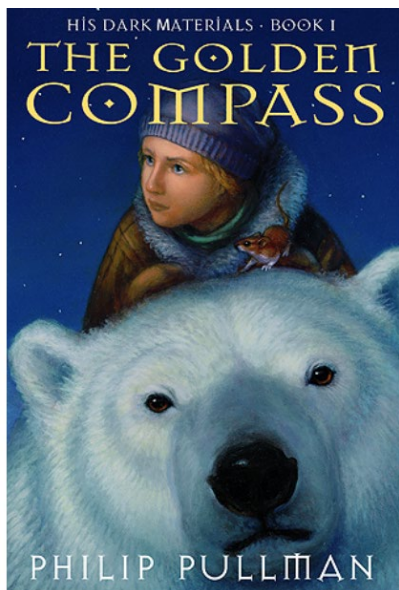


**BOOK
CLUB**



Discussion Guide for
The Golden Compass by
Philip Pullman

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sir Philip Nicholas Outram Pullman was born in Norwich in 1946. His father, Alfred Pullman, was a Royal Air Force pilot and the family traveled and lived all over the world. In 1954, when Pullman was seven, his father, an RAF pilot, was killed in a plane crash in Kenya, being posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. As a boy, he saw his father as "a hero, steeped in glamour, killed in action defending his country." Pullman's mother remarried the next year and the family settled in North Wales.

When Philip was 12 or 13 he heard older students reciting T. S. Eliot's. Pullman recalls, "It intoxicated me. That was one of the moments I realized poetry was going to be very important to me. It had a physical effect on me." Poetry taught him that words have "weight and colour and taste and shape as well as meaning." A few years later, Pullman discovered John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which would become a major influence on **His Dark Materials**.

As a teenager, he discovered Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*. "This 1960 anthology burst into my life when I was 16 and changed the course of everything for me. Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' was part of it; I had no idea poetry could do anything like that." Ginsberg led him to William Blake: "My mind and my body reacted to certain lines from the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*...I didn't have to work anything out. I knew they were true in the way I knew that I was alive."

He received his secondary education at Ysgol Ardudwy, Harlech, and then went to Exeter College, Oxford, to read English. At the age of 25, Philip began teaching at various Middle Schools before moving to Westminster. He is passionate about education, although claims that his "views on education are eccentric and unimportant."

Philip's first novel was published in 1972, *The Haunted Storm*. Pullman later distanced himself from the work, saying "it was published by a publisher who didn't realize it wasn't a very good book" and as of 2016 he omits it from his listed works.

Pullman is most well-known work is the trilogy **His Dark Materials**, beginning with *The Golden Compass* (originally published in the UK under the title *Northern Lights*) in 1995, continuing with *The Subtle Knife* in 1997, and concluding with *The Amber Spyglass* in 2000. These books have been honored with many awards including the Whitbread Book of the Year Award which was the first time in the history of that prize that it was given to a children's book. In 2003, **His Dark Materials** ranked third in the BBC's The Big Read, a poll of 200 top novels voted by the British public.

In 2017, Pullman started a companion trilogy to **His Dark Materials**, *The Book of Dust*. As of 2025, the books in the two trilogies plus related short stories have sold more than 49 million copies.

Pullman was knighted in the 2019 New Year Honours for services to literature.

SYNOPSIS

The first book in Phillip Pullman's epic trilogy **His Dark Materials** tells the story of a young girl named Lyra and her dæmon Pantalaimon. The two live in a mystical universe where children have dæmons, animal-like creatures that are physical manifestations of the child's inner self. Dæmons can also assume any shape, real or imaginary until sometime during the child's maturity when their dæmon "settles" into a final form that is the final true representation of the child's character. The story unfolds at Lyra's residence with her currently absent uncle Lord Asriel who is a scholar at Oxford. Lyra is swept into an adventure after her best-friend, Roger, is kidnapped by someone in the Magisterium that she believes is conducting experiments on children and their dæmons.

THEMES

The story can be read as a work of fantasy adventure or as a work with deep meaning about truth, the human soul, and how social structures such as religion shape our existence.

The Golden Compass follows 11-year-old Lyra. Having the main protagonist be a child, we see the world through her eyes. She innocently thinks that she will be able to embark on an adventure and save her friend. Through her actions, the author explores themes of innocence and childhood. Lyra is "good" even though she is a naughty child and often lies. Lyra's behavior is juxtaposed with the Mrs. Coulter's behavior; she also lies but also has malicious intent exploring the nature of truth and lies and good and evil.

The Golden Compass is extremely concerned with what it means to be alive and what it means to have a soul. Within the world of the novel, a dæmon is a physical manifestation of a person's soul. In Lyra's reality, humans and witches are the only creatures to dæmons and a human without a dæmon is unimaginable and disgusting. There are other sentient creatures, like the Bears, but they don't have dæmon.

The Golden Compass introduces the reader to a world in which the Magisterium—a version of the Catholic Church—rules nearly everything. This questions how much control religion and politics should have on society and individuals. In Lyra's case, this question is explored by simply discovering how much of the world the church actually controls.

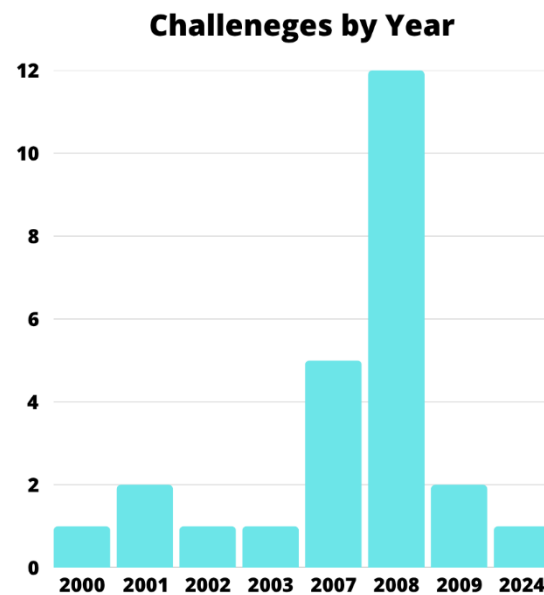
CHALLENGE & BANNING HISTORY

His Dark Materials series by Philip Pullman is listed as the #8 most frequently challenged book in the US from 2000-2009.

Parents and clergy were often the challengers of these books. Challengers frequently expressed that they believed the book to be anti-god.

ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom has documented 25 attempts to censor Philip Pullman's *Golden Compass* in U.S. libraries.

- Challenges took place in: CO, IA, KS, KY, LA, MD, MI, MS, MT, OR, PA, TX, UT, WA, and **WI**.
- It was challenged as part of school curricula or classroom libraries 14 times, in school library collections 9 times, at a public library 1 time, and at an academic library 1 time.
- It was challenged by parents 14 times, by pressure groups and decision makers (such as administrators and elected officials) 8 times, by library users 2 times, and once by an unknown party.
- We have documented 1 instance in which it was removed from a school library collection, 1 in which it was removed from a classroom library, and 1 in which it was removed from a school's curriculum.
- Those challenging it believed the book should be censored due to: religious viewpoint (19 times), occult/satanic content (4 times), and violent content (3 times). Note that these do not add up to 25 as the initiator of a censorship attempt may provide more than one reason.
- The data is compiled from confidential reports made to ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom, media accounts, and public records. Most censorship attempts go unreported. A censorship attempt may result in access to an item being retained, restricted, or revoked at the institution where the challenge took place.
- In December 2007, the Catholic League, a Roman Catholic anti-defamation organization in the U.S., urged parents to boycott a movie version of the book.
- Also in 2007, the book was banned at St. John Neumann Middle and Lourdes High School in **Oshkosh, WI** because of concerns about what critics call its "anti-Christian message."



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. 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?
2. Do you like Lyra? What parts of her personality made her a difficult character to like?
3. Philip Pullman says that it is vital that stories are 'psychologically true.' How well do you think Pullman has met his own criterion? What aspects of the story are/are not psychologically true?
4. Discuss times that Lyra and Pantalaimon argue. Who was "right"?
5. Why does Lyra lie so often? What circumstances prompt her to tell the truth?
6. Discuss the dæmons. What do dæmons tell about the person they are attached to? Do you think it's significant that they are called "demons"?
7. What kind of a man is Lord Asriel? How did your feelings about him change during the book?
8. What do you think motivates Mrs. Coulter? Why does she have such a powerful effect on everybody around her?
9. Why can't bears be tricked?
10. What is the nature of the tension and conflict between Iorek Byrnison and Iofur Raknison? What do you think Philip Pullman is trying to convey?
11. How did you feel about the way the Church was presented in the story? How does the Church compare with the Gyptians and with the witches?
12. What values do the Gyptians and witches represent?
13. Human knowledge and experience are made physical in *Dust*. What other psychological, intellectual, or spiritual activities does the author make physical?
14. In chapter 15, Pullman writes "It wasn't Lyra's way to brood; she was a sanguine and practical child, and besides, she wasn't imaginative." Do you agree?
15. In what ways is gender a significant or stratifying element in the novel? Why do you think all witches are female? Why does Lyra laugh at the idea of a female scholar? Why are dæmons usually the opposite gender of their human counterparts? Is the fact that Lyra is a girl-child relevant to the themes of the story?
16. How does gender influence Mrs. Coulter's trajectory? How does she hold power while maintaining her femininity?
17. Curiously absent from *The Golden Compass* are four words that are prevalent in most fantasy adventures: right, wrong, good, and evil. Why did the author omit these words?
18. Philip Pullman says: 'All stories teach, whether the storyteller intends them to or not. They teach the world we create. They teach the morality we live by' (Carnegie Medal acceptance speech). What does this story teach?