

## *Shedding Light on His Dark Materials*

### **Book Discussion Guide**

#### Introduction

What does Kurt Bruner find so compelling about Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials*? What does he find so disturbing about Pullman's novels?

On page xi, Philip Pullman describes the "religious impulse" he embraces as "the impulse to feel awe, wonder, a sense of mystery, a sense of delight in being alive, and in being a part of this great, extraordinary universe." How has the church celebrated those same attributes? How has the church kept them in check?

Pullman does have a moral center throughout his series. Do you think it was intentional or unavoidable? Why?

#### Other Worlds

In talking about fantasy, what do you think J. R. R. Tolkien meant when he said that fantasy "does not destroy or even insult Reason; . . . The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will make it" (see page 6)?

Children seem to have more imagination than adults. How might an adult enrich his or her spiritual imagination?

#### Daemons

What if you and I had daemon companions that clearly reflected who we were? If you had to choose an animal that reflected your personality traits the best, what animal would it be? Would having daemons be a help or a hindrance to modern-day relationships with other people?

Of all the definitions of daemons mentioned, does Pullman's decision to equate daemons with the human soul seem to reinforce his own search for spiritual meaning? How do daemons bridge the gap between a character's physical self and spiritual self?

Can a person change their identity without changing their station in life? What does the concept of an adult's daemon "settling" mean?

#### "I and Thou"

Why was the character Lyra so horrified when she discovered the "severed" child? How would you describe a severed person? Do you have any severed people in your life?

Discuss the theological concept that the universe revolves around a nucleus of *personality* and *relationship*. Explain how you and I live according to the principle of *plurality* within *unity*, individually and in the universal sense.

Do you think it's true that people need interaction with other people to be whole? Why do you

think God made us that way?

What do you think of Pullman's depiction of the Church as the severing agent in his fantasy world? Does it merely reflect Pullman's personal agenda or is there any truth hidden in it?

What severs us from God? What did God do to reconnect us to him? What does he want from us in return?

### Dust

Philip Pullman's description of Dust is drawn from a mixture of scientific, philosophical, and even some religious foundations. Do any of them seem more fitting for Pullman's storyline?

Baruch Spinoza's beliefs got him expelled from his synagogue. What was Spinoza claiming was the truth?

The authors suggest that Pullman creates "the impression in the readers that cutting-edge science frightens religious leaders because it undermines their outdated, church-imposed assumptions." Do you believe that is true today? Why or why not?

The philosophical term *metanarrative* means an overarching story that explains all of life. Christians believe in the metanarrative of God's redemptive love found in the Bible. Do you agree that Western man has abandoned metanarratives? What is Western man embracing instead? Why do think that is happening?

### Family

In essence, Lyra is an orphan. How does that affect her and shape her personality?

What things—positive or negative—did you learn from your parent(s) or any sibling(s)?

Why does it make sense that many people who grow up without a father or with an abusive father profess to be atheists?

Describing God as a loving father doesn't always translate to a person who never knew his or her father or, tragically, may have had an abusive father. Can you think of any way to break through that psychological barrier so the person can see God for the loving father he is?

### Will and Grace

Will is a self-reliant, self-made young man. Is there anyone in your life who fits that description? Have you discussed spiritual matters with that person? Has anything you said made an impression on him or her?

In your life, have you had a friend who extended grace to you? Describe the circumstances.

### Angels

Why do you think people find angels so fascinating? What do you personally believe about angels? Do you know anyone who believes they have had an encounter with an angel?

How do the angels in Pullman's trilogy correspond to scriptural angels? How are they different?

### The Authority

Reflecting on this chapter, the authors ask: "Why does God demand our worship? Why does He require our submission to His will rather than our own?" How would you answer those questions?

Have you ever struggled with God as the Authority in your life? Have you ever been so angry with God that you wished He didn't exist? What turned your thinking around?

Our culture today embraces the "we are all gods" mind-set. Discuss where that type of thinking leads.

### Magisterium

Not unlike Dan Brown's book *The Da Vinci Code*, Philip Pullman portrays the Church as the great villain in his trilogy. The witch Ruta Skadi wages war on the Church because "For all its history . . . it's tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. . . . every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling." Why has this antagonism against the Church grown? Is any of the antagonism justified?

Why did Pullman choose the word *Magisterium* as a synonym for Church? How does Pullman's idea of the Church differ from the biblical model?

Interestingly enough, throughout Pullman's books, one central biblical figure is barely mentioned. Who does Pullman write out of his stories? Why do you think Pullman did that?

In what ways did Jesus redefine the Church? How can today's followers of Jesus carry on what He established?

### Rebel to the Wrong

What biblical rebels to the wrong can you name? How do they differ from Lord Asriel in Pullman's series?

Have you ever been in the scenario George MacDonald describes: "Instead of automatically blaming a person who does not believe in God, we should first ask if his notion of God is a god that ought to be believed in"? How might that attitude change your approach when reaching out to non-Christian friends?

What is accurate in Philip Pullman's idea that the most admirable and valuable people in the world are "those who do good things; no matter what they believe or don't believe, no matter what they feel"? What is erroneous about his statement?

### Sorry Science

*Since the Fall, people have struggled to find the proper balance between innocence and experience (scientia). Can you give an example from your own life, or from society at large, that illustrates the tension between the two?*

*Know more. Be wiser. Grow stronger.* In today's culture, where do you hear those messages repeated?

What do you think the "subtle knife" represents in *His Dark Materials*?

Have you experienced a "you don't know what you've got till it's gone" moment? Explain.

### Silvertongue

What's the first lie that you remember telling? Did you feel guilty about it or relieved that you got away with it?

Why is lying so easy to do and telling the truth often so difficult?

Has anyone lied about you? Did you call the person on it? How did they respond?

### The Green Shoot

Why did Philip Pullman say that his character Marisa Coulter was "a challenge to write"? Why do you think he made her the most complicated character of all?

What caused "the little green shoot of love" to take root in Mrs. Coulter's heart?

Have you ever seen the life-changing power of love grow in someone considered unlovable? Describe what happened.

### Know Who It Is

When did the character Mary Malone's logic go awry in her life? How could this have been prevented?

Almost all "coming of age" stories today include the loss of sexual innocence. Why do you think that writers find that to be an easier story to write?

What would you say to a nonbeliever who says "God hates sex"?

### Eve

What is Philip Pullman's interpretation of the Fall? What does he think of original sin?

If there had been no tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden, how would everything in the world been changed?

Define "true freedom."

### The Missing Piece

Do you agree with the authors that *His Dark Materials* isn't that "dark" after all? Why is it

impossible for Philip Pullman to create a completely dark world?

Pullman has called himself a "Christian atheist." What do you think he means by that?

What positive aspects of being a father does Philip Pullman build into his characters?

In your own words, explain the statement "Without Him, the center cannot hold."