



A HANDFUL OF DUST

PHILIP PULLMAN'S *HIS DARK MATERIALS*

Lyra tells the story of a great battle between the forces of good and evil, both of whom are trying to respectively save and destroy a strange substance known simply as Dust. Dust, in this fictional universe, could be called a number of things - experience, self-knowledge, consciousness - and its defender is a pre-pubescent girl called Lyra.

Lyra is a girl who lives by her instincts - half wild, uncultured, fierce, loyal, and above all, hungry for experience. She befriends polar bears, fights witches, conducts her own fervent battles against the church and against her parents; the tyrants who wish to impose their own authoritarian knowledge on the world. For Lyra, Dust is as essential to survival as air and water - for how can a child grow into an adult without self-awareness, without learning how to process her experiences? In the story, Pullman cleverly subverts the most heinous of the Biblical myths - the Fall. Lyra comes to epitomise Eve, tempted by the fruits of knowledge, but recast here as a heroine for seeking to satisfy her hunger. Who wouldn't be tempted by the wonders of adult experience, the author asks us - sex, love, self-knowledge? Who wants to remain in the dark; innocent but unformed?

For the visionary poet and artist William Blake, to whose work Pullman admits a debt, childhood - innocence - was not a state of inexperience or ignorance but one of pure being; joyful, free and loving. All children are naturally creative - they learn by painting and singing and playing make believe, but somehow these instincts don't last... eventually we do fall, all of us. Children grow up, and at some point their natural inclination to self-expression gets cramped, censored and streamed. Talents are assessed, medals are won or lost, the desire to blend in becomes stronger than the desire to follow your own muse. We become ashamed, like Adam and Eve were, once they became aware of their nakedness, of expressing ourselves so freely. We lose that instinctive fearlessness that allows creative children to become creative adults, the same fearlessness that real artists need in order to put their creations out in the world and let them have a life of their own. But our current critical culture, with its emphasis on the alchemical process of turning ordinariness into talent via the conductor of celebrity, does nothing but grade, judge and reward those who guarantee higher ratings, greater circulation, more column inches. How is talent, in all its myriad forms, supposed to flourish in a world that encourages us to value celebrity above all else, and yet

ridicules us for believing that we are talented at something other than a flair for self promotion?

If Blake is right then our experience should allow us to sing and dance and write ourselves into existence, from children to adults. Sadly, this becomes ever harder. While arguably we have more opportunities for personal, sexual and financial freedom than ever, we are mired in the quicksand of materialism and its incessant demands for style over substance. How are humans supposed to explore the world and all its imaginative possibilities when we are led to believe that the terms of success are simply fame, youth, beauty and wealth? In this world, experience counts for nothing; in fact its marks are negative - wrinkles, loss of sex appeal, adding up to a sort of human obsolescence.

The truth is, there is no magical process that creates talent. There is no alchemy at work; for a talent to flourish it takes fearlessness, hard work, self-belief. Above all it depends on the ability to follow your creative instincts. In a sense, Lyra is the ultimate heroine for modern times, fighting to keep her own sense of possibility alive, to protect her path into womanhood from the adults who want to suffocate her need for individual self-expression. In the final volume of *His Dark Materials* Lyra reaches adolescence and wins her battle to keep Dust alive via an entirely new and precious experience - first love. Pullman beautifully captures its exquisite pain and joy, when surety in its perfection temporarily overcomes all other doubts and fears. What else is first love but a magical occurrence when childish innocence and adult experience finally melt together, producing enough golden Dust to light up an entire firmament?

Although in our own world Dust is just something to be swept up and thrown away, in Pullman's fictional universe it needs to be preserved at all costs. Experience is our fuel, our food, our palette and our toolbox to create the best from the raw materials we are born with. It is a talent in itself, if we can only learn how to use it properly, as Lyra does herself. Lyra's one own great childhood talent was lying, but by the end of her adventures she has realised that there are other more productive ways to use her imagination. She decides to dedicate her adult life to learning how to read the alethiometer - a rare instrument, something like a compass. It takes a lifetime to master, and can only be understood via the tools of perception, intuition and imagination. What does the alethiometer do? It tells the truth.