

The Golden Compass and the religious right

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Directed by Chris Weitz, screenplay by Weitz, based on the novel by Philip Pullman

The Golden Compass is the first in a planned trilogy of films based on a series of novels for young readers by Philip Pullman. Pullman's novels *Northern Lights* (released in the US as *The Golden Compass*), *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*, comprising a trilogy entitled *His Dark Materials*, have received numerous awards and have found a readership numbering well into the millions. Pullman, alternately described in the press as an atheist or agnostic, has invested in his books a critical attitude toward religion.

The film adaptation of *Golden Compass* has been attacked by right-wing Christian fundamentalist groups who claim the movie promotes atheism, deceitfulness, the occult, and even the killing of one's parents. It almost goes without saying that such claims are entirely ludicrous, as is the very notion that some sort of "atheist manifesto," as the film has been described, could suddenly emerge from the Hollywood studio system.

The story of *The Golden Compass* is set in a parallel universe similar to our own in which a corrupt organization called the Magisterium rules the world. Bringing to mind in its language and dress the Catholic Church, the Magisterium holds enormous influence over people's lives, controlling the information to which they may be exposed.

In this parallel world, souls live not inside the bodies of humans but instead walk alongside them in animal form. Called "daemons," these soul-creatures may change shape so long as their human counterparts are children. As the child grows into an adult, however, the daemons settle into one unchanging animal form. The daemons in the film serve as an effective device to reveal characters' true feelings and intentions. When one of the more ruthless characters, for example, attempts to persuade or trick a "good" character with a calm face and a friendly word, their daemons bristle and fight in a visual expression of the brutality beneath their human owner's otherwise "polite" suggestions.

A scientist in this world, Lord Asriel (Daniel Craig), has come to a university attended by his young niece Lyra Belacqua (Dakota Blue Richards). He has made a discovery in the Arctic north involving alternate worlds and "Dust," a mysterious force found to be pouring out of those other worlds, feeding its way through daemons and into their human counterparts. There are, according to Asriel's findings,

innumerable alternate worlds, some in which there is no such thing as the Magisterium. Such theories have led to accusations of heresy from the Magisterium church, even attempts on the scientist's life.

When Lord Asriel secures funding from the school for a new expedition to the Arctic and leaves the university to continue his investigations, young Lyra is soon taken under the wing of Marisa Coulter (Nicole Kidman), an agent of the Magisterium. Perhaps one of the most effective scenes in the film comes when Coulter, having invited Lyra to stay in her luxurious home, tells the little girl how the Magisterium helps people. It tells them what is good for them and what is bad, tells them how to live their lives. Some people need this guidance, she says. Lyra asks the wealthy and glamorous socialite why she herself does not need such guidance.

While sneaking around Coulter's home, Lyra discovers that agents of the Magisterium called Gobblers and led by Coulter are abducting children and taking them far away to the north. Once there, a machine violently separates the children from their daemons. When Lyra sees that two of her young friends have been taken away by the Gobblers, she decides she must make her way north to save them. On her journey, she will be joined by a small group of unlikely comrades, all outcasts of one sort or another. There's Iorek Byrnison (voiced by Ian McKellen), an armored polar bear and excessive whiskey drinker; Lee Scoresby (Sam Elliott), an "aeronaut" whose ship is in hock; and a family of "Gyptians," itinerant workers and sailors who save Lyra from the clutches of the Gobblers in one memorable scene.

The frigid north will prove to be the perfect setting in which to place the Magisterium's criminal enterprise. Their laboratories and nurseries are cold, bathed in white. The environment is sterile, antiseptic. Here the set pieces and lighting convey to the viewer a sense of coldness and rigidity. Imagination, sensuality and, above all, dissent, are dead here. It is from this environment that the children and these values must be rescued.

The Golden Compass is a lively and entertaining film. Director Chris Weitz and cinematographer Henry Braham have done an admirable job in bringing this story to life, their use of light, shadow and camera placement being more expressive than what one is accustomed to in today's Hollywood cinema. Newcomer Dakota Blue Richards makes a strong impression as

Lyra, and Daniel Craig, in a smaller role as Lord Asriel, gives yet another solid performance.

But in citing the film's very real virtues, one also does not wish to overrate the work. There are a number of instances in which the Lyra character seems too well equipped in facing the challenges before her. While her defiance is admirable and even infectious, the drama suffers at times due to her unflinching ability to overcome all obstacles in her path. The viewer never doubts her ability to defeat her adversaries.

If Lyra is perhaps too "able" as the embodiment of "good," the "bad" characters tend to be too broadly drawn altogether. When one council member in the Magisterium's leadership is shown to have a daemon in snake form slithering through his hands, one can't help but feel the filmmakers have put too fine a point on things.

The story Philip Pullman has written in his series of novels provides more than enough material with which a filmmaker may challenge viewers. And while Chris Weitz's *Golden Compass* does avoid in its best moments being a simple "good" against "evil" story, one hopes more challenging material finds its way into the sequels, should they be made.

There is more than enough challenging material in the present work, however, to have drawn the wrath of the religious right.

The Golden Compass has come under sharp attack from a number of Christian fundamentalist groups. Leading the way in the fight against the film is William Donohue, president of the right-wing Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Donohue has called for a boycott of the film, saying that while the film's "anti-religious" message is tame in comparison to the book on which it is based, the film may nevertheless serve to encourage the interest of children in the Pullman books, causing "unsuspecting Christian parents" to buy them. And for Donohue, this is something that cannot be countenanced. The spontaneous enthusiasm for a work of art by children and young teenagers is something very dangerous to such figures. An interest in the arts is not to be encouraged, but restricted.

Dr. Ted Baehner, a founder of the Christian Film & Television Commission, in his comments on the work, goes so far as to defend the villainous Marisa Coulter against Lyra, saying the movie "creates [in Lyra] a heroine who is selfish, willful and stubborn to such a degree that she does not express love, kindness, joy, peace or any of those other wonderful virtues that make us put others before ourselves." In fact, this is not true. The Lyra character is compassionate, self-sacrificing, and brave. What Baehner calls "lying" are the young girl's attempts to outwit those who would do her harm. In one scene, she tricks the brutal king of the "ice bears" who claimed his throne after poisoning the true king then defeating his rightful heir in battle. Lyra "lies" to this king only to save her own life and the life of a friend.

After providing a further warning that *The Golden Compass* "will plant hateful scripts of behavior in the minds of susceptible youths," Dr. Baehner suggests that parents "avoid

'The Golden Compass' if you don't want to turn your children into spoiled brats who want to kill their parents like Lyra." This last comment about Lyra's desire to kill her parents (she has no such desire) is a twisted take on a scene in which Lyra must defend herself against her brutal mother who is in league with the Magisterium. Baehner's comments are foul and dishonest.

Adam R. Holz, in an insipid criticism of the film and Pullman's books written for *Plugged In Online*, the magazine run by James Dobson's Focus On The Family, calls the *His Dark Materials* series "diabolical" and says that besides being "an attempted refutation of the Christian faith," "other messages woven into this story exalt witchcraft, evolution, divination, homosexuality and premarital sex. Accompanying them are smoking, drinking, occasional mild profanity and moments of visceral violence."

Holz also quotes favorably from comments on Pullman's books from *Beliefnet.com*. Rod Dreher, in those brief remarks, says the following: "If you believe in God, and that the loss of God is the worst thing that can happen to a person, then you would sooner give your child a rattlesnake to play with than expose him or her at an early age to the work of a man who openly says he wishes to destroy God in the minds of his audience." There's something thoroughly debased in comments such as these.

When a positive review of *The Golden Compass* found its way into the web pages of the *Catholic News Service*, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, in an act of censorship worthy of Pullman's Magisterium, ordered the review removed from the site. It was promptly taken down.

Ultimately, what one finds in *The Golden Compass*, whatever its limitations, is a healthy attitude towards imagination, scientific discovery and experience. In other words, an orientation towards life. There is an openness in this work that the film's reactionary critics simply cannot tolerate.



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