



# Authorgraph No.102: Philip Pullman

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**Philip Pullman** interviewed by **Geoff Fox**.

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The eight-year-old Philip Pullman was enjoying 'a sort of Jennings life, you know?' at his prep school near Norwich. Then, 'one day, a master called Mr Glegg, whom I liked because he was a kind man, opened a book and began to read. It was 'The Ancient Mariner?', and he read it from start to finish. Fifteen of us listened spellbound by this extraordinary thing. It gripped me like nothing I'd ever heard before.'

There is something of the storytelling Mariner about Philip Pullman himself. Readers of his Carnegie medal winner, **Northern Lights**, are fixed by its glittering power; they *must* hear the story out. Those desperate for more news of his parallel worlds will be relieved to know that Philip's wife Jude (always his first reader) took the manuscript of Book 2 of the trilogy upstairs at 4 o'clock one September afternoon and finished the last sheet at 1.00 in the morning. Meanwhile, the expectant author paced about downstairs.

Eight was a good age for Philip. He was living at his grandparents' home, a Norfolk rectory, whilst his father was serving in the RAF in Kenya. His grandfather was 'the most important influence in my life, I'm certain'. A country drive in his old Ford Popular was an adventure into stories: 'Now this stream - that's called Laughing Water ... This road we're on - the Romans tramped along here ... and you see that old tree over there, well that's why they call this The Trail of The Lonesome Pine.' Bible stories mingled with tales told by murderers whose last hours before the scaffold grandfather had shared as chaplain to Norwich Jail. He was very much the Victorian head of the household - yet he was also a playful man and, occasionally, a source of unintended humour: 'he dropped a box of fireworks in the hall one Bonfire Night and struck a match to find them.' Above all, though, a man 'in whose presence you *wanted* to be good.'

Pullman is unashamedly interested in people being good, though not in the moralistic fashion of C S Lewis, a writer he finds 'distasteful', sanctimonious even. The goodness which excites him is more complex, more ambiguous. It lies at the core of **Northern Lights** :

'The trilogy is my most coherent and thought-out statement of where I am, religiously, morally, and philosophically. And it's probably the right time of my life to do it ... What I try to do is to show people behaving well in difficult circumstances. So there isn't an overt 'Do this and you'll be saved and go to heaven?', but just a model that somebody could call on if they were ever in a difficult situation.'

The title of the trilogy, **His Dark Materials**, is drawn from Milton's **Paradise Lost**, a powerful element in the genesis of the work. Pullman's 'argument' also is The Fall - in his view, a fortunate fall ('the best thing that could have

happened to us?). Before the trilogy is played out, the heroine Lyra must herself survive long enough to fall, to acquire self-awareness; only then can she win through, with study and discipline, to the redemption of a wiser state of grace. The wicked characters are not wholly evil; they have the attractiveness which Milton could not avoid giving his Satan. The alluring Mrs Coulter may be a close relative of Cruella de Vil, or the Queen in **Snow White**, but she is the more mesmeric in that her malevolence is relieved by moments of fierce love; she does, after all, save her daughter Lyra.

Pullman sometimes sees himself as much the servant of his characters as their creator. They develop lives of their own, and may insist on behaving in ways he had not envisaged (?you fight over it?). In all his novels, individual voices come talking, laughing, arguing animatedly from the page. Some of these voices were first heard in plays written when he was teaching in an Oxford middle school. ?I was a rotten teacher,? he reflects. ?Once in a while, I was brilliant - usually outside the classroom but not a *reliable* teacher.? You would not forget him, though, if you had been in one of those plays or heard him retelling **The Odyssey** or **The Iliad**.

Pullman's conversation is relaxed and ruminative, but charged by an enquiring and excited confidence to push ideas to conclusions. He knew his own mind well enough, as a sixth former, to decide he was going to Oxford - the first person to do so from his school, Ysgol Ardudwy, Harlech, and from a family with no great interest in the Arts.

That searching mind seems always to have been matched by a disciplined determination. He knew he wanted to write even when he was at school, and he has steadily written his three pages a day through a series of jobs he did after university, through all his 23 years of teaching in school and at Westminster College, and within a busy family life alongside a working wife (Jude is a clinical hypnotherapist), two sons, an amiable dog, a somnolent cat and a nimble caged finch in a house crammed with books and pictures. In his twenties, he would even nip out at lunch time from his job at Moss Bros to write in St Paul's churchyard - poetry usually. At school, he had written an epic in heroic couplets, but over his sandwiches on the park bench he would only have time to knock out a rapid rondeau or two. From these early exercises, he feels he learned a sensitivity to the rhythms of prose as well as verse:

?It's the sound and the taste of words that give them their savour as much as what they mean ... it's like Mr Glegg and ?The Ancient Mariner?, you just have to let the splendour and the mystery have some effect.?

Pullman began a novel the morning after he finished Finals at Oxford. He had loved the undergraduate life of the mid-sixties, and thought vaguely of becoming a singer-songwriter and maybe growing up to be Bob Dylan, or at least Donovan. His course, however, had not given him much (?I read widely but not well?). He had been absorbed by John Cowper Powys, but he also read popular literature - thrillers especially. ?I've never been sniffy about that, ever since I read **The Eagle** and **Biggles**; and I loved **Dick Barton** and do you remember **Quatermass and the Pit**? I've always relished a good yarn.? Within minutes of starting that first novel, he had collided with the problem of point-of-view. Where is the writer telling from, where is the reader placed? And, he thought, ?Why wasn't I taught this? I've just done an English degree and I haven't learnt to write at all.?

He is a great reader himself - and a painstaking reviewer. He makes frequent references to contemporary novels, to the satisfying structure of the six volumes of Proust he read last year, to other children's writers. He especially admires Jan Mark and Anne Fine (?They can do so much with two or three characters in a simple setting - if I were a better writer, I could do that?) and the uncompromising intelligence and range of Peter Dickinson.

His own range perhaps exceeds that of any other contemporary writer for children. There are the two gothic graphic novels, **Count Karlstein** and **Spring-Heeled Jack**; the adventures of The New Cut Gang around the streets of Lambeth - a kind of late nineteenth-century version of **Just William** with a dash of Damon Runyon (of **Guys and Dolls** fame) - these must be wonderful books to read aloud to top juniors; so much action, comedy, so many escapades - and so many voices. Victorian times have been fruitful for him. The quartet which first charted the adventures of young Sally Lockhart in **The Ruby in the Smoke** races down some of the meanest of London's streets and ends up in the tiny European kingdom of Razkavia in **The Tin Princess**. Along the way, without a hint of the didactic, the stories have embraced a woman's fight for a career in a man's world, the opium trade, the struggles of immigrant Jews in the East End - and we have met some of the most evil of double dyed villains outside Conan Doyle and the Penny

Dreadfuls, and some of the chirpiest cockneys since *The Artful Dodger*. He stays true to what is possible historically; his research takes him far enough to free, but not to constrict, his imagination.

In his most recent book, the ingeniously crafted **Clockwork**, one narrative slides into another with enough metafictional games to satisfy the most post of post-modernists. There is a nice irony in this, for in his Carnegie acceptance speech in July 1996, Pullman launched a considered attack on contemporary British 'adult novelists' who seem embarrassed by the notion of telling good stories. ('If you were so self-conscious when you told a children's story, you'd lose the reader.') His assault hit a nerve and the headlines and leader columns of the broadsheets where, for the most part, the Press cheered him on.

That controversy was about structure as much as anything else - it is the architecture of a novel which fascinates and challenges Philip Pullman. He often drives his plots forward with three or four reins together in his hands. He will not write down to his readers. If he has anyone in mind as he writes, it is probably his own younger self, so there will be no compromise on language, or subject matter. If there is a need for a horrific death, we shall have it - and likewise the vulnerability of adolescent lovemaking in **The White Mercedes**, one of his two Young Adult novels. His readers need to match his quick intelligence, and to love roving here and there about an adventure - he sometimes leaves them hanging over a couple of cliffs simultaneously.

Driving to the station, we talk of how fictions begin. One of the things you learn to recognise, Pullman thinks, is the *scale* of a possible narrative. 'That man digging his garden,' he points, 'why's he wearing a suit? Probably up to no good. He's not a novel, he's a short story ...?'

### Philip Pullman's books

The 'Sally Lockhart Quartet'

**The Ruby in the Smoke**, Puffin, 0 14 036627 X, £3.99 pbk

**The Shadow in the North**, Puffin, 0 14 036608 3, £3.99 pbk

**The Tiger in the Well**, Puffin, 0 14 036628 8, £4.99 pbk

**The Tin Princess**, Puffin, 0 14 036604 0, £4.99 pbk

The 'Graphic Novels'

**Count Karlstein**, Yearling, 0 440 86266 3, £2.99 pbk

**Spring-Heeled Jack**, Yearling, 0 440 86229 9, £2.99 pbk

The New Cut Gang

**Thunderbolt's Waxwork**, Viking, 0 670 84912 X, £8.99; Puffin, 0 14 036410 2, £3.99 pbk

**The Gas-Fitters' Ball**, Viking, 0 670 84913 8, £8.99

Young Adult Novels

**The Broken Bridge**, Pan, 0 330 32227 3, £3.50 pbk

**The White Mercedes**, Pan, 0 330 32813 1, £2.99 pbk

His Dark Materials Trilogy

**Northern Lights**, Scholastic Point, 0 590 54178 1, £12.99; 0 590 13961 4, £4.99 pbk

Others

**The Firework-Maker's Daughter** , Doubleday, 0 385 40527 8, £8.99; Yearling, 0 440 86331 7, £3.50 pbk

**Clockwork**, Doubleday, 0 385 40755 6, £9.99

**Geoff Fox** edits the journal, **Children's Literature in Education** ; he has written extensively about children's books and he teaches at the School of Education, Exeter University.



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