The role of scientific language in Philip Pullman’s ‘His Dark Materials’

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Résumé

Philip Pullman’s epic is a ‘dark matter’ made up of religious and scientific underpinnings which challenge his readers’ knowledge of the world, making them ‘intellectually adventurous’.

Although scientific language seems to sound uncomfortable to his younger readers, he builds on myth and physics a new dimension of « stark realism dealing with matters that might normally be encountered in works of realism, such as adolescence, sexuality, and so on; and they are the main subject matter of the story - the fantasy is there to support and embody them, not for its own sake ».

Pullman’s heroes (Lyra, Lord Asriel, Mrs Coulter and Mary Malone) are all scientists involved in a new political opinion of the world and in the role to be played in a universe which seems to be ‘probabilistic’.

Biographie de l’auteur

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Annalisa Bonomo is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at Kore University (Enna). Her current research interests lie mainly in the field of multilingualism, intercultural communication, World Englishes and translation studies; she co-edits the international series “In-between spaces: le scritture migranti e la scrittura come migrazione” (Edizioni Sinestesie), about the connections between language matters, multi-ethnicity, literature(s) and identities. She is the supervisor of two international research projects dealing with the role of English in the multilingual turn. Among her books: World Englishes and the Multilingual Turn (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) and Discutere di plurilinguismo nell'epoca della complessità (Guerra 2012), dealing with multilingualism, World Englishes and complexity. She has also published several articles in national and international journals and volumes.
The BBC is to turn Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials trilogy into a TV series, giving both existing fans and a new generation the chance to experience the tale of parallel universes, Daemons and armoured polar bears. Pullman said the many adaptations of the books on screen, radio and stage had been a “constant source of pleasure” but shows such as Game of Thrones and the Wire had shown that TV had the capacity to reach “depths of characterisation and heights of suspense by taking the time for events to make their proper impact and for consequences to unravel”.

Agreed. But I certainly wouldn’t say no to Sam Elliot reprising his role. Northern Lights (published in the US as The Golden Compass) was published in 1995, the first novel in Philip Pullman’s hugely successful His Dark Materials trilogy. In the preface, the author tells us that the story is set in a universe ‘like ours, but different in many ways’. One of the ways Pullman achieves this eerie sense of similarity yet strangeness is through his use of language. Archaic place names and Greek etymologies. Rather than resorting to Greek formations for names of scientific studies, Pullman employs the Old English practice of forming compounds using craft ‘skill’ to describe technical areas of study. Where Old English coined grammatic-craft ‘grammar-skill’ and tungol-craft ‘star-skill’, i.e. astronomy, Pullman creates the term atomcraft for particle physics. Pullman is unwilling to compromise a complex ethical and moral story for his younger audience. The Golden Compass kicks off by introducing 12-year-old Lyra Belacqua, a girl who lives in Oxford in an alternative world where people are accompanied by physical manifestations of their souls, called daemons. His Dark Materials ultimately advocates for the abolition of rigid, orthodox structures such as organized religion, by pushing against dogma and encouraging rational thinking and logic. As a result, the trilogy is frequently banned over objections about how it depicts religion. The American Library Association ranks the series eight out of 100 on its most frequently banned list between 2000 and 2009.