



## The Golden Compass

**"The Golden Compass" is the film version of the first of Philip Pullman's trilogy of young adult fantasy books, "The Northern Lights".**

It is doubtful, given the relatively financially poor returns so far from American film-goers – in spite of it having done very well in other parts of the western world – that parts two and three of Pullman's "His Dark Materials" trilogy: "The Subtle Knife" and "The Amber Spyglass", will ever be made. This failure has a great deal to do with religious controversy in the U.S.A.

The story is set in a world parallel world to our own in which some things are familiar to us, but several are crucially different. In particular, in this world, people's 'souls' are exterior to their bodies in the form of animal 'daemons', which are not unlike the 'familiars' usually associated with witches. Their souls are as much to do with the capacity to think and act in a mature way – that is, with a person's whole 'spirit' – as with religious and moral qualities.

The dominant group in this world is the 'Magisterium', who wish to impose their view of reality on the population and to limit and control adult independence of thought and action. When it was found that maturity results from space 'dust' entering the bodies of adults through the medium of their daemons, the Magisterium sets up an experiment to test the efficacy of controlling adults by severing pre-pubescent children's daemons, so that they will continue to grow physically but will never mature mentally or spiritually and so will be biddable creatures of the Magisterium. The story is focused on the struggle of a young girl 'saviour' figure to stop this experiment.

Reviews of the film have been less than glowing, including commenting that while the special effects and casting were marvelous, the film has too little character development and lacks genuine drama.

A film has to be judged on its own merits and comments such as that 'the books weave a magic the film simply cannot match' are hardly fair as every film-of-the-book has, of necessity, to translate literature into story. Yet I have thoroughly enjoyed many film-of-the-book movies, including "The Golden Compass".

While the film is an abridged, though faithful, rendering of the book, many reviewers have commented that the film has pleased neither the fans nor the foes of Pullman's books. In the books the Magisterium is the focus of the anti-church rhetoric – which readers understand as a thinly veiled attack on the Catholic church. In the film, though the Magisterium is still the 'baddy', it is presented much more generally as a dogmatic, corrupt, authoritarian organisation that quashes free will and restricts what people may know or investigate. So, fans of the books are upset by the watering-down of the anti-church rhetoric. Even though this was done in response to pressure from Catholic and Evangelical church bodies, these foes of the books are still not happy in that they say that Christian children might enjoy the film so much that they might be tempted to read the actual books – and so be exposed to the anti-church focus!



A lose/lose situation for the film! It might be pointed out that in demanding the watering down of Pullman's rhetoric and in trying to keep children away from the books, these church bodies are doing exactly what the Magisterium does – trying to command thought and free-speech!

I have read the complete trilogy, and highly recommend the books to adults as well as to the teenagers, who are their primary intended readership. However, I feel that the extremity of Pullman's anti-church rhetoric is mis-focused in the same way as in the writings of the 'New Atheists' – such as Richard Dawkins in "The God Delusion". Many of the criticisms of the churches and of religion made by these writers are valid, but where I differ is that these writers will admit of no good whatsoever in the churches or religion, whereas I feel that such overstatement considerably weakens the persuasiveness of their case.

Therefore, in contrast to fans of the books, and to most reviewers of the film, I feel that the more generalised version — an 'expanded' version — of the Magisterium, encompassing all types of dogmatic control (political, social and intellectual, as well as church based) — actually strengthens the story.

It would be a pity if parts two and three of the trilogy that continue the story begun in "The Golden Compass" were not filmed as a result of the religious coercion and poor financial returns in America. We need stories such as Pullman's to remind us that, even though we in the West live in a post-Enlightenment world in which we are able to develop into mature beings able to think and act independently, we must be aware that the struggle is on-going against political, social, intellectual and religious fundamentalist dogmatists who might wish to diminish our freedoms.

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