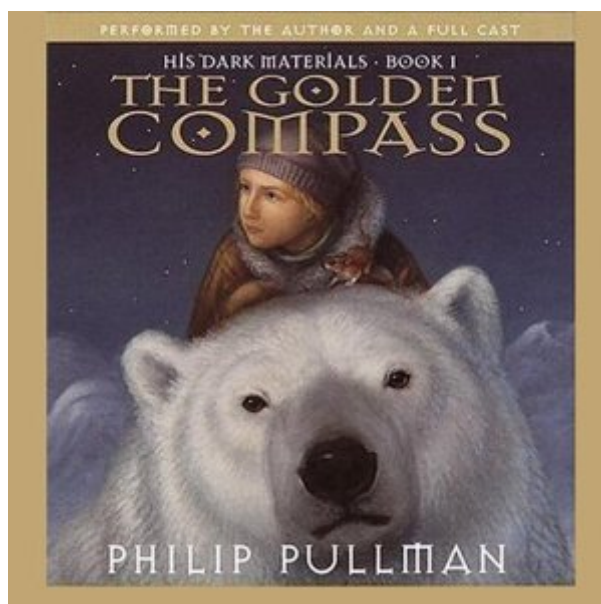


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# The Golden Compass: His Dark Materials, Book 1



## Synopsis

Published in 40 countries, Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy--The Golden Compass, The Subtle Knife, and The Amber Spyglass--has graced the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, San Francisco Chronicle, Book Sense, and Publishers Weekly bestseller lists. In 1996, The Golden Compass changed the face of fantasy publishing, and 2006 marks its 10 Year Anniversary--and an opportunity to celebrate with a deluxe hardcover. Pullman created new material just for this edition (archival documents, scientific notes and "found" letters of Lord Asriel) which has been illustrated and handlettered by renowned British artist Ian Beck and will be included in the back matter. The deluxe edition also features Pullman's own chapter opening spot art. A quality collectible--with the enticement of never-before-seen new material--for Pullman fans. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

First of all this is really a review of the trilogy and not The Golden Compass on its own - (I prefer the British title Northern Lights and I wonder why it has a different title in North America?). Its been a long time since I read a book ostensibly for children, possibly the last time was when I was an actual child unless you count a couple of adult re-readings of Tolkien - but I felt I had to read it to know what the fuss was about - both from the ample praise given to these books by critics and also some of the controversy they seem to have provoked - some of which is touched on in these reviews. And yeah I was impressed - I felt genuinely gripped by the plot and went out and bought both sequels

right after reading Northern Lights and read them all in a day and its not everyday I do that. Incidentally I don't want to sound like I'm boasting but the last few books I read included Jorge Luis Borges, Albert Camus and Umberto Eco - all fairly grown up, intellectual authors so the previous reviewer's comment that the only people who'd enjoy this are either children or just stupid is just blatantly untrue. There is so much to admire in these works - the creation of Lyra's world with its alternative version of history, the interesting touch of the daemons and the way they represent the characters' natures, the depiction of the frozen north with its Panserborne and witches etc was just fascinating, along with the other parallel worlds visited over the trilogy (though Lyra's is the most fully realised I think) as was the whole underlying framework of Pullman's universe with its blend of theoretical physics, William Blake, Paradise lost, theology etc - you have to salute Pullman's creativity and imagination here. Neither did I agree with some comments about the writing style which I actually thought was quite good - I didn't have any problems with the characterisation, dialogue, descriptions etc - all a lot better than Tolkien for example IMHO. Having said that the trilogy wasn't perfect - I thought part one was better than the others and part three was perhaps slightly weaker - having created this imaginary universe and built up the plot over the first two volumes I think it was hard for Pullman to bring it all to a conclusion in a way that fully did justice the brilliance of the underlying concepts which is why I'm not giving it five stars. Also there were too many deus ex machina moments where characters were rescued by the excessively timely intervention of some ally. But I really, truly enjoyed reading this trilogy and found several things to ponder on afterwards - if I had read it as a child it would undoubtedly had been one of my all time favourites. is not an appropriate forum for political or religious discussion but I am a little saddened and amazed at some of the comments made by some reviewers which if anything unintentionally show just how right Pullman is on many things. The last book I reviewed on was Eco's The Name of the Rose which deals with heresy in the middle ages - reading some reactions you can see how little the world has moved on in some ways with people as quick as ever to shout "burn the heretic!" the minute they see something they disagree with, however imperfectly they have understood it. Some of the comments seem bizarre - the vague accusation of "pederasty" seems bizarre - I must have missed the child pornography section of this work. I certainly knew about sex and love (or thought I did) at age 13 as did most people and the rather tender blossoming of love between Will and Lyra is handled with such delicacy (there is in fact no actual sex here as far as I can see) that this says far more about the people making the claims than it does about the actual book. As for the accusation that Pullman is ignorant and believes Calvin was a catholic pope(!) this seems to stem from someone flicking through the book looking for something to get annoyed about rather than

reading it - I would have thought that the idea that this is a parallel universe with a substantially different history from ours (eg in which the Reformation never happened) is something that most people would grasp in a few short pages and I'm pretty sure that Oxford Professor Pullman knows that Calvin was never pope. I don't believe there is much misogyny here either (I think a confusion between the briefly expressed views of an immature character who living in a backward world and those of the author) As for the anticlericalism - well clearly Pullman IS against rigid authoritarian systems of religious thought but again this is set in a parallel universe where the church is really standing in for any number of real theocratic regimes from the medieval catholic church (who did far worse things than mentioned in this book incidentally eg the brutal suppression of the Cathars in the Albigensian crusade - "Kill them all! God will recognise his own!" - this quote is from a real Catholic bishop about what to do with the civilian prisoners -women, children etc in a captured Cathar town) to the secular theocracies of the Soviet Union and the Third Reich. I don't think he is actually personally accusing the late John Paul II of trying to surgically amputate children's souls here - that seems a depressingly literal take on things - so literal in fact you wonder why some people bother reading fiction? Or even manage to function on a day to day basis in a world filled with metaphor? Frankly given all the fuss I was expecting this book to be far more heretical and religion-bashing than it actually was. I suppose people like a friend of mine's cousins who ban Christmas tree fairies for being "satanic" and consider the Disney movie "Pocahontas" to be a work of the devil will probably not like it. Personally I consider this book to be quite a moral work though not in a preachy or dogmatic manner and in a way which also recognises shades of grey - it seems to stress the right qualities that I would certainly like any child of mine to learn - tolerance, friendship, love, the courage to do what is right, to be sceptical about dogma and not to be blindly obedient to authority - someone disapproved of this book because of the last point - well after the history of the 20th century with the Soviet union, Third Reich etc I'm quite surprised that some people still think that unthinkingly following orders is such a great idea. In any case there is another famous work where the protagonist takes on the religious and secular powers that be - its called "The New Testament". In the real world the battle between the Kingdom and the Republic rages on as it does fictionally and personally I think Jesus might not have been on the side that many seem to think he would've. As for the anti-God theme in later parts of the trilogy - well for starters the "God" of these books is clearly shown not to be the creator God of Christianity and the "bad guys" are those who have usurped him and used his authority for their ends as many have in human history. Asriel's war against God is shown to be misguided and missing the point in any case. Pullman IS anti-organised religion and he IS an atheist but I think some people have just simply misread him in their outrage

and tried to simplify what he is actually saying to make it easier to dismiss I could go on but what's the point? The bottom line is that if you think you won't like this because of its moral or religious take on things you almost certainly won't - though I notice my UK edition has a rather glowing quote from a review by The Church Times which suggests that not all believers are as outraged as some. As for me I thought it was gripping, highly imaginative and thoroughly enjoyable. PS this book was recommended to me by a Christian.

What's it doing in the Children's Section? Is it simply that children are at the heart of this fable? Be forewarned, this is a rich and complex tale with themes that examine the creation and structure of the universe, good and evil, and the very meaning of life and death. While cloaked in the trappings of an epic odyssey, the language, violence, and themes make this a book most suitable for mature young readers and adults. "His Dark Materials" is not only "Dust" -- the fear of which propels this story -- but it is the dark recesses of human nature. Pullman questions our views of the world, science, religion and ourselves. It is bold enough to make a clear philosophical stand, which the reader, like Lyra, comes to understand over the course of this journey through multiple universes and the inner depths of human spirit. So why is this book in the Children's Section? Perhaps it's because it requires a mind not set firmly in its ways -- a mind that can jump from idea to idea as quickly as Lyra's daemon can change shapes.

Whew! I just finished reading all three of Phillip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" books in a little over a week (I couldn't put them down!), and I'm still trying to absorb all of this. My initial reaction: this is going to be an all-time classic, and certainly not just of "young adult" or "fantasy" books (Phillip Pullman himself has stated many times that he can't read "fantasy," because it "doesn't tell [him] anything interesting about being a human being." While it is certainly different than the "Lord of the Rings," it is NOT AT ALL ridiculous to place Pullman's creation in the same pantheon as Tolkien's, which is something I swear I never thought that I would say. Anyway, the bottom line is that this trilogy is an amazing, mind-blowing, fascinating, exciting, heartbreaking, work of transcendent brilliance, and it starts with the story of Lyra, somewhat inaccurately titled, "The Golden Compass" (I guess that sounds better than "The Alethiometer" or "Lyra vs. the Gobblers" or something, but I strongly prefer the British title, "Northern Lights"). Also, the marketing of this book is very strange - if you look at the cover you might think this was some warm, fuzzy children's adventure story about a girl and her pet bear. Not!!! Instead, how about Phillip Pullman's dark take on creation and extended riff on multiple themes raised in John Milton's "Paradise Lost" and the Book of Genesis. The bottom

line: if Phillip Pullman is mainly for children, than so are John Milton and the Bible! I don't think so....Anyway, "The Golden Compass"/"Northern Lights" tells the story of a plucky, wild, courageous, amazing 12-year old girl named Lyra Belacqua, her beloved daemon Pantalaimon, her alethiometer (and all that it helps her discover about "Dust" -- and other things), her powerful, ambitious, complex, and dangerous parents (Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter), political intrigue in a world VERY much like our own in crucial ways, evil experiments on kidnapped children and their daemons, fascinating people called "gyptians" (water gypsies), theology and the Church, a window on a parallel universe (and the quest to find out what exists there), angels, witches, and an amazing bear named Iorek Byrnison. Is that enough material for you for one book? And how about put all that material into the hands of an author who is a great storyteller! The result, as I've said before: a CLASSIC!! Just three other points. First, this trilogy inevitably is going to be compared to (and possibly overshadowed by) another "young adult" series out these days, which you might have heard of...I think it's called, uh, "Harry Potter" or something like that. Anyway, not to disparage "Harry Potter" or anything, because that's a pretty good series of books, but "Harry Potter" is merely a cute, whimsical, well-told tale of a boy and his adventures compared to Phillip Pullman's very dark, amazing, even disturbing creation (especially if you have a closed mind towards explorations of God, religion, the Church and the nature of man - all the interesting and important things, in other words)! Second, I absolutely love Pullman's writing style (what a great storyteller!), as well as his use of words and names. He apparently has put a LOT of thought into this! For instance, take the main character, Lyra. I looked it up in the dictionary and found that "Lyra" is a constellation in the NORTHERN Hemisphere near Cygnus ("northern CROSS") and Hercules (child of the highest Greek God, Zeus, and Alcmene, a hero of extraordinary strength who won immortality by performing the 12 labors demanded by Hera). Interesting... Also, the constellation "Lyra" is located near the Corona BOREALIS. Finally, "Lyra" sounds awfully much like "liar," which is Lyra Belacqua's main skill (besides reading the alethiometer), and one in which she takes great pride. Coincidence? Hmmmm...I don't think so! Also, just to intrigue us further, Pullman names his Lyra's father "Asriel," which is similar to "Israel", which according to my dictionary is the name given to Jacob by the angel with whom he wrestled; perhaps literally "God struggles"). Double hmmmmm! Finally, we've got Mrs. "Coulter," and guess what that means? Well, according to my trusty dictionary again, a "coulter" is a BLADE or wheel on a plow for making VERTICAL CUTS in the sod (from Latin culter, KNIFE). Cool! Third, maybe we all should read (or reread) Milton's "Paradise Lost" (and the Book of Genesis) before/after we read "The Golden Compass", because there's no doubt that Phillip Pullman has borrowed freely from Milton's all-time classic take on Creation, God, Satan, free will,

the temptation in the Garden of Eden, and the "Fall" of man into "Sin" (among other things). Before the book even begins, we have an epigraph from "Paradise Lost," specifically the scene where Satan surveys the unformed potential of the Creator. Given this, it should not be surprising to anyone familiar with "Paradise Lost" (or the Bible, for that matter) that "The Golden Compass" leads us ever northwards, since the rebel angel, Satan, repaired to the NORTHERN realms. Meanwhile, don't forget that in "Paradise Lost" the angels (at God's command) tilt the Earth's axis so that man will have to endure extreme hot and cold seasons, instead of the constant temperate climate which existed before the Fall. Meanwhile, in "Paradise Lost," Sin and Death construct - with God's permission -- a bridge (window?) for easy passageway between Hell and Earth, through which they promise to infect the Earth and to corrupt all living things with Death and Sin. Veeeerrrry interesting!!! In interviews, Phillip Pullman has confirmed that the biblical Creation story, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and "Paradise Lost" are major sources for "His Dark Materials" trilogy, and that the title itself comes from the following quote: "Unless the almighty maker them ordain / His dark materials to create more worlds." Read "The Golden Compass" if you want a great story, if you want to be challenged, amazed, intrigued, and moved (as long as you're not one of these strange, closed-minded, disturbing, Oblation Board types who I see here and there on this site criticizing Pullman for "bigotry" or "blasphemy" or some other ridiculous thing!). And OF COURSE read it if you're curious to know more about "dust" -- "our final rest and native home..."

For anyone else getting confused, apparently for some stupid reason they retitled the book for the US version. (It's not like it's a different language and we wouldn't understand the translation.) I was about to buy this book, thinking it was a continuation of the series that I loved when I realized the plot sounded remarkably familiar.

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