

BOOKNOTES

TEACHERS GUIDE

in the classroom

Each of the novels in Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy offers an exciting adventure that takes readers, young and old, on a journey through different dimensions to unknown worlds. The electrifying plots and unusual and mysterious characters make these novels excellent choices for reading aloud.

Themes of *good vs. evil*, *betrayal*, *courage*, *fear*, *trust*, and *love* raise important questions, offering students a wonderful opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue. This guide offers questions for discussion and includes activities that connect the language arts, social studies, science, music, and art curriculum.

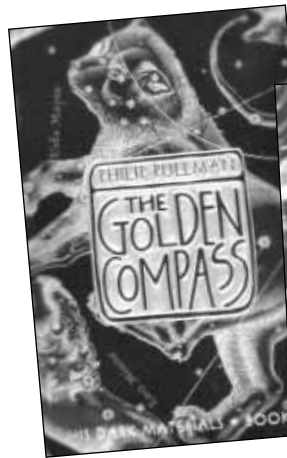
about the books

Philip Pullman's intriguing and haunting trilogy sends fantasy lovers on an incredible journey through other worlds where they meet mysterious creatures and a brave and extraordinary 12-year-old girl, Lyra Belacqua, who has the power to seek truth.

In *The Golden Compass*, young Lyra Belacqua journeys to the far North to save her best friend and other kidnapped children from terrible experiments by evil scientists.

The Subtle Knife takes Lyra to Cittagàzze, where she meets Will Parry, a fugitive boy from our own universe who becomes her ally and friend. On their journey from world to world, Lyra and Will's lives become forever intertwined as they uncover a deadly secret.

HIS DARK MATERIALS TRILOGY Philip Pullman



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thematic connections

**Betrayal • Good vs. Evil
Courage • Fear
Trust • Love
Grades 7 up**

And finally, in *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra and Will, with the help of two tiny Gallivespian spies and Iorek Byrnison, the armored bear, set out to a world where no other living soul has ever gone, to make their most haunting discovery yet.

pre-reading activity

Religion plays an important part in many works of fantasy, which often include themes of good versus evil and characters searching to understand the basic foundations of their faiths. Ask students to use the Bible, a storybook, or an encyclopedia to read about the Garden of Eden and the fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2, 3). Have students discuss original sin, why God forbade Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and how Adam and Eve's lives changed once they gained knowledge.

thematic connections

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Betrayal—Ask the class to look up the various meanings of the word betrayal. How does Lyra betray Roger in *The Golden Compass*? Discuss whether she was aware that she was betraying him. How does she try to rectify this betrayal? What is Lyra's great betrayal in *The Amber Spyglass*? How do Lyra's mother and father betray her—and then protect her? Discuss how Lyra deals with these betrayals.

Good vs. Evil—The trilogy challenges our assumptions about good and evil: some witches are good, while some members of the church are evil. What are other examples of unexpected forms of good and evil in the trilogy? At the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, what do Will and Lyra learn about good and evil, about actions versus labels? How will this affect the way they will live the rest of their lives?

Courage—Have students trace Lyra's courage as she travels from one dimension to another. At what point does she almost lose her courage? How does Will show courage in *The Subtle Knife*? Discuss how Lyra and Will help one another sustain their courage throughout their quests in *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*.

Engage the class in a discussion about whether having possession of the alethiometer and the subtle knife either gives Lyra and Will courage or threatens it. How does it take courage to leave one another and return to their own worlds at the end of the trilogy?

Fear—At the end of *The Golden Compass*, Lyra is afraid of her father, yet admires him. Why does he evoke fear in her? How can she be afraid and admire him at the same time? How is fear the basis of Will's mother's illness? Discuss how fear is related to courage. Engage the class in a discussion about how Lyra and Will's fears contribute to their courage as they face the evil forces.

Trust—In *The Subtle Knife*, Will accidentally kills an intruder who wants his father's personal documents and then labels himself a murderer. Why does this enable Lyra to trust him? Which characters do Serafina Pekkala and Lee Scoresby decide to trust? Is their trust warranted? Who are the characters that Lyra once trusted, but in the end finds that she cannot? In what other way does trust play an important role in Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy?

Love—In *The Amber Spyglass*, Will says to Serafina, "Thank you, Serafina Pekkala, for rescuing us at the belvedere and for everything else. Please be kind to Lyra for as long as she lives. I love her more than anyone has ever been loved." (p. 509) Trace the development of Will and Lyra's love for one another from the time they first meet in *The Subtle Knife* until they part in *The Amber Spyglass*. How does their love affect the fate of the living—and the dead? How does Lyra's adventure help her to discover a new meaning of love?

connecting to the curriculum

Language Arts—*The Golden Compass* has been described as a heroic novel. Ask students to identify the qualities of a hero. Who are the heroes in Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy? Have students select a hero from one of the novels and write a poem about that hero. Encourage students to share their poems in class.

It is quite common for writers of fantasy to create their own vocabularies. Vocabulary, including the names of characters, is often symbolic of the underlying themes and messages of the story. Make a glossary for Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy that represents the unique vocabulary he created.

Social Studies—At the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, Will and Mary return to their world and Will accompanies Mary to her flat. Mary explains to Serafina that she can't just give Will a permanent home because in her world you must follow rules and regulations regarding keeping children. Find out today's rules regarding foster care. What is the purpose of foster care? Discuss whether Will would qualify for foster care. Would Mary qualify as a foster mother?

Art—Masks have been used through the ages to represent animals, monsters, supernatural spirits, dream creatures, etc. Ask students to think about which animal would most likely be their dæmon and create a mask to represent that animal. Allow students time to share their masks and to explain why they chose that particular animal as their dæmon.

Science/Health—Mary says that Will's mother sounds like a "classic manic-depressive." Ask students to research the symptoms and characteristics of manic-depression or bipolar disorder. How is it different from other types of depression? From anxiety? Research the treatments for various types of depression. What type of treatment is Will's mother likely to need?

Science—In Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy, Lyra has the alethiometer, Will has the knife, and Dr. Malone has the spyglass to aid them in their quests. Though these items are fictitious, scientists have

always used tools and instruments to conduct investigations. Have students research the type of instruments used through the ages and construct a time line that reveals their development. What instruments do scientists use today?

Music—Music plays an important role in modern fantasy and science fiction films. Play music from films such as *Star Wars* and ask students to analyze the music as it applies to plot development. How is music an important link in communicating story? Divide students into three groups and assign each a novel in the trilogy. Instruct them to locate music that would be appropriate for a film of their assigned novel. Allow time to share the selections.



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about the author

Philip Pullman is the highly acclaimed and popular author of novels—from contemporary fiction to Victorian thrillers—plays, and picture books for readers of all ages. He received his degree in English from Oxford University and has taught middle school English for many years. *The Golden Compass*, the first of Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy, won the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Fiction Prize, and is considered one of the best juvenile fantasy novels of the past 20 years. *The Amber Spyglass*, the trilogy's astonishing finale, was the first children's book in history to win the Whitbread Book of the Year Award. It was also nominated for the Booker Prize. Mr. Pullman lives with his family in England.

one step beyond

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OF PHILIP PULLMAN'S HIS DARK MATERIALS TRILOGY

The Golden Compass

The author tells us that *The Golden Compass* takes place “in a universe like ours, but different in many ways.”

How do you think Lyra’s universe relates to ours?

Why do you think Lyra is described as an unimaginative child? Why would imagination be dangerous to her? How would it affect her understanding of the alethiometer?

What do you think is the author’s purpose in inventing—and exploring—the world of the armored bear?

Are Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter in collusion or are they fighting each other? How and in what way?

The Subtle Knife

How has Will learned to make himself unnoticed by others? Relate this to the witches’ ability to make themselves invisible.

How are the Shadows that communicate with Lyra through the computer related to Dark Matter (Dust)?

If Lyra can understand the Shadows as she understands the alethiometer, is the computer also acting as a truth-giving device? What is the real origin of the Shadows’ messages?

Giacomo Paradisi tells Will the rules for bearing the subtle knife. (p. 188) Why do you think Will must “never open without closing”? What did Paradisi mean by a “base purpose”? Compare these formal guidelines to the instinctive rules Lyra obeys when using the alethiometer.

In what way can a knife that divides pathways between worlds—and can sever bone, rock, and steel—be called “subtle”?

The Amber Spyglass

Dust, Dark Matter, and Sraf are three different names for the same material. How do these names reflect the different worlds they come from? What kinds of attitudes and feelings does each society have about this material?

Discuss whether Mrs. Coulter is aware that her influence on Will is capable of breaking the knife. What are the connections between Mrs. Coulter and Will’s mother?

Mrs. Coulter goes through a dramatic transformation as her maternal feelings for Lyra break through to the surface. What do you think is the catalyst for this change?

Discuss the significance of human *dæmons* taking an animal form. Do you think a Mulefa *dæmon* would take an animal or human form? What does this mean about the nature of *dæmons*?

By the end of the novel, what similarities can you see between Lyra and Mrs. Coulter? How is Lyra’s story-telling different from Mrs. Coulter’s lying?

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