



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

The Golden Compass

By Erik Goodwyn

Arising ironically during the Christmas holidays is the latest “big” fantasy production known as *the Golden Compass*, based upon the first book of Phillip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy. I say “ironic” because it has aroused a big stink among certain religious groups for being anti-Christian and pro-atheism, and all during the Christmas season. You know, it’s those same yahoos that complained about Harry Potter, and Dungeons and Dragons before that. Yeah, those guys. Never mind, of course, that the holiday known as “Christmas” was originally a Celtic pagan holiday celebrating the winter solstice, that we know virtually nothing about the actual birth date of Jesus (historical writings are notoriously contradictory on this account), and that the movie, in fact, appears less anti-Christian than anti-dogmatism... although... if you look carefully at the symbol that represents

the Magisterium, which is the organization that represents the villains in this story, you will see the vague semblance of a cross behind the big “M”. So I don’t know.

Anyway, so what? Is it a good movie? Like most fantasy, it has a mixed bag of detractors and die-hards. Notably, it was touted by Roger Ebert as “a darker, deeper fantasy epic than the ‘Rings’ trilogy, ‘the Chronicles of Narnia’ or the ‘Potter’ films.”

Um, I don’t think so. But it is still pretty darn good, and at least in the

same league as those films. Like the other fantasy epics mentioned, it has a great supporting cast, including honored Shakespearean Derek Jacobi, perennial deep-toned bad guy Christopher Lee, and a grizzled Sam Elliot playing the role he seems to have been born for, just to name a few. Stealing the show is the mighty Ian McKellen as the voice of Byrnison the troubled and noble bear warlord. Honorable mention goes to the surprise player Nicole Kidman, who is downright creepy as Magisterium luminary Marisa Coulter: one half Marilyn Monroe, one half daughter of Satan. You love to hate her, right down to her simian demon familiar. Because, you see, in the world of *the Golden Compass*, everyone has a “demon”, which is described in the prologue as the “soul”—unlike our world, where the soul lives within us, in this world, the soul wanders around outside of us. These souls are animals, shape changing in children, but settling upon a single animal form upon adulthood. These “demons”—used in what might be called the “pagan” meaning of the word, i.e. powerful nature spirit—help and guide us, and give us our life force, like the animistic versions of our Jungian unconscious shadow-selves. Pretty spiritual stuff for a fantasy criticized as being “atheistic”.

But never mind that charge, because it’s silly. The story isn’t at all about denying God, but rather celebrating the spirituality and free will within each of us, for the main peril of the story comes when a nefarious plot is hatched by the Magisterium involving separating children from their demons through a process cheekily labeled “interscission”. Their motives for doing this are vaguely described as “maintaining authority” and “protecting the people” from the inspiring power of Dust, another of Pullman’s inventions, which is powerful inspiring energy that lies

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The University of Science Fiction, a fictitious concept, is just that—concept. Alas, there is no such campus other than in your town, your state, your mind where interested people congregate and mull over the latest discussion topic. I would like to think I've earned a degree by now, however, other than the few literary classes that might be offered at literal universities, there is no such opportunity.

Recently, I was honored to facilitate a community group panel about inspiration. Just what is inspiration; how does one acquire it? Famous names were bantered about, Stephen Hawking, Mother Teresa and Helen Keller, to name a few. Gene Roddenberry was overwhelmingly the favorite. Why? He was credited for the most well known non-inventions of a speculative time. His imagination inspired imitators who are convinced they can make the pretend boxes and impressive equipment functional. To date, the scientific community and others ardently toil to make it so. Roddenberry did not attend USF any more than Hawking yet they did acquire a need to explore *what may be*, either internally or scientifically. In that attention to some higher calling, those men worked their magic, inspiring generations to dream and wonder—to speculate—and reach for the stars.

With tightening budgets and high transportation costs, I speculate what will happen to my fellow classmates at USF. Will we be forced cyber-bound and spend our waking hours disconnected from humanity by connecting to the web? Will local USF students (finally) find themselves gravitating to each other out of desperation for comfort, connection and common need? One concern I've harbored since I understood that science fiction (sci-fi, speculative fiction) was a large, but unorganized mass of "fans" is what will happen if we don't somehow find each other on a local level? This applies to metro areas where distance might prove prohibitive by cost or convenience. I'm thrilled that various organizations are able to promote science fiction in the larger venues, but us little rural folk are still hungry, starving to

find each other and play with our toys, books and ideas. If not for the net, we'd be like farmers in the Dirty Thirties, we'd dry up and go our separate ways. It takes patience and effort to communicate. Consider...

Presently, four generations of values and communication styles (and skills, or lack of) make up the science fiction community. The Elders are old, dying, and sadly, taking their wisdom, songs and stories of early science fiction writers and legends with them. The youngest of us know mostly the world of convenience and computer. They have no idea what an *f*-stop is on a camera any more than our Elders understand what drives our youth's musical tastes. USF students suffer from a generation gap and the fault lies with our communication preferences. (Insert big 'Duh' here). The attitude of youth is edgy from uncertainty of their future, while our elders survived change after change and know how to adapt. If these two generational extremes can't understand each other, even congregate in the same room, how can we ever tell our stories and be inspired? I fear a black hole in the USF student body is widening.

For myself, I still cling to my Iowa friends, and cyber-space. I've stopped asking everyone I meet if they like speculative fiction or short stories; I'm discouraged with the answers and lack of opportunity(s). Another generational problem is that my generation is busy making a living and still raising our kids. We must prioritize. Finances and time steal our opportunities for indulgences. This does not apply to *everyone*, obviously. But for a majority of fandom who enjoy playing with other like-minded people, it does. We are out there, just can't find the time to be as devoted as we'd like to be. Likely, this will change in about ten years. Can we wait? Will the institution of higher learning survive this slump? I hope so. All I have left is my books, my anime, the net, a few e-pals to tide me over until there's time to play again, and my imagination. At least I have that.

I was spoiled in Iowa. It remains the pinnacle of my sci-fi education. Like a religious experience, I keep watch, hoping for something similar to

Armageddon In Science Fiction

by Joe Vadalma

One of the most reoccurring themes in science fiction is the end of the world, or at least the end of civilization. It is not surprising since there are many ways that this could actually come about. Also, prophets have been predicting catastrophic disasters from the time men learned to speak to each other. Two popular ones lately are global warming and an asteroid strike. So we have a choice of drowning when the ice caps melt or being smashed to atoms by a big rock.

For a while, when a few people caught bird flu in Asia, pandemics were all the rage. In the latter half of the twentieth century, everyone was betting on an all-out atomic war, but that fizzled when the cold war ended. Recently, I read article about a scientist who said we could all die from a burst of gamma ray radiation from a nearby supernova explosion. As the clock struck midnight ushering in the year 2000, all the computers were supposed go mad because they only had the last two digits of the year and could not distinguish between the twentieth and twenty-first century (which to some people did not start until 2001 anyway.)

Anyway, science fiction authors love to write about Armageddon of one sort or other. Here are some of my personal favorites. There are two by John Brunner. The first is *Stand on Zanzibar* where civilization is brought to an end because of overpopulation. Overpopulation as threat seems to be no longer in vogue. I guess because there are so many ways of dealing with overpopulation. For example, nuke the excess or give everybody a gun and give them leave to hunt and kill everybody they hate.

The second book by Brunner is *The Sheep Look Up* which is about pollution. We are pretty certain that is the most likely end that we face.

There are many atomic war novels. These were especially popular during the cold war years. The funniest was the movie *Doctor Strangelove*, where a deranged general starts world war three because of his erectile dysfunction. I also like the novel *On the Beach*

by Nevil Schute, which was also made into a good movie. In this novel, the last people on earth after an atomic war are living in Australia waiting to die from the radioactivity produced by all those hydrogen bombs going off. Probably my all time favorite about a post apocalyptic world is *Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter Miller where a monk finds an artifact from our civilization after civilization has gone back to the dark ages.

One of the more interesting ways that the human race comes to an end is a little known book called *The Black Corridor* by Michael Moorcock. In this short novel, bigotry runs wild so that everyone kills everyone else that is different from himself or herself. It's a real chiller. I got goose bumps reading it.

Invasions by aliens is another possibility that could end the human race. My favorite is *Footfall* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, where the invaders look like elephants.

An old movie that's fun is *When Worlds Collide* where a group of scientists and a chosen few race to build a spaceship to escape from a collusion between earth and another planet. The one thing I never quite understood was where the planet they were headed for was located

I liked the TV miniseries *The Stand* by Stephen King as the survivors of a pandemic meet up at the cabin of an old woman and go fight the devil in Las Vegas.

Of course there are many more great science fiction novels and stories about the Apocalypse, but those were some of my personal favorites, because they each have a slightly odd slant to the end of the world.

I have written one novel about Armageddon myself. It is called *Morgaine and Armageddon* and has a lot of stuff in it based loosely on *The Book of Revelations* of the Christian Bible. If you are interested, it is in eBook format and can be obtained from Renaissance Ebooks, www.pageturneredition.com or Fictionwise Ebooks, www.fictionwise.com.

The Writer's Block: Emotion and Medium in Writing

If we were to place the mediums of writing along a continuum from least to most emotion-laden, they would probably be listed as: Nonfiction – Fiction – Poetry. For nonfiction, I believe that it can be written from the intellect alone, and, personally, am often suspicious of nonfiction that is strongly emotional in tone. Facts are the meat of nonfiction, and the interpretation of facts can be easily colored by emotion.

Scientific writers, for example, should strive to be rational and objective rather than passionate and subjective. I've read and enjoyed many nonfiction books that engaged no emotion in me other than curiosity and a very human excitement at discovering new things. I've also read plenty of nonfiction works that left me teary eyed or that irritated me because of the emotional approach taken by the author. And although I may have enjoyed the more emotional books at some level, I tend to have less respect for the points they try to make and less trust in their conclusions.

Compare, for example, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* to Erich Von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods*. Each espoused a theory that, if true, would change the world. Darwin's book has flashes of humor and throughout one gets the feeling that Darwin was passionate about discovering the truth of evolution, but his evidence is marshaled rationally and laid out logically, lucidly, and objectively. Von Daniken, on the other hand, writes much more emotionally about his hypothesis that aliens have visited Earth and helped found human civilization. The result is that Von Daniken is persuasive only on the surface and further research into his book reveals numerous flaws in his scientific method, and, apparently, some outright fabrications. Darwin's book did indeed change the world; Von Daniken's is a footnote.

When looking at fiction, however, we find that stories void of strong emotions like joy, agony, fear, and rage are a waste of time. If a fiction doesn't involve *me* emotionally in the first few pages I'll drop it like a struggling diver drops a weight belt. I don't want objectivity. I want subjectivity. I

want to *feel* things through my involvement with the story and its characters. I can tolerate a fiction writer who gets some facts wrong, but I can't tolerate one who gets the "feeling" wrong.

Consider the work of Robert E. Howard, the pulp author of the 1920s and 1930s who is best known for creating a character usually referred to as Conan the Barbarian. Howard himself felt strong emotions and channeled those emotions into his writing. His characters, too, are passionate. In a story called "Queen of the Black Coast," Conan says: "Let me live deep, let me know the sting of wine on my palate, the wind in my face, the glitter of royal pageantry, the bright madness of slaughter—let me burn and sting and tingle with the madness of life and living..."

A passage like that sings with heart and it shows the focus that Howard's writing had on emotion rather than intellect. Yes, Howard sometimes made factual errors. L. Sprague de Camp once related a story of how he tossed Howard's work aside on first exposure because Howard had the Romans using stirrups with their saddles and de Camp knew that stirrups hadn't been invented at that time. But, when it comes to most readers, who really cares if a few minor facts are inaccurate when the prose surges and storms with life.

As counterpoint, many other authors have written pastiches of Conan since Howard's death. With rare exceptions, these have fallen flat in the emotional department. Most were OK from a technical standpoint. Many had interesting plots. But they didn't sing, and I suspect that at least part of that was because the writer didn't create the character of Conan and therefore had little emotional investment in that character.

Despite the absolute necessity of strong emotion in fiction, however, emotion by itself isn't enough. Readers do expect that a story will have a logic, even if it is only an internal logic. They expect that characters will behave emotionally but only rarely stupidly. They expect an author to make an effort to get facts straight even if they don't want that author to be slavishly devoted to facts at the expense of story. And fiction that

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Reviews

Evil For Evil

K.J. Parker

Orbit, Nov 2007, \$12.99

ISBN: 9780316003391

Review by Harriet Klausner

The Mexentine army found the invasion of Eremian easy; they won without much resistance. However, the occupation is another matter. Insurgents like that led by Miel Ducas, who prefers resistance liberators, is causing problems for the occupiers. Their solution is to take it out on the common people as killing them is easy and the Mezentines are quite proud of their ability to kill and destroy.

Walled cities like Civitas Vadanis cannot survive the onslaught. It's leader Duke Valens is troubled with how to save his people; fleeing seems the only responsible solution, but that will leave many dead even if the enemy army fails to find them, an unlike outcome. Of course there is that insane exiled Mexentine engineering genius Ziani Vaatzes, whose killing machines frighten even his vicious people as they are weapons of mass destruction; his latest one may be capable of destroying the world or protect a city from invaders. He is joined by another engineering genius Daurenja in a partnership that means hell for everyone else. Meanwhile the worlds a stage for all the key players are coming together in holy matrimony and other stately alliances that foster betrayals caused by love and worse emotions.

The first Engineering tale (*Devices and Desires*) is a complex somewhat convoluted thriller; however book two, *Evil for Evil*, makes the predecessor look like a simple Dick and Jane adventure as the plot has become even more complicated. The above is too simplified of a description of all the goings-on as the key players return still filled with a gloom and doom inevitable outlook. K.J. Parker uses satire and humor to expand the plot; for instance the Mexentine people and its bureaucracy ironically remain disengaged from their war fighters

except for the technology sector. Intricate, multifaceted, and still way over the top of the stratosphere, fans who read the first Engineer's tale will appreciate the middle segment and look forward to how K. J. Parker ties together the antics of a cast that act like some sort of DNA blending of Rove, Machiavelli, and Rumsford.

Metal Swarm

Kevin J. Anderson

Orbit, Dec 2007, \$25.99

ISBN 9780316021746

Review by Harriet Klausner

The Terran Hanseatic League known as Hansa, the Ildiran Empire and the recently formed Confederation of Hansa (former colonies of the failing Terran Hanseatic League) struggle to survive while fighting one another. The three groups know they need to forge an alliance as they have external threats to their respective security.

However none of the leaders want to be accused of taking the first step towards forging an alliance as no one trusts the others to adhere to any pact. Instead they each continue to go it alone with some military resources diverted to keep the other two empires in check. Separately they struggle against runaway robots, strange intelligent fire beings and worst an insectoid race that has pandemic plans to eradicate all humans on planets found in all three spheres that they consider theirs. Failure to unite means extinction in many sectors of the universe.

The latest intergalactic interspecies hostilities outer space thriller is fast-paced and exciting, but has too much going on making it difficult to keep up with the zillion subplots especially for newcomers. Still the exhilarating story line is filled with plenty of non-stop action. Though no character stands out (there are almost as many key players as there are insectoid), fans of the series will enjoy the *Metal Swarm* of killer robots, fire creatures and the bugs as humanity stands on the brink of extinction in some places due to species cleansing if they fail to forge an alliance between distrusting enemies.

Reviews

Saint City Sinners

Lilith Saintcrow

Orbit, Nov 2007, \$6.99

ISBN: 9780316021432

Review by Harriet Klausner

Her Lucifer assignment to capture four demons is on hold though she prays that the Prince of Darkness is ignorant of being put aside even temporarily. Dante Valentine does not need another confrontation with a superpower who would not mind her being dead. However, the text message Gabrielle "Gabe" Spocarelli is succinct and to the point: "Danny, Mainthusez I need you. Now. Gabe". Only for her best friend in her Saint City childhood would Dante put off Lucifer.,

Dante returns home to learn Gabe's beloved Eddie was murdered ten days ago and Saint City is filled with danger. Dante seeks vengeance, but is irate with her demon lover Japhrimel, who seems to know who and why, but refuses to tell her anything. As Dante's frustration grows, Japh turns increasingly obstinate as he insists his prime objective is to keep his beloved safe including from her own reckless self at the cost of their relationship if need be. However once again he underestimates the necromancer who affirms hell hath no fury like a female seeking revenge even when it is against the wrong individual as she fails to see she is the victim of a Judas betrayal.

The latest Dante Valentine paranormal thriller is an exciting tale that showcases the talent of author Lilith Saintcrow as she combines angst and heart break with supernatural action. The story line is fast-paced, but the key elements to this superb fantasy are the plausible plot twists that send the heroine deeper into depression and anguish; she even seems suicidal ready for demons or Lucifer to kill her (kind of like having the cops shoot you). *Saint City Sinners* affirms that you can't go home even for a heavenly cause.

Another One Bites The Dust

Jennifer Rardin

Orbit, Dec 2007, \$12.99

ISBN: 9780316020572

Review by Harriet Klausner

After defeating an ancient demon in *Once Bitten, Twice Shy*, CIA field operative Jaz Parks and her vampire partner Vayl have forged a special squad with their new associates they met on the last case. Millennium old Cassandra the seer, technological genius Bergman, and sensitive Cole have joined Jaz and Vayl in hunting down evil doers.

Their current assignment is to prevent an invincible Chinese vampire, Chien-Lung from starting WW III. Bergman is especially sensitive to this malevolent being as Chien stole one of his gizmos from the army's White Sands Missile Range, a body armor that has made him unbeatable when combined with his supernatural abilities. Finding this cold blooded killer will not be easy as they also must dispatch the soul stealing Reavers who want to snack on the team members especially Jaz while she goes undercover as a belly dancer in Corpus Christie. They also know somehow malevolent vampire Edward "The Raptor" Samos, who believe he should rule the world, is somewhere in the mix

The second Jaz urban fantasy mystery thriller is an exciting tale that grips the audience from the onset. The heroine forges her new team into a cohesive fighting and bickering until, seeks to defeat the evil ones, belly dances at a winter festival and learns more about her relationship as Vayl's avhar than she wants to know. With romance, espionage, and mystery enhancing the fantasy, sub-genre fans will appreciate the adventures and missteps of Jaz and her mates.

The difference between a coward and a brave man is mostly a matter of timing.

— Philip K. Dick

USF (con't)

present itself so I can revel in the people, the spontaneity and the dream for the future—figuratively and literally. I've resigned myself to be content with home study until a study-buddy or two comes along. It is a delay in my education at the University of Science Fiction and may be a long wait. I'll keep a candle burning in my window, just in case.

This concludes the USF series. Join me in January, and have safe, fun holidays.

Writer's Block (con't)

engages the intellect as well as the emotions is often the most memorable type.

Our final medium of literary expression, poetry, is very different. It involves virtually no need for intellect at all, outside of the need to understand the actual vocabulary that is used. Nonfiction is fact based and fiction is a literature of both feelings and ideas. But the core of poetry is almost wholly emotional. What I need from a poem is the raw emotion of images. Sure, it's nice when a poem's meaning has some philosophical or scientific idea to express, but it isn't necessary.

I've even enjoyed poems in which the evoked imagery was largely cliché, as long as I could also feel the author's joy, anguish or rage come through. This is why I can like a lot of the poems that I see on the internet by young writers. They may not even realize that the images they are using to express their personal suffering are common ones that others have used before. They only know that they feel, and they have to express that feeling or explode. On a personal basis, all of *my* best poetry has been written while I was in a state of emotional uproar.

A discerning reader can almost certainly find exceptions to the emotion "rules" for the three mediums that I've expressed in this essay. True masters of literature are likely to bend, if not shatter, these rules. But it seems important to me to think about the different emotional involvement that is demanded from different types of writing. Anything that helps us writers smoke out the subtleties of the strange and wonderful literary world that we all love is worthwhile.

Science Fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin.

— Kingsley Adams

Golden Compass (con't)

within the very fabric of the universe. Is Dust the same thing as God? It certainly shares many of the same characteristics, and I wonder how Pullman would answer this question. So, as you can see, the story is very provocative philosophically and religiously, and could not have arrived at a better time, when it seems the world's religions and sciences are at odds in so many circles.

But the film's execution doesn't do justice to such a big story. See, the film is undercut by New Line's choice to go against one of the very decisions which made "Rings" such great cinema—namely allowing the running time to match the material. *Compass* is rushed. Clocking in at an anemic 113 minutes, the film just doesn't spend enough time anywhere for you to get your bearings before you're whisked away somewhere else, with new characters fluttering in and out before you can name them. One reviewer noted that 150 pages of the book are covered in the first 15 minutes of film time. That's 10 pages per minute!

Sigh. But I suppose it could have been worse, and I imagine repeat viewings, as well as reading the book (!), would help. Despite this complaint, the film is still consistently entertaining, with plenty of gorgeous scenery and effects, as well as a few scene-chomping actors, to sustain interest throughout the story. Hopefully, though, New Line will relax the running time on the next outing of *His Dark Materials*, and give us a sequel we can really sink our teeth into. But only the compass knows.