

Insight: Self understanding through stories of parallel worlds

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My research generally focuses on self understanding and understanding of others, through avenues such as racism, religious dialogue, personal agency and empowerment, self worth and ethical relationships. This is summarised in the word Insight, a term taken from psychology and psychotherapy for a person's awareness of their psyche, mental processes and potential, including their understanding of the consequences of behaviour. Insight therefore is self understanding, moral and ethical understanding: it leads to personal and social action.

The purpose of this paper is to consider whether and how fantasy for children and young people contributes to the readers' self-understanding. The fantasy is likely to contain an adventure with its own plot, characters and tensions. It will require a suspension of disbelief – the reader knows that the fantasy is not real, but reads as if it is. In the stories considered, the fantasy takes place in other worlds, through some kind of gateway (such as a wardrobe, window or door). In some, our real world has magical or fantasy events presented as real (described as magic realism). The very famous parallel worlds are found in Tolkein's *The Hobbit* and C.S. Lewis's Narnia stories, the first a tale of moral duty in the face of danger, the second a crusade to combat evil both in the world and in ourselves, and to fight for the rule of good.

The more recent stories considered in this paper are:

- Urn Burial, by Robert Westall, one of many supernaturalist plots by this writer
- The Abhorsen trilogy (Sabriel, Lirael, and Abhorsen) by Garth Nix, a tale of magic and necromancy
- His Dark Materials trilogy by Philip Pullman, involving many parallel worlds.

For the reader, this development of self understanding will be educational, the story helping to scaffold new knowledge understanding and development by presenting abstract ideas as concrete situations. For some readers, the process may be transformative – the book becoming a powerful agent for personal change. For some, the experience may be therapeutic, that is establishing a new understanding that destroys pathological thoughts (such as low self worth, self harming, or bullying). Such transformative relationships with books may be helped if the reader is encouraged to talk about issues in the stories they read. The adults around them, by being prepared to read and discuss the books children read, can for a child turn a superficial reading (focusing on plot and characters) to a deep reading interrogating issues. This may well develop an ability which will stay with the child for life.

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Robert Westall, *Urn Burial*

Westall wrote realism (*The Machine Gunners*, a second world war story) magic realism (*The Watch Tower*, *Scarecrows*), time slips (*Wind Eye*, a

time portal to the time of St Cuthbert) and psychological mysteries (*Gulf*, where a western boy exchanges personalities with an Iraqi boy fighting in the Gulf war). *Urn Burial* is different – a boy shepherd, Ralph, finds a sarcophagus in a cairn, in which he discovers a humanoid astronaut time traveller evolved from a cat just as we are evolved from apes. He accidentally wakes him out of stasis and explores his world deep inside the mountain. Both he and his girlfriend Ruby are 'repaired' in a health machine to be in perfect health and fitness. Humans are perceived as primitive, apes filled with aggression: Ralph is address as 'ape'. This aggression so upset the feline race that they considered using chemicals to make people as calm as sheep: but then shepp have never achieved anything anywhere in the universe.

Unfortunately the feline traveller's awakening comes to the attention of an intergalactic race evolved from dogs and a fight in spacecraft breaks out which causes local death and destruction. The canines are defeated, largely by a plot thought up by Ralph and any dead or injured are repaired and everyone's memories (except for Ruby and Ralph) are erased. The 'other' world is revealed as our world, albeit unseen by most of us. Ruby proposes to Ralph: a plaque, the only evidence of the underground base, suggests Ralph and Ruby to be the new Adam and Eve, the couple who promise a new start to humanity, a solemn lifelong task. The felines stress that human ape aggression should be channelled and transformed. People should be more than apes, and should work towards a better world and be achievers. We have to earn the title of 'human'. We (readers) should think seriously about our human creative potential and our life ambitions. We should have some humility in giving ourselves special status over animals: we have to rise above our simian natures and see potential in all life.

Garth Nix, *Sabriel*, *Lirael*, *Abhorsen* (teen) and *The Keys of the Kindgom Series* (8-12).

In the *Abhorsen* books, two girl necromancers save their world from immense evil. The parallel world lies behind a wall specially built to keep magic in and away from our normal world. Whereas our world works through atomic bonding, behind the wall everything is kept together through magic bonding, controlled in The Charter. There is 'free magic' also, not controlled within The Charter, but sometimes controlled in other ways. Keeping the world safe is the task on an elite, each with different skills, and requiring lifelong self-sacrifice and determination. The forces of destruction wish to destroy the charter and all things ordered and living.

The *Abhorsen* is a crucial civic responsibility to protect the world from evil and destruction. They inherit the power to journey into and out of death. *Sabriel*, as a young girl, is handed the job when her father dies. Her job is to return hostile and unruly dead spirits back into death with the help of her necromancer's bells. The *Abhorson* in waiting in book 2 is a shy young girl, who has been given the addition power of sight into the past, and needs for example to look back to see who her father is and the circumstances of her conception. All characters, including wall builders and women with 'Sight' (i.e. of possible futures) work together to save the world from annihilation.

These books present a picture of death as a journey through nine gates into deep death. The Abhorsens had to deal with evil necromancers doing the bidding of forces of destruction. Battles are violent and bloody. Magic is represented as real, albeit in the context of other worldly fantasy. The overall message is that life is a constant struggle against the forces of evil, destruction and annihilation. There is a force of negation, the psychologist Erich Fromm's 'necrophily, love of death, stemming from experience of and study of Hitler, Himmler and Stalin. There are people who prefer death to life, destruction to construction. It is up to good people to defeat them. We all have a role to play in fighting evil.

In a rather different series for younger children, still appearing, the negative forces of Nothing become a hostile paralysing force supported by monstrous troops. Once, there was a Will, a last will and testament, and a deliberate intention rolled into one. This cosmic will is negated by seekers after power. In the beginning the Architect constructed all universes out of Nothing. She had gone away and left everything to seven Trustees, each responsible for a single day and subject to her Will. However the Will was divided into seven and each part imprisoned across the universe. The Trustees assumed personal power over an ever inefficient celestial bureaucracy in "the House": this explains the current state of our world. Restoring the Architect's will provides the action for the books, through the recovery of seven keys. The boy hero, Arthur, an asthmatic new boy in school and close to death, is the reluctant heir to power. After his school burns down and everyone has a sleeping sickness (similar to what killed his own mother), Arthur has to save everyone. Nix presents strong female characters. Leaf is dynamic in our world, Suzy Torquoise Blue (a former 'victim' of the great plague in 1666) is a key support in "the House". This is a series about activism, the refusal to accept authority unchallenged, and the painstaking and painful responsibility to put our world and our universe right. We progress by trusting no one. We are not even sure if the Will of the Architect is good or bad, an absolute or an assertion of power. The Old One is perpetually punished for opposing the Architect. Arthur, by refusing the Will's command to execute Mr Monday, asserts his own independence by healing him instead in body and in mind.

The series affirms that the past is not a model for the future, but consists of tyrannies that must be resisted, and are not appropriate models for future civics and politics. We need new vision. The idealism of the concerned young hold the keys to future peace and harmony. Humans are the most creative of all the universe's species; therefore creative individuals are feared by authorities and bureaucrats as undermining. Their job is to keep the faith in spite of marginalisation, censorship, punishment and attempts to silence the truth. Nix uses time to evoke a mythic realm. How to cope with Now is important. Days, even seconds, are not to be wasted. Problems should be faced without procrastination. Each day should be valued for its creative potential. Tomorrow brings other concerns. Routine dulls creativity and affects our effectiveness, filling time with unhelpful tasks for no ultimate purpose.

Philip Pullman: His Dark Materials

In this trilogy, millions of worlds lie in the same space. Normally contact between them is impossible, but for the purpose of the story, contact between these worlds has become possible through a bridge established in book 1, and windows cut with a subtle knife, the title of book 2. These worlds are imagined, and this status quo is re-imposed at the end when the interconnections between worlds are closed again. We can in our imaginations walk, talk, meet people and have adventures: dreams have their own rules; in wakeful visualisations, our experience can seem real and even tactile. By looking in a certain way, keeping the real and imagined worlds in focus together, we can see things normally invisible; or to put it another way, we see deep hopes and relationships as real. An author visualised a character – a Harry Potter or a Mrs Coulter, in a similar way. They appear, as real.

For fatherless and friendless Will, visualising himself within this story helps him to come to terms with some deep rooted problems and builds a secure foundation for his later life, for which the word *bildungsroman* is used. It is the development of insight, understanding of himself, of his friendships and of his world. Will remembers her softness much later in his life [AS538]. Through the adventure, self reliance, trust, friendship, love and responsibility are developed. In physical terms, his problem over his mother's mental illness, and any other problems with the police, are sorted out as Mary Malone promises to become friend and carer.

In his first arrival in Cittagazze from our Oxford, the 'spectres of indifference' which debilitated adults had the same symptoms as his mother. He understood there was a physical cause, which could be prevented. Spectres (visualisations of guilt and anxiety) feasted on wisdom and left an empty shell without responsibility or spirit. Children are left to bring themselves up, to fend for themselves, to fight and to steal. People kill time rather than fill it. In his visualised adventure, the openings between worlds caused it (that is the confusion of reality with imagination and wisdom). The blame is laid at the door of science and technology for this confusion, since imagination, wisdom and decency is demoted to unverifiable superstition: "You think things have to be *possible*? Things have to be *true*" says Will [SK337]. This all began three hundred years ago with the first creation of the Royal Society (and equivalent creations in other worlds, the subtle knife and the alethiometer).

These openings also caused the loss of his father. Will meets his father, Dr Grumman the academic aka Jopari the shaman, twice in the visualisation: once as a shaman, killed in his presence by a jealous rejected witch-lover; and once in Hades. He is presented as the wisest figure in the story, especially during his journey with Lee Scoresby. Will sees the body, and converses with the spirit and can let him go into the aether of eternal bliss. He achieves personal autonomy at this point, being his own man, making his own values and being in control of his future choices. He starts friendless, secretive and suspicious, and finds both love (in Lyra), an adult friend (in Mary), and confident self expression. His very name, Will,

suggests that this is the growth of free will; Parry may suggest defence rather than attack.

For Will also there is a remodelling of his mental frameworks or paradigms. Such models are visual aids to help us understand our place in the world, our relationships and our responsibilities. Pullman says, 'Myths are significant and we need new myths for our own age'. Equally we need to demythologise traditional frameworks which hold us back. For example, traditional beliefs about gender, race and class are not appropriate for future development. For Pullman, some religious myths which imprison the spirit. As the witch Rita Skadi said, the cruelties and horrors committed in the name of religion (the Authority) are "all designed to destroy the joys and the truthfulness of life". [SK283]. As children our lives are shaped by what significant adults tell us is true. This 'authority' holds us back or helps us forwards, depending if it is helpful or harmful. We have to unpick our given myths to create real understanding, because even a once helpful myth can become harmful if it stagnates (for example if praise which once raised self esteem becomes the root of arrogance).

A dominant demythologisation in HDMs is that independent thought and action (free will) is disobedient and therefore sinful. The myth from Milton (and ultimately the Bible) of original sin dominates the trilogy and is dislodged only when The Authority (God, the Ancient of Days) is cast off his pedestal and crumbles into nothing. The old sinful Eve according to this paradigm is replaced with a new Eve (Lyra) who freely chooses Will as eternal soul mate in a relationship filled with love and not guilt. In Lyra's world where ideas take concrete form, this conceptual battle is presented as a real battle. The death of Authority brings the end of tyranny and disempowerment. The 'kingdom of heaven' can be replaced by a republic in which everyone works for the common good.

We need to take a closer look at Lyra, since the trilogy starts and ends with her. Will's visualisation has taken on a life of her own and her future is as important as Wills. In her world, the *experienced* world has a solid reality. Wisdom exists physically, not just conceptually, and a machine can measure it. The personality is a solid animal companion (or daimon). Magic consists of real forces. Myth represents real beings such as angels, witches and deities. Shamans have real powers, and 'seers' really see. All this has helped to broaden Will's mind about the meaning of truth, and some residual powers remain, albeit in the imagination, such as seeing one's daimon. Lyra's own development, if this is also her *bildungsroman*, is to be educated in interpreting truth (i.e. philosophy) using physical measurement instruments (the alethiometer). She was effectively motherless and fatherless (but even her mother had found redemption). The tyranny of her world was changed so that the serious quest for wisdom and progress had begun. It is her words with which we finish: we all need our whole lives to build the republic, the ideal society based on cooperation and goodness.

Insight comes from a mixture of knowledge, inspiration and imagination. We can still visualise in our imaginations, but should not confuse visualisations with reality, or image with physicality. The windows to other

worlds are closed, and we have to develop our own. In our world, angels, daimons, ghosts, spectres and horoscopes do not exist as physical reality; our pictures and stories about them may contain elements of truth at a deeper level. Even poetic inspiration does not come to us from outside, but comes from deep within. Readers, children or adults, need to be active citizens, self aware, partners in moral actions. We do this by being free independent thinkers, not tied down with unhelpful beliefs and superstitions. Nevertheless we should not be blind to the insights derived from the imagination. Science must not be allowed to be a flawed narrow-minded measurer of truth as only that which can be measured. We should, like Lyra, be trying to 'measure' (conceptually in our case) everything that contributes to our truth and reality. To be *rational* need not mean to be narrowly positivist.

In HDMs, one window remained open, the window out of Hades. Death is the one untamed mystery left for us to cope with. We cannot scientifically illuminate it, and imagination also fails us. The myth of Hades coexists with hope for everlasting bliss as our atoms join the eternal 'ocean' of matter, a *nirvana*, a philosophic myth. These are myths we still need: to compensate we have to work still harder at building our rational republic:

"And if you help everyone else in your worlds to do that [gaining wisdom through thinking, feeling and reflecting] by helping them to learn and understand about themselves and each other and the way everything works, and by showing them how to be kind instead of cruel, and patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all how to keep their minds open and free and curious...Then they will renew enough [Dust, or wisdom] to replace what is lost through one window. So there could be one left open"
[AS520]

Therefore, we are able to hope for eternal bliss only if we live and promulgate full ethical lives.

For young readers, recognizing and decoding myths is important. This extends far beyond religion. Our mythic role model for a successful person is more attached to money and celebrity than ethical action. In struggling with the myths of manliness and womanliness, young people suffer the Spectres of anxiety and depression concerning machismo and body shape. Their paradigm of (lack of) self worth leads to alienation, anger and aggression. Young people need to become critics of peer group and media assumptions and values and learn how to make their own way in life.

Conclusion

Urn Burial asks whether ape-people have potential, or will they always remain tribal and aggressive. Ralph and Ruby are presented as the first humans, the Adam and Eve, in the residual plaque left by the cat-people. This prompts a discussion about what it means to be human and what humans can achieve.

Garth Nix presents a story in which the main characters face extreme danger fighting for the common good. Life is a constant struggle between

good and evil, construction versus destruction. If we the ordinary people allow, destruction will consume us; but we all have diverse skills which we should use to support each other in this struggle.

His Dark Materials places the reader in the battle between corporate neurosis creating social pressure (the belief in sin and authority) until we are empowered with self-agency to spend our lives working towards the common good – the kingdom of heaven has become a republic. We have to spend our whole lives working creatively for social progress. Outside of the story, we can 'experience' other worlds and their fantastical inhabitants only in imagination. Through this we learn to 'see' meaning in intangible realities – the human soul; creative inspiration; love and relationship. By the end of the story, belief in eternal afterlife is presented as an anomaly. We cannot give death meaning but we can believe that death is affirming rather than punishment, that it is a time of unification of all matter. In order to keep this hope (in the story, to keep this window open), we have to work even harder to behave constructively and make sense of the rest of things.