexist and are bound together by Dust

Milton and *Paradise Lost*

- * John Milton (1608-1674) was an English poet and civil servant who supported the Commonwealth of England and republicanism, wrote against state censorship, and composed *Paradise Lost*, a blank verse retelling of the story of Genesis
- * *Paradise Lost* is famous for its depiction of Satan as a compelling, articulate rebel with individualistic and republican values – William Blake said Milton was ‘of the Devil’s party without knowing it’
- * Pullman borrowed numerous phrases and ideas directly from *Paradise Lost*, considers Milton’s Satan to be a hero, and writes an inverse narrative of the Fall of Man in *HDM*, where the intellectual and romantic maturity of a new ‘Adam’ and ‘Eve’ liberates the universe
- * Epigraph of *HDM* is taken from a portion of *Paradise Lost* in which Satan contemplates flying over the abyss of Chaos to go to Earth and tempt Adam and Eve. The chaotic elements in the abyss are referred to as ‘his [God’s] dark materials to create more worlds’, suggesting the importance of Dust as a ‘dark material’ that allows for creation, chaos, freedom, and proliferation of universes

William Blake

- * Artist, poet, and engraver (1757-1827)
- * Committed Christian but disliked organised religion. Thought the Church sought to impose unthinking obedience rather than encouraging free thought, personal engagement with God
- * Invented personal mythology in which Los (imagination) clashes with Urizen (law, constraint). Church wrongly asks us to worship Urizen, who is not the true nature of God
- * Importance of achieving 'higher innocence' through experience – learning to see the world as complex, containing both good and evil. Similar to Pullman's idea of the Fall as a good thing for humanity
- * Pullman's idea of the Authority as a false Creator God, with rebellious angels seeking to restore free will to the universe, is inspired by Blake's Los/Urizen mythology

