



# The Science of Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials

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Editorial Choice:

off

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'His Dark Materials' is a trilogy of high-supernatural space operas in cowboys-and-indians mode, embracing daemons, witches, angels and ghosts, laced with occasional shots of straight 20th-century physics. Consequently the Gribbins, who are well-known popularisers of science, have a hard row to hoe. Their attempt to cope with Dust, a mysterious stream of 'particles of consciousness' (Pullman's words) is an example. They say that 'At one level, the Dark Materials are Dust', but that 'this is also a metaphor for... hidden knowledge and hidden forces'. Further on, they say that Cold Dark Matter, a currently popular cosmological hypothesis, is 'the real science behind the Dark Materials', but later 'Dust is like Jung's collective unconscious', and still further on, 'Dust is like the soul of Gaia' (the living planet of James Lovelock). The alethiometer, a machine which tells the truth, isn't, for the Gribbins, 'really doing it at all'; instead Lyra, the central character who uses this machine, 'is doing the truth-telling in her own mind'. The problem with this interpretation is that the alethiometer provides details which could not possibly be found by introspection - for example that a person knowledgeable about Dust who is sought by Lyra can be found in a particular room of a particular building of which Lyra knew nothing beforehand. The Gribbins wisely do not attempt to cope with the daemons. The continual violations of elementary physical laws by the daemons' transmogrifications would be difficult to justify. In between excursions to Pullman's worlds, the authors present some basic physics and astronomy with their usual competence.

Running Order:

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