# Recent older children's fiction: a new golden age?--Part 1

**Harvey Thompson**
**7 September 2004**

*This is the first of a three-part series reviewing recent older children's fiction.*

Northern Lights *(published outside the UK as* The Golden Compass*) (ISBN 0-440-23813-7),* The Subtle Knife *(ISBN 0-440-23814-5) and* The Amber Spyglass *(ISBN 0-440-23815-3), by Philip Pullman, published by Laurel Leaf*
Sabriel *(ISBN 0 00 713731 1),* Lirael *(ISBN 0 00 713733 8) and* Abhorsen *(ISBN 0 00 713735 4) by Garth Nix, Harper Collins*
Shadowmancer *(2003) by G.P. Taylor, Faber and Faber (ISBN 0 571 22046 0)*

In recent years there have been a number of important developments in the world of children's literature. Many fictional works written primarily for a younger audience have gained an unprecedented popularity amongst adult readers. The dividing-line between adult and children's fiction has further been blurred by the recognition accorded to such titles as *Northern Lights* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night time*—both written by children's authors but recipients of non-children's fiction awards.

Towards the end of last year the BBC's *Big Read*—a televised competition of 100 books, (billed as Britain's largest ever literary event) from classics to modern fiction, voted for by the reading public—resulted in a third of entries picked from the children's fiction category.

Are we witnessing a "golden age" of writing for children, as one recent book reviewer put it? In terms of the vast amount of notable works that have appeared recently, this review cannot but be selective. The titles reviewed here, are a combination of those which have received acclaim recently, as well as other lesser known works.

Young adult fiction has always been something of a hybrid, reflecting its diverse audience, which includes older school children, students, adolescents, and increasingly of late, adult readers. Consequently, subjects have been covered in a number of quite different styles of writing. The stories discussed below deal with; the personal and social problems faced by many modern teenagers growing up in large cities; the plight of children living amidst war; as well as exploring important historical episodes. But first, three books from the resurgent world of fantasy/science fiction.

*Northern Lights* by Philip Pullman is the first part of a trilogy (the tale is continued in *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*) that tells the story of two children, Lyra and Will, who find themselves at the centre of a drama of cosmic proportions. Set in another world (which vaguely resembles a strange montage of our own, where Victorianesque explorers, Zeppelins and advanced particle physics inhabit the same society), which is ruled by a corrupt religious body known as the Authority.

The two children become unwitting targets of the church when they make a discovery about the essence of life itself. Lyra's father, the scientist and explorer Lord Asriel, first stumbles on the discovery (which involves elementary particles or "dus" seeping in from another world) and seeks to use the knowledge to overturn the Authority and establish "the Republic of Heaven".

Pullman's trilogy is littered with scores of different characters including; shape-changing pets, armoured-bears, boat people, witches, ghosts, angels and various other supernatural beings. It has received an extraordinary amount of praise. The books have become bestsellers and crossed over into the adult reading market. A series of spin-off publications have also been released and last year the story was turned into a stage play. The level of praise has been matched only by the contempt heaped on him by various church leaders, religious journals and right-wing commentators for its anticlerical message.

When *Northern Lights* was awarded the Carnegie Prize soon after its publication in 1995, some saw this as signalling a revival in children's fantasy literature.

In writing the three books, Pullman borrowed copiously from the works of many writers including John Milton, William Blake, J.R.R. Tolkein, Garth Nix as well as from Biblical texts. Pullman is perfectly open about his debt to especially Milton (the name of the trilogy *His Dark Materials* is a line taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*) and Blake (passages from whom presage many chapters). He has intimated in the past that he sees himself adding to a grand narrative. In a recent interview, the writer asserted bluntly; "I'll steal from anyone."

This in itself isn't an argument against Pullman's work. He is more honest than most (even though certain influences do announce themselves a little too obviously) and direct influence has produced many memorable works in children's fiction. The most important consideration is; has the author drawn from these influences to produce something original enough to stand on its own? Is there sufficient imaginative power at work to bring something fresh and creative before the reader?

Despite the plaudits and the undeniable promise in Pullman's work, it is sadly lacking. The world which Pullman has created is ultimately too thinly spread and unwieldy to sustain credibility—even after overlooking his dubious utopia, the "Republic of Heaven". In a scientifically educated world, it is far more exacting to produce a believable alternative universe—modern science fiction is a graveyard of examples that have slipped off into absurdity.

To give him his due, Pullman began with a very bold plan; of writing a variant of Milton's epic for children, while fusing it with contemporary scientific thinking, such as quantum string theories of parallel universes. Whereas this results in compelling adventure and in some interesting ideas at times, the end product is derivative and cluttered.

The weakest parts of the story are the main characters, which are almost universally bad. Pullman seems to have cared surprisingly little about them. Lyra, who is apparently cast as a rebellious, headstrong girl, comes across as peevish and irritating. Will is wooden and perpetually mournful. Lord Asriel is never menacing enough to justify his sinister reputation. Worse still is Mrs Coulter—loosely modelled on Margaret Thatcher—who comes over as nothing more than a wealthy neurotic woman spouting terrible dialogue.

In an increasingly secular world, where religion is more than ever

popularly viewed as synonymous with political repression and socially retrogressive ideas, it is not too surprising that large numbers of people, particularly the young, have been attracted to the anti-religious sentiments of Pullman's books. (Pullman was castigated by the *Catholic Herald*, which described his books as "truly stuff of nightmares ... worthy of the bonfire.") But whereas religious obscurantists have no duty to distinguish between a good piece of work and a merely anti-religious book; others have.

Pullman is at best ambiguous with regard to the conflict between religious superstition and science and materialism. He has declared, "We all need some sort of myth ... some sort of overarching narrative to live by. For hundreds of years in the West, this need was fulfilled by the Christian story, but that is now either dead or dying."

Without the overblown response of some critics (the *Observer* newspaper speculated on Pullman being the greatest ever storyteller!) *His Dark Materials* trilogy would more easily be seen for what it is: a story that is both ambitious and at times interesting, but ultimately clumsy and flawed.

Another book that strongly influenced Pullman is *Sabriel* by Garth Nix. It opens with a map depicting a northern region of land called the Old Kingdom divided by a fortified wall from a southern area known as Ancelstierre. We soon learn that the Old Kingdom is a land of "free magic", feared creatures and the un-dead.

A "necromancer" known as the Abhorsen used to wield the power to bind the dead but he has since disappeared. And now the dead do not stay dead and they are increasing their attacks on the south. The only thing that protects the citizens of Ancelstierre is a perimeter wall that is manned with soldiers and protected by "charter marks". But there is a growing foreboding of an approaching day of reckoning.

The Abhorsen's only child (smuggled out of the Old Kingdom in infancy), Sabriel, has grown into a young woman. The disappearance of her father compels Sabriel to cross into the Old Kingdom in order to try and help him, but with the knowledge that if the rumours are correct—and it is already too late—she must prepare to take on the mantle of the Abhorsen herself.

*Sabriel* appeared in Nix's native Australia in 1995 where it was nominated for the Aurealis Award for Excellence in Science Fiction. The book enjoyed a degree of success with two Australian and US editions before being published in the UK in 2002. The Old Kingdom trilogy has since been completed by *Lirael* and *Abhorsen*.

*Sabriel* is a beautifully written story. It is surprisingly rare for an author writing fantasy for young adults to afford their audience this level of seriousness. The story explores many important themes, such as death, violence and sex, which Nix approaches with unforced candour.

Nix has also created a fascinating world which is wonderfully balanced between fantasy and realism. While the Old Kingdom is a place of fear magic and near mythical creatures, Ancelstierre is a variant of the modern world. But technology breaks down the nearer you are to the wall, which is why the wall is guarded by barbed wire, trenches, and men with swords and chain-mail. In Ancelstierre, all but the strongest magic fails and science holds sway. As a result, much of the population doesn't believe that magic exists. Ancelstierre retains enough familiarity for us to appreciate and almost feel this pressing danger from the north.

The story follows the form of the traditional quest set against an epic battle of good and evil, but it aspires to more than this. *Sabriel* is about growing up, becoming aware of an increasingly complex world, and with it, the responsibilities that it confers. As we come to know Sabriel, she begins to transform in front of us, from a shy, unassuming and lost youngster into a courageous and intelligent fighter.

In parts *Sabriel* is extraordinarily sensitive, such as when dealing with the protagonists' relationship with her father. In the brief time that Sabriel and her father are together are contained some beautifully poignant moments. The Abhorsen is a man who carries an enormous burden; he is powerful and much feared. But he knows that ultimately he is confronting forces far more awesome than his or anyone else's capacity to contain or defeat. Sabriel has only recently grown into adulthood—she is on the cusp of taking on a level of responsibility beyond her comprehension. In the often painful reality of Sabriel's transformation, Nix speaks to the great fears and hopes that all parents have for their children and how the latter are haunted by the fear of failure.

In the character of Sabriel, Nix has created a truly original young heroine who fights to keep her bearings in a world she neither knows nor understands.

*Shadowmancer* by G.P. Taylor is set in the 18th century, and apart from a few invented place names the plot takes place around the Yorkshire seaside town of Whitby. The local vicar, Obadiah Demurral, has become corrupt and "gone over" to the devil. While preaching tolerance and restraint to his flock by day, he is a "shadowmancer" (someone who communes with the dead) by night. In his plan to "enslave" god and rule over the world he must unite the two mysterious "Keruvim".

The young Thomas and Kate try to stop Demurral's evil plan. They are aided in their attempts by the foreigner Raphah and at times by the smuggler Jacob Crane.

Taylor is a one time policeman turned vicar (full title Rev Graham Taylor). After his book was repeatedly turned down, he is reported to have sold his 1,000cc motorcycle and published it himself. With a reputation for being a shameless self-publicist and financially hard-headed, Taylor persuaded one bookseller to take copies of *Shadowmancer*, while he sold the rest to his congregation, one of whom had connections to the publishing house Faber.

The US-rights to the book were recently sold to Penguin Putnam for $US500,000 (£314,000). JK Rowling's US advance for her first Harry Potter story seven years ago was £100,000. Universal pictures are planning a film of *Shadowmancer* and Taylor recently secured a £3.5 million deal for his next six books.

*Shadowmancer* is a terrible book. This is not due solely to the fact that it is barely disguised Christian evangelism, but because it is a dull and uninteresting story.

Taylor has bemoaned the fact that the current fascination for wizards and the "dark arts" has meant that religious writing for children has been marginalised. There are, undeniably a great number of silly wizard stories around at the moment, but pity the congregation that has this for its reply!

The story is littered with clumsy allusions to the power of a redeeming god, his son Jesus and the evil but ultimately doomed way of the devil. Throughout, Taylor cannot resist any opportunity to sermonise. In a very long list of awful character dialogue, are the following lines; "It's as if I was blind, and suddenly the blindness is gone.... Run, and pray on the way!"

Even the natural setting of the atmospheric northern English coastal town of Whitby, with its ruined abbey perched high on the hill couldn't remedy the flawed work. Bram Stoker wrote and based part of *Dracula* here after imagining the shapes of bats in the night-time swirling of the seagulls.

So how has *Shadowmancer* done so well commercially? Are large numbers of teenagers being attracted by its message? A brief look at how the book has been marketed as well as a cross-section of reader responses illustrates the point in a very literal sense: Taylor is preaching to the converted.

In the US, and to a lesser degree in the UK, the success of *Shadowmancer* is being strongly driven by right-wing moral backlash made up of significant numbers of adult readers who feel that children's books have been too long dominated by themes involving the occult and witchcraft. They have embraced *Shadowmancer* with the zeal of an answering prayer, and US publishers are openly touting it as the religious

antidote to the Harry Potter books. The correspondence section of the official *Shadowmancer* web site is full of glowing letters from born-again Christians, many in their 50s and 60s who attest to the book's moral acceptability in accordance with the Bible.

*To be continued*