

THE WORLD
OF THE
GOLDEN COMPASS

THE OTHERWORLDLY RIDE CONTINUES



Edited by Scott Westerfeld

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INTRODUCTION

HIS DARK MATERIALS AND THE IDEA OF NORTH

Here's a secret about us writers:

Many of us dread the question, "Where do you get your ideas?"

It's just too complicated to answer, and at the same time too simple—both silly and sublime. I've probably been asked it a thousand times, and yet I still don't have a real response.

Phillip Pullman has also admitted difficulty with the question. Not only with answering it, but with why anyone would ask. As he puts it: "I can't believe that everyone isn't having ideas all the time."

Now *that* answer makes sense, at least in Pullman's case. He's got more ideas than most of us.

As this anthology began to take shape, one complaint became constant among the contributors: Pullman had provided them with an embarrassment of riches. Or perhaps a *confusion* of riches. His Dark Materials simply contained too many ideas. There were talking bears to be wrangled, poetic allusions to analyze, and a canvas that stretched across "ten million other worlds . . . as close as a heartbeat" (*TGC* 164-165). And on top of that, the characters' souls were flitting around outside their bodies. Where was the humble essayist to start?

As Maureen Johnson fumes within these pages: "His Dark Materials is a kind of symbol scrap yard. . . . There are even symbols imprinted on symbols (the golden compass itself)." And just as with the alethiometer, the symbols are layered with meanings that change every time the needle stops.

Luckily, our intrepid essayists weren't dissuaded by this multitude of ideas. As you will read, they've plunged into the scrap yard boldly and with scintillating results. But perhaps it should be unsurprising that even when the needle stops in the same place, the answers change. For example, our three essays about *dæmons* conclude that:

- 1) We might one day have our own *dæmons* to talk to.
- 2) We wouldn't really *want* to have *dæmons* if we could.
- 3) We *already* have *dæmons* here in our own world.

It's up to you to decide who makes the strongest case, or to conclude that these contradictory claims can somehow coexist, all as close as a heartbeat.

As the essays rolled in, here's a question I started to ask myself:

If *His Dark Materials* lends itself to so many interpretations, how does it all hang together as one novel? Why doesn't the story just fly apart under the weight of its many, many ideas?

Well, I have my own personal theory about that, which I'll give you now, before I throw you into the scrap yard.

For me it all starts in the arctic, with the idea of North.

First, you need a little history.

Back in the early 1800s, here in our non-fictional world, the globe was getting warmer. A centuries-long period called the Little Ice Age was ending, ancient icebergs breaking up. With the sea lanes clearing in the far north, a new age of arctic exploration was about to begin.

It wasn't just scientific societies and scholars who found this new age exciting. In Victorian England, crowds waited in line for hours to see arctic cycloramas (huge painted landscapes that wrapped around the viewer, an early form of virtual reality). Expeditions were followed closely by newspapers and explorers feted as heroes on their safe return. Adventure novels set in the far north were immensely popular. Following this vogue, even Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1817) heads north in the end, with the tragic monster disappearing across the glaciers toward the pole.

So what was so fascinating about a bunch of ice?

For one thing, the environmental extremes in the far north seemed to create a kind of magic. Explorers saw apparitions in the arctic sky, ghostly projections of floating mountains and cities. We know now that these visions weren't really magic, they were just ice crystals suspended in the air. The floating icy layer acted as a reflective surface, mirroring islands that were still over the horizon. But for a long time sailors believed their ships had actually gone *inside* the Earth, discovering another upside-down world inside our own. (Imagine yourself on the inside of a balloon, looking "up" at the other side!)

And floating cities weren't the only tricks the arctic played. Even the

sailor's trusty compass can turn traitor in the arctic. The Earth's magnetic poles don't match up with the geographic ones, alas. So as explorers pushed farther and farther north, they found their compass needles pointing in strange directions, even swinging in lazy, uncertain circles. The simple notions of north, south, east, and west were suddenly up for interpretation. . . .

And then there's meteoric iron, the kind favored by armored bears.

About 10,000 years ago, five giant meteorites fell in Greenland. They were eventually discovered by ancient arctic dwellers, who harvested iron from them, creating metal tools that revolutionized their stone-age culture. By the time European explorers arrived, this magical sky-metal had become the ultimate status symbol in arctic culture, linking a huge community in trade.

And the iron to be found in the far north wasn't just in meteors. In the 1870s, an explorer named Nils Nordenskjöld became obsessed with "cosmic dust." He discovered an almost-invisible layer of iron falling from space onto the arctic snows, and theorized that this cosmic rain played an important role in the formation of our globe. He wasn't totally crazy. These days, many scientists believe that the building blocks of life on our planet were brought here by meteors—intelligence arising from so much cosmic dust (NASA).

So let's review: cosmic dust, meteoric iron, needles swinging lazily on compasses, and floating cities that augur hidden worlds. Does any of this sound familiar?

This can't all be a coincidence, can it?

In *The Golden Compass* our first glimpse of the arctic comes near the start, during Lord Asriel's slide show at Oxford. He shows the Scholars (and Lyra, hidden in the wardrobe) a photograph of a floating city, just like those glimpsed by sailors two centuries ago in our world.

Intriguingly, this second chapter of *TGC* is entitled "The Idea of North." And perhaps that's a clue to how Pullman's symbol scrap yard all hangs together. He's taken arctic mysteries that modern-day science has explained away—cosmic dust, meteoric iron, floating cities, even wobbling compass needles—and reinvigorated them with wonder.

In Pullman's world, the floating city in the slide show is no illusion; by the end of the book, Lyra is stepping across onto its streets. It's an old "idea of North" made real again.

Of course, that's just my reading, partly formed out of my own obsession with the arctic. And it doesn't explain witches, anbaric lights, the Oblation Board, and Magisterium, or those all-important dæmons. But my theory does hint at answers to that classic question: where ideas come from. Pullman makes his fictional world from out-of-date pieces of the real one. His symbols hold together because they all lived together in the past of our own world, before scientific explanations made floating cities and iron from the sky mundane.

Within these pages you will find more answers to that question we started with, explanations for those witches, anbaric lights, and dæmons—*lots* of talk about dæmons, and the Magisterium, too, I promise. But this isn't a book of answers, really. It's a book of readings, full of signposts for your own journeys into the scrap yard of symbols that is His Dark Materials. So don't look for simple answers here; any compass with a wandering needle remains open to interpretation.

As the early arctic explorers learned, true north becomes trickier the closer you get to it.

—SCOTT WESTERFELD

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