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The Golden Compass

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The Golden Compass

Abstract

This is a review of *The Golden Compass* (2007).

The attention paid to the accomplishment of *The Golden Compass* - it has been attacked both for what it says about religion and what it doesn't - may obscure the impact the film could have in sparking interest in the several theological concepts it introduces. Based on the first book of Phillip Pullman's His *Dark Materials* trilogy, the movie has raised the ire of such groups as the Catholic League for its negative portrayal of a Machiavellian "Magisterium," also called the Authority, which bears a passing resemblance to the upper hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Die-hard fans of the books, on the other hand, have complained that the resemblance is too oblique as, in an effort to avoid causing offense, the film fails to do justice to Pullman's real critique of religion. In fact, never in the film is the Authority referred to as the "Holy Church," as it is in Pullman's books, and although there's more than a touch of cathedral to the Magisterium's central headquarters, and pictures that look a lot like Orthodox icons on the outer walls of a divisional office, the filmed version has toned down Pullman's frontal attack on the dangers of specifically theocratic power. The hints are there: Fra Pavel (Simon McBurney) and his other sinister, male co-conspirators dress in regal uniforms that could grace an ecclesiastical conclave, and like to talk about charges of heresy. The wicked, beautiful Mrs. Coulter (Nicole Kidman), a Magisterium ally, likewise offers a simplified description of original sin to explain what's at stake in their efforts to control a mysterious cosmic force called "Dust" that they consider a sign of humanity's evil penchant for disobedience. But viewers will have to wait until

the two remaining and far more religiously explicit books get filmed (if they do get filmed) to see how far New Line Cinema is willing to go in following Pullman's vision. In *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass* Pullman re-enacts and reinterprets both Christ's conquering of death, and the Fall, with Lyra serving both as death's conqueror and as Eve. He even plots the death of God. For now, however, the Authority is left generically nebulous: the rich uniforms could be nods to the bureaucratic tunics of 1984 or any other fictional dystopia, and all those phallic spires on the Magisterium headquarters could just be reminders of why men shouldn't be allowed to run everything.

What is offered while we wait is a non-stop, at times almost frenetically exciting, adventure that races through a précis of the 400-page book. In almost two hours, director Chris Weitz manages a surprisingly coherent, if breathless, stitching together of snippets from key events that, with the help of judicious telescoping of characters and plot, could be the solid launching of the even more complex narrative to come. And there's a lot to launch. Children in the vaguely Victorian world of the young girl Lyra Belacqua (Dakota Blue Richards) are disappearing, including Lyra's friends Roger (Ben Walker) and Billy Costa (Charlie Rowe), victims of shadowy kidnappers called "Gobblers." Guided by a truth-telling clock-like device, an alethiometer, the "golden compass" of the title, and aided by a band of boat-dwelling Gyptians, an armored polar bear Iorek Byrnison (voiced by Ian

McKellen), and the occasional intercession of a clan of ageless witches, Lyra sets off to rescue them. There's also the matter of Lord Asriel (Daniel Craig), Lyra's guardian, who turns out to be her father, and his mysterious experiments with Dust in the far North to work in. Weitz approached the project with some trepidation, given his lack of experience with special effects, but the convincing environment, at once familiar and fantastic, that he manages to conjure is impressive. A scene of Lyra riding Iorek through a deep winter landscape, as one example, should be as thrilling to adults as to children.

Nearly all the characters could do with a bit more development - just what is the connection between Iorek and the Texan aeronaut Lee Scoresby (Sam Elliott) who shows up to rescue him, for example - but Weitz gives us enough to get things moving. Our most complete picture is of the impish Lyra, with Richards a near perfect embodiment of Pullman's scrappy heroine. Through Lyra we simultaneously get our best introduction to what really sets Lyra's world (and Pullman's books) apart, which is the linking of each human with an external "daemon" in an animal shape. Often referred to as the humans' souls, Pullman's daemons actually seem more a mingling of psyche and soul, or whatever entity might constitute personality. Lyra's Pantalaimon (voiced by Freddie Highmore) is both fellow conspirator and voice of caution, as multifarious in mood as any child's spirit, and like all daemons of pre-pubescent children in Lyra's world, able to

change animal form at whim. Only when daemons start to settle down to one permanent animal shape at puberty does a human's final character emerge.

This imaginative exploration of the nature of the human essence stands, with Pullman's own self-avowed atheistic shadings, in a long tradition of theological puzzling over what it means to be a living person. Though settled doctrinally for many minds by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, the precise relationship between soul and body, or even whether such a thing as a soul exists, remains an elusive topic. By linking his daemons so strongly to personality, and by highlighting the absolute bond between daemon and person, Pullman actually follows Aquinas in understanding a human as a necessary unity of body and soul; though by giving the daemons material form he echoes earlier suggestions by Tertullian and Irenaeus that the soul might be somehow corporeal. In any case, Pullman's narrative exploration of what might happen if soul and body were severed - the fate of the "gobbled" children who have their daemons cut from them by forces in league with the Magisterium - offers a rich metaphor for any psychological event that might be called "soul-killing," from heavy-handed applications of authority that would quench a child's creativity, to the more explicit sexual abuse that could be hinted at darkly by the Magisterium's association with the Church. In the end, Pullman has said in an interview with *Atlantic* magazine, it is any creative search for knowledge that he hopes to defend against forces, religious or otherwise, that

would curb it.¹ Not surprisingly, affirmations of free will and independence run as a refrain through the film. Dust, which the Magisterium fears as the mark of sin, is for Pullman a fundamentally good force generated through self-discovery. The Fall, meanwhile, which in Mrs. Coulter's reduction refers vaguely to the nasty discovery of sex, is in Pullman's text the all-important, even world-saving act of adolescent self-assertion willing to seek wisdom, especially by embracing sexuality.

Apparently not wishing to conclude, as Pullman's first book does, with the sacrifice of a child, Weitz ends his film literally up in the air, as Lyra sails off in Scoresby's balloon, promising more adventure to come. Whether Weitz gets to fulfill that promise will depend largely on whether New Line recoups its reported \$180 million cost for this first film. Given the gnarlier, yet even more intriguing theological issues raised in the remaining books, we should hope to see the sequels if just to find out how and how well he negotiates those thorny thickets, and what of Pullman's true story remains.

¹ Hanna Rosin, "How Hollywood Saved God." *Atlantic*, Vol.300, no. 5 (December 2007). Source: Atlantic.com