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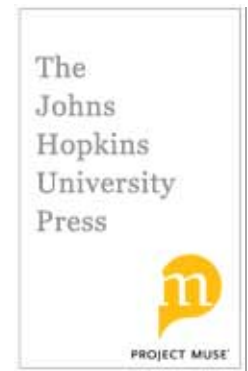
The Elements of His Dark Materials : A Guide to Philip Pullman's Trilogy, and: His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman's Trilogy, and: Shedding Light on Philip Pullman's Trilogy His Dark Materials (review)

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Laurie Frost. *The Elements of His Dark Materials: A Guide to Philip Pullman's Trilogy*. Buffalo Grove, IL: Fell P, 2006.

Millicent Lenz with Carole Scott, ed. *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman's Trilogy*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2005.

Tony Watkins. *Dark Matter: Shedding Light on Philip Pullman's Trilogy His Dark Materials*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity P, 2004.

It seems safe to say that Philip Pullman is now a publishing and cultural phenomenon. A Google search using the terms "His Dark Materials" and "Pullman" produces more than 700,000 hits. A feature-length film of *The Golden Compass*, starring (among others) Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig, will appear in November 2007. The production company is New Line Cinema, triumphant veteran of the filming of *The Lord of the Rings*. There are *His Dark Materials* Websites, fan sites, and blogs. Even the prestigious *New York Review of Books*, a periodical that pays scant attention to children's literature, devoted a major review article in 2004 by Michael Chabon to the trilogy and the separate, but related, *Lyra's Oxford*.

It is difficult to say exactly what has produced all this. Henry James famously said that "a writer's only obligation is to be interesting," and on his Website Pullman himself quotes Samuel Johnson, who said "the only aim of writing is to help the reader better to enjoy life, or better to endure it." But Pullman is being modest. It is clear that the *His Dark Materials* books possess what George Orwell called a "literary vitamin," something that makes them extraordinarily readable. It is too soon to settle the question of whether or not these books are "great literature." George Orwell borrowed from G. K. Chesterton the phrase the "good bad book," which is, Orwell tells us, "the kind of book that has no literary pretensions but which remains readable when more serious productions have perished." It may very well be that Pullman's work will be remembered in this light. Or, like *The Lord of the Rings*, they may prove to have transcended their genre(s) and be considered literary classics. Not enough time has elapsed to make that judgment.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that literary works suitable to be taught in schools and colleges will spawn guidebooks, a kind of *Vade Mecum* for both the teacher and the student. Three of these are under review here: Laurie Frost's *The Elements of His Dark Materials: A Guide to Philip Pullman's Trilogy* (2006), Millicent Lenz and Carole Scott's edited volume *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman's Trilogy* (2005), and Tony Watkins' *Dark Matter: Shedding Light on Philip Pullman's Trilogy His Dark Materials* (2004). Each of these books is somewhat different in what it sets out to do, and each provides

thoughtful and helpful guidance for the reader, scholar, and teacher of *His Dark Materials*.

Laurie Frost, an Alabama-based independent scholar, has produced a valuable reader's companion to *His Dark Materials*. "I can't recommend it too highly to the reader who's found anything interesting or enjoyable in this story of mine. I know I've returned to it frequently during the writing of the book I'm doing now, and I know I'll continue to do so," writes Philip Pullman himself in an appreciative foreword to this compendious 542-page work that is clearly a labor of love. In a dozen chapters, Frost systematically and clearly presents information about the trilogy's characters, places and people, creatures, philosophy, metaphysics, science and technology, the social structure of the parallel worlds, languages, and other topics. A helpful reference section concludes the book. A mark of the care that has been taken to make this book user-friendly is the inclusion of page numbers for both the American and British editions of the trilogy. The book does not have an index, but the detailed table of contents, directions for use, and extensive cross-referencing make it easy to use while reading the trilogy. Frost's informed scholarship and amicable style make random browsing a pleasure as well. The book also contains a wealth of photos, illustrations, and maps. The 9 ¼"-by-7 ¼" page size and sturdy binding allow the user to lay the book open on a table, ready for a quick search. *The Elements of His Dark Materials* is a treasure-trove of information for both the novice and devotee of Pullman.

As described on the back cover of *Dark Matter*, Tony Watkins is a "speaker, trainer, and workshop leader for the Damaris Trust," a British-based Christian interdenominational "organization that helps people relate contemporary culture and Christian faith." *Dark Matter* is an original, book-length treatment of *His Dark Materials*. American readers who are accustomed to a certain belligerent and hectoring tone from any interpretive work that identifies itself as "Christian" will find Watkins' candor, cosmopolitanism, and generosity to be inviting and appealing. Perhaps tellingly, Damaris describes itself on its Website (damaris.org) as "a centered rather than a bounded organisation." Watkins begins by confessing to the reader in his preface that "I am not presenting this book as the definitive way to read Pullman's work so I don't expect you to agree with everything" (8).

Dark Matter contains fifteen chapters divided into three sections—"The Storyteller," "The World(s) of *His Dark Materials*," and "Shedding Light on Dark Matter." An appendix on the science of the trilogy and extensive bibliographic notes conclude the book. Although an index would be a valuable addition to this book, *Dark Matter* provides its readers—gen-

eral, student, scholarly—with a helpful, appreciative, and well-informed discussion of Pullman’s complex work, its sources, and the public and academic reactions it has engendered. Like Frost, Watkins has benefited from interviews and conversations with Pullman himself, and he succeeds in answering the question he poses at the beginning of his book—“Why does Pullman’s work excite people to such strong feelings?” (13) On the whole, Watkins achieves his goal of providing informed and insightful literary interpretation as well as a Christian perspective on the trilogy.

His *Dark Materials Illuminated*, edited by Millicent Lenz and Carole Scott, is an anthology containing an introduction and fourteen critical essays by British and American scholars. This book is part of Wayne State University Press’s *Landscapes of Childhood* series. The essays are grouped into three sections—“Reading Fantasy, Figuring Human Nature”; “Intertextuality and Revamping Traditions”; “Pullman and Theology, Pullman and Science Fiction.” In her introduction, Lenz, a recognized Pullman scholar who died before completing the book and whose work was finished by her friend and collaborator Scott, notes that “elsewhere I stated my belief that ‘the subject of *His Dark Materials* is nothing less than the story of how ‘human beings . . . might evolve toward a higher level of consciousness’” (6).

The essays in *His Dark Materials Illuminated* reveal the breadth and depth of the scholarly attention the trilogy has attracted. Lauren Shohet’s “Reading *Dark Materials*,” Burton Hatlen’s “Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*,” and Susan Matthews’ “Rouzing the Faculties to Act” all lay out Pullman’s debt to—and quarrels with—his literary predecessors from Milton and Blake to Tolkien and Lewis. Similarly, the substantial religious and theological themes in the trilogy are explored in Carole Scott’s “Pullman’s Enigmatic Ontology,” Shelley King’s “Without Lyra We Would Understand Neither the New or the Old Testament,” Bernard Schweizer’s “And He’s A-Going to Destroy Him,” Anne-Marie Bird’s “Circumventing the Grand Narrative,” Pat Pinsent’s “Unexpected Allies,” and Mary Harris Russell’s “Eve Again! Mother Eve.” Pullman’s conception of human nature is elaborated in Lenz’s introductory essay, Maude Hines’s “Second Nature,” and Lisa Hopkins’ “Dyads or Triads.” Pullman’s use of the conventions of science fiction and fantasy is discussed in Karen Patricia Smith’s “Tradition, Transformation, and the Bold Emergence,” and in Andrew Leet’s “Discovering Faith through Science Fiction.” Finally, Margaret Mackey elucidates the use of the actual and fictive North in “*Northern Lights* and Northern Readers.”

Of particular interest are Burton Hatlen’s treatment of Pullman and his predecessors Lewis, Tolkien, and, more distantly, Milton; Lisa Hopkins’

discussion of daemons and human nature; and Ann-Marie Bird's discussion of Dust and theological vision.

Hatlen discusses the worldview of the trilogy as one that, while it is "in the long shadow" of the fantasy literature of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, in fact exists in opposition to them. Hatlen argues that Pullman sees the fantasy works of his predecessors as "life-denying," and that in *His Dark Materials* he has created a "secular humanist fantasy" (76). On a formal level, says Hatlen, Pullman is indebted to Tolkien for teaching him how the trilogy form, properly used, can generate "tremendous excitement" (78), even though he rejects Tolkien's dualism in favor of "the Republic of Heaven" (80). Regarding Lewis, Hatlen quotes Pullman's remark that the *Narnia* cycle is "one of the most ugly and poisonous things I've ever read" (82). Yet Hatlen points out that Pullman's trilogy is a tribute to Lewis in that it functions as an "anti-*Narnia*"—a secular humanist alternative to Lewis' work. Finally, Hatlen explores Pullman's great and frequently acknowledged admiration for Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Pullman, Hatlen says, argues for the "Romantic" (cf. Blake's remark that Milton was of "the Devil's party") reading of Milton's poem rather than the "Orthodox" reading. "Thus, by invoking the great parallel of Milton's poem," Hatlen concludes, "Pullman reminds us that each moral choice changes the universe and that each one of us carries the fate of the cosmos on our shoulders" (91).

Hopkins draws our attention to the numerous and significant patterns of doubling and tripling throughout *His Dark Materials*. The former, the "classic Gothic doubling pattern" (48), is apparent in many prominent pairings, e.g., Lyra's parents, Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter; the two armored bears, Iofur Raknison and Iorek Byrnison; and the fact that all human beings have a distinct but not separate self, a daemon. Yet the bulk of Hopkins' insightful article deals with profusion of tripling patterns, beginning with the fact that the work is a trilogy, that one's awareness of oneself and one's daemon implies a third part—the "thinking, responsive part" (54), and that the trilogy borrows the classic tripling motif of fairy tales (51). "Humans are internally complete," Hopkins concludes; "they have no need to look outside of themselves for a deity. The triune nature of the human is thus a fundamental part of Pullman's argument that the only worthwhile enterprise is to build the Republic of Heaven where we are" (55).

Bird's article "explores Pullman's attempt to construct an alternative theological vision that is particularly attuned to the secular humanistic climate of the twenty-first century" (189). Dust, the mysterious particles in the sky seen in the photographs Lord Asriel brings back from his polar expedition and what in *The Golden Compass* he calls "the energy

that links body and daemon,” is treated in the trilogy in such a way that “neither term in the spirit-matter binary is hierarchically superior or capable of existing independently of the other term” (190). Bird relates this to Derrida’s “original conception of deconstruction” (190), but notes that Pullman’s strategy goes beyond showing the interrelationship of the positive and negative terms; Dust in his hands becomes “an ambiguous, mystical presence in which everything coexists” (190). Bird concludes noting that “Pullman circumvents the grand narrative, creating instead an open, more egalitarian vision in which Dust functions as a new focus for people’s spirituality, without which, according to Pullman’s trilogy, humanity not only lacks purpose or meaning, but equally as important, a sense of wonder and mystery” (197).

With the trilogy, Philip Pullman has achieved popular acclaim, literary awards, Internet Website and blog attention, and theatrical and film adaptation. That *His Dark Materials Illuminated* is published by an academic press signals the presence of another kind of respectful attention and appreciation for the trilogy. The quality of the anthology’s essays is high and they well repay the attention spent studying them. Like the other books reviewed here, Lenz and Scott’s anthology is a valuable resource for understanding *His Dark Materials*. A comprehensive index, not found nearly often enough in anthologies, adds to the usefulness of the collection.

Each of these works provides worthwhile guidance to *His Dark Materials*. Readers, teachers, and scholars looking for a reader’s companion, a book-length interpretive treatment, or a well-chosen collection of scholarly essays will find each of these three books a source of enlightenment on the trilogy for themselves, their readers, and their students.

Douglas Haneline is professor of English at Ferris State University, where he teaches research writing, American and British literature, and medical writing. He is a lifelong and enthusiastic reader of science fiction and fantasy.

Martin, Ann. *Red Riding Hood and the Wolf in Bed: Modernism’s Fairy Tales*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006.

In *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children’s Books and Radical Experiments in Art*, Juliet Dusinberre sets out to connect the child readers of *Alice* and other children’s literature not only with the adults they later became,