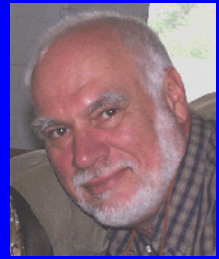


**Bellicose Veins—the roots of violence in US culture**

## **LITERARY VIOLENCE FOR CHILDREN— & FOR THE REST OF US**

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Culture is transmitted in a variety of ways, not the least of which are the legends, tales and literature of a people. In the last score years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the heritage of traditional tales found in childhood and school literature was carefully scrutinized and bowdlerized for racial and gender inequities and slights. Many of us, though deeply devoted to diversity, sensed beneath this process the sense of Heinrich Heine's words, "Whenever books are burned men also in the end are burned."

While classics were being expurgated and rewritten, they were in any version becoming an increasingly unvisited backwater, as new forms of comics, videogames and fantasia in print and on screen seized the lioness's share of attention and, of course, the market.

Recently my good friend Walt gifted me with Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*. Both Walt and I have been sci-fi fans, if our years be added-together for over a century. I am largely of the "hardware" type of fan, interested in the human variation of alternative futures—escapism, if you will, into a better world, whatever the true or imagined struggle used by the author to bring us there. The advent of Tolkien left me cold, and as the world turned to Harry Potter, I found myself totally out of the pale.

With Pullman, Walt offered me another chance to connect. So, here are a few reader's notes of my literary journey across three books, perhaps seeking as so many of Pullman's characters do, for the right company in which to discuss the crash and bang of what I think I have found.

Books one and two were readable and sustained attention. Book three lost it, trying to get everyone into the rush toward an aborted apocalypse. Like much adult children's literature today, the level of violence, death and destruction begs Spielbergian visual interpretation, while good/evil, beautiful/ugly, true/false seem engraved into the characters' identity rather than being dimensions of their behavior. We seem to have fallen under the spell of "evil empires" as an interpretation of the world and it is a chicken-and-egg question as to which comes first. Like most cultural constructions, it doesn't much matter, since these dichotomies build upon each other until the whole edifice collapses from its own weight.

What are the cultural lessons imparted in this trilogy? Many, perhaps too many to count, but recurring themes do occur at the structural level of the author's worldview and that of his characters. Despite Pullman's childhood travels, perhaps remembered only in fantasy, he writes as a staunchly ethnocentric public school pedant. If one attempts to draw out the beliefs, values, attitudes that mark his writing culturally, one comes upon a pretty strong profile of the modern, secular, Anglo individualist, an armored bear, at best true to his or her own intentions, but with no clan affiliations, cuddly at moments, but quite deadly. Here are some cultural pegs that stand out:

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- Institutions and authorities are for the most part evil, unless perhaps they are scientific or academic. The tendency is to fight them rather than influence them and take responsibility for them.
- Organized religion, the church, and in particularly the Roman Catholic Church is the archetype of the evil institution.
- God is dead or should be, though spiritual beings both good and evil abound.
- Friendships and contractual obligations are more important than blood lines.
- Children are more important than adults.
- If you are one of the good ones, there will always be someone to rescue you.
- Constant warfare is normal and ongoing, punctuated only by greater and lesser battles.
- Killing deserves a just cause.
- Romantic love makes the world go round, but it is ultimately forbidden and delusional. Work toward progress is the real human destiny.

Not surprising, there is also a strong Anglo bias in the principal characters and English will not just dominate the world but the worlds. The same line of reasoning that once assumed that God spoke Hebrew has chosen another lingua franca. So, cutting a hole from one world to another may change the landscape but not the comic-book nature of the beings that inhabit it.

Alfred A. Knopf, the US publisher of the trilogy has recommended that Pullman's books are comparable to the writings of John Milton. Some teachers even suggest that they be used as a substitute for teaching *Paradise Lost*. One suspects that few at Knopf and at the head of the classroom who make such suggestions have actually read more than Internet snippets of Milton, though they may have Cliffs Notes on a shelf somewhere.

In the late 1970's I remember scouring Paris with a Swedish colleague for toy soldiers to take back to his little boy (war toys were not sold in Sweden). As I was working with him, I put up in a Stockholm hotel while he went home. On finishing breakfast the next morning, I discovered that the hotel was hosting a sales meeting for sales of Swedish armaments to representatives of foreign governments and other interested parties. The lobby, restaurant and bar were full of Swedes with armaments catalogs talking to and taking orders from their visitors. (Real armaments are big, grisly business in Sweden). Minding oneself is the way to mind one's children. Swedish hypocrisy may, however, be a cut above the marketing of violence to children and the rest of us in unremitting fantasy such as Pullman's.

Our desire to believe in the innocence of children is certainly more for our sake than theirs. Pullman, unfortunately, unlike his characters, may never have to grow up. There will be lots of royalties and movie money to keep him from other realities.

Without criticism, we can only choose between censorship and propaganda. Letting our values stick out is democratic.