

Stories to live by: The fantasy worlds of Pullman and Lewis

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [January 15, 2008](#) issue

The release of the film version of Philip Pullman's novel *The Golden Compass* has reinvigorated the controversy over his trilogy, *His Dark Materials*. Proclaimed "worthy of the bonfire" when first published, Pullman's books have evoked from some Christians the kind of response that one might expect from the church as described in the trilogy itself. Pullman also has Christian defenders, however, most notably Catholic theologian Donna Freitas, who makes an interesting case for him as a liberation theologian manqué in *Killing the Imposter God*. It is a false god who dies in *His Dark Materials*, Freitas argues, and Dust, the mysterious substance at the heart of Pullman's story, is the real divine presence in the world.

Whether or not he understands himself as a theologian, Pullman acknowledges that he wanted to provoke a theological argument with his trilogy, most notably with C. S. Lewis and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which he sees as shot through with a theologically derived disdain for embodied life.

For all their much-discussed differences, however, Pullman and Lewis give us remarkably similar visions of what they desire for children: that they be, in the words of both authors, "alive and awake" to themselves and to the world. In *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory and Polly describe the experience of being close to Aslan as being more "alive and awake" than they had ever been before. In Pullman's *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra resists when her mother attempts to drug her into a permanent state of dreaming innocence. "I'm just trying to wake up," she says to a friend in a dream. "I'm so afraid of sleeping all my life and then dying—I want to wake up first! I wouldn't care if it was just for an hour, as long as I was properly alive and awake."

In both series, being alive and awake is what is most at risk from malevolent forces. In Narnia, those who are not alive and awake risk having their appetites manipulated (think of the White Witch seducing Edmund with Turkish Delight in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*) and their dearest beliefs used against them (as when the

Ape uses the desire of Narnians for the return of Aslan to pave the way for their enslavement). In Pullman's worlds, evil forces seek to put consciousness itself to sleep, leaving indifference in their wake. Mrs. Coulter and her minions use a special guillotine to sever children from their daemons—their souls, externalized in the form of animals—leaving the children neither alive nor dead. Ghostlike specters feed on “a conscious and informed interest in the world,” leaving their victims “alive but not alive,” “indifferent to everything.” Torture renders the experience of being alive and awake unbearable, reduced to pain alone.

In Lewis's novels, children's capacity to be alive and awake is cultivated through the reading, a practice that the children in the Narnia books rely on to interpret and respond to the world. In *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory tells cruel Uncle Andrew that he won't win in the end because characters like him never do in stories. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Peter, Lucy and Susan follow a bird through a forest, because birds in fairy tales are always trustworthy. In *Prince Caspian*, Edmund knows how to survive in the woods because of the tales of knights-errant that he's read. And in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace doesn't even know a dragon when he sees one, nor does he know how to tell a story straight, because he hasn't read any of the right books.

The hermeneutical capacity that the children in Lewis's novels cultivate through their reading shapes their ability to act and allows them to face progressively more difficult choices, on the basis of more and more complex tasks of interpretation. In *The Silver Chair*, Jill, Eustace and Puddleglum the Marsh-wiggle are trapped in the underground kingdom of a queen who uses a narcotic powder and a hypnotic mandolin to lull them into believing that the world above ground does not exist. “There is no Narnia, no Overworld, no sky, no sun, no Aslan,” the evil queen tells them. Like Lyra struggling against Mrs. Coulter's sleep potion, they try to resist the sweet smell of the powder, the hum of the mandolin and the convincing tone of the queen, but only when Puddleglum sticks his foot into the fire, replacing the smell of the witch's powder with the acrid smell of burnt Marsh-wiggle, do the drugged and hypnotized heroes fully wake up.

Puddleglum's speech epitomizes Lewis's desire for his readers to learn what it feels like to sustain belief when all the evidence of their senses argues the opposite.

Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. . . . Then all I can say is that . . . the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. . . . I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia.

The capacity to live “as if” makes resistance to manipulation and cruelty possible in Lewis's books and in Pullman's as well. “I think we should read books, and tell children stories . . . as if it would make a difference,” Pullman has said. “We should act as if life were going to win.”

For Lewis, reading is the mark of a moral imagination that is alive and awake; for Pullman storytelling is. Only those who are alive and awake can tell stories. Lyra describes the blankness she encounters in adults who have been severed from their daemons as the lack of an ability to tell a story. Without a daemon to help cultivate an inner dialogue, storytelling becomes impossible.

Storytelling itself is easy for Pullman's Lyra—she has navigated her way through many dangers by telling great whopping lies which have honed her capacity for storytelling, although not for truth-telling. She cultivates truthfulness through reading the alethiometer, a truth-telling instrument that requires the reader to hold many possible meanings in her mind at once without, as Pullman says, following Keats, “any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

The scenes in which Lyra reads the alethiometer are more didactic than any description of a practice in the Narnia books and offer something close to instruction in the meditative practices through which interior life—and even religious life—is cultivated. Lyra relaxes into a state of profound concentration; she watches the needles of the alethiometer swing from image to image, gathering up meanings as they go. She lowers herself along “the long chains of meaning to the level where the truth lay,” and then she moves outward again. Lyra focuses her mind into a state of profound attention until meaning emerges, then unspools that focus in order to explain what she has learned, to tell a story that is true.

This movement into herself and out again enables Lyra to tell stories that have eternal importance. Lyra enters the world of the dead in order to rescue a friend and ends up liberating all the dead who ever were. They are trapped in a prison camp (heaven and hell having been lies all along) presided over by harpies hungry for

stories of the world above ground. Lyra negotiates with the harpies to allow the dead safe passage out in exchange for true stories. But as she leads a seemingly endless procession of the dead toward the world above ground, she and her companions, like Puddleglum in the queen's underground kingdom, must struggle against despair and fear to hold that world in mind. When the dead finally stumble out into the starry night, they murmur about the goodness of stories before "becoming part of the earth and the dew and the night breeze."

Lyra makes one more journey inward before the series ends, but without the alethiometer to guide her. In response to the distaste for the awakening of the sexual self that Pullman finds in the Narnia books, he offers a scene in which a trusted adult shares the story of her sexual awakening with Lyra. "As Mary spoke," Pullman writes, "Lyra felt . . . as if she had been handed the key to a great house she hadn't known was there, a house that was somehow inside her, and as she turned the key, she felt other doors opening deep in the darkness, and lights coming on."

There is a great hope for children, and for all of us, at the heart of this passage: that the exploration of the hidden rooms inside us will have everything to do with our embodied life in the world. That the more interior doors we open, the more we will know others as also full of deeply hidden places. That when we are alive and awake to the mystery of ourselves and others, the greater will be our desire to act with compassion and courage in response to stories that are not our own.