

The BiblioFiles: Philip Pullman

Premiere date: September 20, 2014

DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today, my guest is esteemed author Philip Pullman.

Pullman's writing career began with the publication of the hilarious *Count Karlstein* in 1982. That was followed by *The Ruby in the Smoke*, the first in a quartet of mystery and intrigue novels set in Victorian England. Pullman has written shorter standalone books, such as *I Was A Rat!*, *The Firework-Maker's Daughter*, and *The Scarecrow and His Servant*. He has also retold classic stories, such as *Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp*, and a selection of Grimm's Fairy Tales.

His best known work, however, is the epic and genre-transcending book, *The Golden Compass*, called *Northern Lights* in the UK, and its sequels, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*. Pullman has won numerous awards, including the Carnegie medal, the Guardian Children's Book Award, the Whitbread Book of the Year award, now known as the Costa Award, and Astrid Lindgren award. He has also won the Carnegie of Carnegies for *The Golden Compass*, which was chosen as the best book of all the Carnegie winners from the past 70 years.

Pullman creates and animates his characters and their worlds with exceptional imagination, humanity, depth, and confidence. You are not reading his books. You are living his books, experiencing the fear, joy, pain, and revelation as the characters do. It's absolutely extraordinary.

Philip Pullman joins us from England. Mr. Pullman, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

PHILIP PULLMAN: Thank you. I'm glad to be with you.

DR. DANA: I'd like to start with the Sally Lockhart mysteries. This is a quartet of books set in Victorian England, featuring Sally Lockhart, a very unusual young lady for this era. She's independent. She can shoot a gun. She has an extremely unusual past. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to read the beginning of the first book in the series?

PHILIP PULLMAN: Of course. "Chapter One, The Seven Blessings. On a cold, fretful afternoon in early October 1872, a hansom cab drew up outside the offices of Lockhart and Selby, Shipping Agents, in the financial heart of London, and a young girl got out and paid the driver.

She was a person of sixteen or so - alone and uncommonly pretty. She was slender and pale, dressed in mourning, with a black bonnet under which she tucked back a straying twist of blonde hair that the wind had teased loose. She had unusually dark brown eyes for one so fair. Her name was Sally Lockhart. And within fifteen minutes, she was going to kill a man.

She stood looking up at the building for a moment and then climbed the three steps and entered. There was a drab corridor facing her, with a porter's office on the right, where an old man sat in front of a fire reading a sensational story of the sort known as a penny dreadful. She tapped on the glass and he sat up guiltily, thrusting the magazine down beside his chair.

'Beg pardon, Miss,' he said, 'Didn't see yer come in.'

'I've come to see, Mr. Selby,' she said. 'But he wasn't expecting me.'

'Name, please, miss?'

'My name is Lockhart. My father was...Mr. Lockhart.'

He became friendlier at once.

'Miss Sally, is it? You've been here before, miss!'

'Have I? I'm sorry, I don't remember...'

'Must've been ten years ago at least. You sat by my fire and had a ginger biscuit and told me all about your pony. You've forgotten already? Dear me...I was very sorry to hear about your father, miss. That was a terrible thing, the ship going down like that. He was a real gentleman, miss.'

'Yes...thank you. It was partly about my father that I came. Is Mr. Selby in? Can I see him?'

'Well, I'm afraid he ain't, miss. He's at the West India Docks on business. But Mr. Higgs is here - the company secretary, miss. He'll be glad to talk to you.'

'Thank you. I'd better see him, then.'

The porter rang a bell, and a young boy appeared, like a sudden solidification of all the grime in the city air. His jacket was torn in three places. His collar had come adrift from the shirt, and his hair looked as if it had been used for an experiment with the powers of electricity.

'What d'yer want?' said this apparition, whose name was Jim.

'Mind yer manners,' said the porter. 'Take this young lady up to see Mr. Higgs, and smartish. This is Miss Lockhart.'

The boys sharp eyes took her in for a moment, and then flicked back suspiciously to the porter.

'You've got my *Union Jack*,' he said. 'I've seen yer hide it when old Higgisy come in earlier.'

'I ain't,' said the porter, without conviction. 'Go on and do as yer told.'

'I'll have it,' said the boy. 'You wait. You ain't stealing my property. Come on, then,' he added to Sally and withdrew.

'You'll have to forgive him, Miss Lockhart,' said the porter. 'He weren't caught young enough to tame, that one.'

'I don't mind,' said Sally. 'Thank you. I'll look in and say goodbye before I go.'

The boy was waiting for her at the foot of the staircase.

'Was the boss your old man?' he said as they climbed.

'Yes,' she said, meaning to say more but not finding the words.

'He was a good bloke.'

It was a gesture of sympathy, she thought, and felt grateful.

'Do you know anyone called Marchbanks?' she asked. 'Is there a Mr. Marchbanks who works here?'

'No, never heard the name before.'

'Or - have you ever heard...'

They were near the top of the stairs now, and she stopped to finish the question.

'Have you ever heard of the Seven Blessings?'

'Eh?'

'Please,' she said, 'It's important.'

'No, I ain't,' he said. 'Sounds like a pub or summat. What is it?'

'It's just something I heard. It's nothing. Forget it, please,' she said, and moved up to the top of the stairs.

'Where do I find Mr. Higgs?'

'In 'ere,' he said, knocking thunderously at a paneled door. Without waiting for an answer, he opened it and called, 'Lady to see Mr. Higgs, name of Miss Lockhart.'

She entered, and the door closed behind her. The room was full of a pompous masculine atmosphere of cigar smoke, leather, dark mahogany, silver inkwells, drawers with brass handles, and glass paperweights. A portly man was trying to roll up a large wall map on the other side of

the room and gleaming with effort. His bald pate gleamed, his boots gleamed, the Masonic seal on the heavy gold watch-chain over his paunch gleamed, and his face was shiny with heat and red with years of wine and food.

He finished rolling the map and looked up. His expression became solemn and pious.

‘Miss Lockhart, daughter of the late Matthew Lockhart?’

‘Yes,’ said Sally.

He spread out his hands.

‘My dear Miss Lockhart,’ he said, ‘I can only say how sorry, how truly sorry, all of us were to hear of our sad loss. A fine man, a generous employer, a Christian gentleman, a gallant soldier, a...umm, a great loss, a sad and tragic loss.’

She inclined her head.

‘You're very kind,’ she said. ‘But I wonder if I could ask you something?’

‘My dear!’ He had become expansive and genial. He pulled out a chair for her and stood with his broad backside to the fire, beaming like an uncle. ‘Anything that is in my power will be done, I guarantee.’

‘Well, it's not that I want anything done - it's simpler than that - it's just...Well, did my father ever mention a Mr. Marchbanks? Do you know anyone of that name?’

He appeared to consider the question with great attention. ‘Marchbanks,’ he said. ‘Marchbanks...There is a ship's chandler in Rotherhithe called that, spelled Marjo-ri-banks, you know. Would that be the one? I don't recall your poor father ever having dealings with him though.’

‘It may be,’ said Sally. ‘Do you know his address?’

‘Tasmania Wharf, I believe,’ said Mr. Higgs.

‘Thank you. And there was something else. It sounds silly...I shouldn't be bothering you, really, but-‘

‘My dear Miss Lockhart! Anything that can be done, will be done. Just tell me how I can help.’

‘Well - have you ever heard the phrase 'the Seven Blessings'?’

Then something extraordinary happened.

Mr. Higgs was a large, well-fed man, as we have remarked; so perhaps it was not Sally's words so much as the years of port, and Cuban cigars, and rich dinners that preceeded them which made him crumple at the heart and gasp for air. He took a step forward - then darkness flooded his face, his hands clutched at his waistcoat, and he fell with a crash to the Turkish carpet. One foot kicked and twitched five times, hideously. His open eye was pressed to the carved claw-foot of the chair Sally sat in.

She did not move, nor did she scream or faint; her only actions were to draw back the hem of the dress from where it brushed the shiny dome of his skull and to breathe deeply, several times, with her eyes shut. Her father had taught her this as a remedy for panic. He had taught her well; it worked.”

DR. DANA: And so it begins this marvelous story. Thank you.

PHILIP PULLMAN: Yes, it was fun writing that.

DR. DANA: How much historical research went into these books?

PHILIP PULLMAN: Well, quite a lot. But it wasn't, it didn't feel like work, because I was enjoying it so much. It was what I found interesting. My rule with research is to read as much that I find interesting and then stop. And if I need any more, I make it up.

But there's quite a lot you can find out about this period of history and that place. London in the late 19th century was well photographed. There are many, many photographs and many, many street maps, too, and things like that. There's lots of information about it.

Photographs are important, because for the first time in history, in the 19th century, we can see what ordinary people looked like. We can see what aristocrats and rich people and kings and queens looked like from further back in history, because they were the ones who had portraits painted of them. But portraits weren't normally painted of servants and ordinary workers. So we can't see what they looked like until the camera came along and made it possible to take photographs of them.

DR. DANA: And some of them are quite shocking, some of those photographs.

PHILIP PULLMAN: Well, they're so vivid. And it's amazing to look back 120, 130, 140, years and see people who look so like us and yet dress so differently and with such different lives.

DR. DANA: The plot of these books gets extraordinarily complicated, especially in the third book in the series, *The Tiger in the Well*. Do you need to take notes or keep composition books dedicated to the different plot lines? Or do the plots emerge fully formed from your head?

PHILIP PULLMAN: Well, they don't emerge fully formed. I tend to write without making a plot ahead of time, without making a plan. I've tried making plans, and I just find it so dull afterwards, because I've done all the fun part of working it out. It's just tedious to write it all up. I tend to let the plot emerge. But, of course, when that happens, you have a lot of dead ends and

loops and it goes all over. So what you have to do is write the book and then afterwards make the plan. Look at what you've got and see about tidying it up.

DR. DANA: Many of your characters are so compelling the reader becomes quite attached to them. I'm not going to give any spoilers for this series. But when the character dies, it can be quite harrowing for the reader, especially when the death is sudden and unexpected. What's it like for you as an author to write these scenes?

PHILIP PULLMAN: Well, you have to have unexpected things happening, if you as the writer want to remain interested in your story. And one unexpected thing and one devastating thing that happens, of course, is when people die. Where it's not often signaled in real life, if people die in an accident or by murder. You're not told, oh, old Uncle Tom? He's going to get murdered next week. I'm just telling you now so you won't be surprised. It doesn't work like that.

DR. DANA: I'll just pencil that in.

[LAUGHTER]

PHILIP PULLMAN: It doesn't work like that. So a sudden death is something that takes characters in the story by surprise, as well as the reader and sometimes the writer.

DR. DANA: You mentioned that your shorter standalone books such as *I Was A Rat!* and *The Firework-Maker's Daughter* were immensely difficult to write. Why is that?

PHILIP PULLMAN: Well, I think it was the story called *Clockwork* that was the most difficult one. Because that has a pretty elaborate construction. It sort of moves like a clock. This bit turns that bit, which moves that bit, which turns another bit. And it was hard to get that right. I had to try it several times before it started to fit together and work properly.

But the fairy tales-- and I've written four fairy tales. I call them fairy tales-- *I Was A Rat!*, *Clockwork*, *The Firework-Maker's Daughter* and *The Scarecrow and His Servant*. They're different from my novels because the characters are flat rather than round. That's the way I think of it.

When I'm doing a novel such as, the *Sally* books or *His Dark Materials*, the purpose, what you're trying to do is make the characters as real as you can make them, which involves a certain amount of three-dimensionalism. Now you know they've got depths, depths sometimes which they're not aware of themselves. So you want to make those characters as real as possible.

But in a fairy tale, such as the four books I've mentioned and of course, *Puss in Boots*, I've done that, and the Grimm tales, the *Tales from the Brothers Grimm*, character isn't such an important thing. All the characters in a fairy tale are pretty flat, really. They don't have much depth. And the interest of the story is not in the psychological complexity of the character so much is in the incident and what happens and what succeeds and what will follow it. So they're different kinds of writing.

DR. DANA: Your black and white illustrations for the three His Dark Materials books are displayed on your website. Did these precede the books? Did they emerge during the writing process?

PHILIP PULLMAN: No. What happened was my publisher in this country, David Fickling, said when the book, when we were nearly ready to start copy editing the text of Northern Lights, as it was in this country, The Golden Compass, said, I know, let's have a little symbol, a little design at the head of every chapter. And I said, what do you mean? The same one every chapter? And he said, yes, of course.

And I said, well, why not a different one for every chapter? And he said, oh, that's a good idea. And I said, well, what about me doing them? And he said, but you're not an illustrator. And I said, but I can draw. So I went away and I drew the polar bear's head. And I drew something else. And I drew something. And he said, oh, yeah, these are all right. We'll have these. So I did one for each chapter. And they were great fun to do. And they're printed very small. They're about the size of my thumbnail.

But the book came out, and it won a prize or two. And it got successful. And it sold a lot of copies. So when I did pictures for the next book, The Subtle Knife, he let me do them a bit bigger. They were a bit bigger. And then when The Amber Spyglass came out, people had been waiting a long time for that. And there wasn't time to do pictures initially. So instead I found some quotations from poems I liked and things that I thought were relevant to the story. And we just put those at the head of each chapter.

But then when the paperback came out, I had time to do the pictures as well. So that also has my little pictures now. It was great fun to do the pictures, much more fun than writing.

DR. DANA: In The Subtle Knife, one of the main characters, Will, is confused when he learns that Pan is Lyra's daemon, an external, shape-changing companion that is actually part of her. Typically, the term, daemon, is associated with evil. Pan is clearly not evil. Why did you decide to use the word demon in this way?

PHILIP PULLMAN: Well, because that's the original meaning of the word. And that's why I spell it in the way I do, D-A-E-M-O-N, rather than D-E-M-O-N. The original meaning of the word-- it's a Greek word-- and it means companion spirit or guardian angel even, you could say. So that's the sense in which I wanted to use it. And it quickly becomes clear from what's happening in the story that the daemons are not bad things. They're an important part of ourselves.

DR. DANA: So the original word is Greek?

PHILIP PULLMAN: Yes, it's D-A-I-M-O-N. That's how it's usually transliterated.

DR. DANA: Was Mrs. Coulter's daemon never going to be anything other than a monkey? Or did you know that straight away?

PHILIP PULLMAN: No...I've got a thing about monkeys. They're pretty terrifying. There's a monkey in the *The Tiger in the Well*, too.

DR. DANA: You were somewhat involved with the casting process when they were making *The Golden Compass* into a movie in the United States. What's it like to watch actors bringing your characters to life? Did any of the actors immediately fit with your vision?

PHILIP PULLMAN: Well, the most difficult one was going to be Lyra, because she would have to be someone who was completely unknown. And so they had a very long and involved process that involved looking at, was it, 10,000 little girls came and auditioned to be Lyra. And the one we chose, Dakota Blue Richards, was absolutely fantastic. She was an amazing actress. She had never acted before, and she was the complete star of the film.

As far as Mrs. Coulter was concerned, I always wanted Nicole Kidman for that character, because I thought she could do both sides of the character-- the very elegance and sexiness and the deadly danger, too. Other characters, well, I think all the characters were very well cast. I was thrilled with Sam Elliot's portrayal of Lee Scorsby, the balloonist. I thought he was terrific. Daniel Craig was wonderful as Lord Asriel. And in fact, there wasn't a weak link in the whole film. It was very, very well cast.

DR. DANA: In the introduction to your retelling of Grimm's Fairy Tales, you wrote that when you're working, you're highly superstitious. Can you tell some of your superstitions?

PHILIP PULLMAN: Well, I'd like to, but that might take their power away. No, I've got various little bits and pieces I like to have around me on my table. I've got a piece of-- I don't know exactly what it is, but it's a bit of mechanism from inside a dark matter detector that the scientists at an Oxford laboratory gave me when I went to seem them about dark matter. So I've got that. That's important to me. And I always use the same sort of paper and the same pen. Things like that I'm sort of superstitious about.

DR. DANA: Do you still get writer's block?

PHILIP PULLMAN: No, no. There are times when it's hard to know what to write next. But then I don't believe in writer's block. Doctors don't get doctor's block. Plumbers don't get plumber's block. Why should writers be the only profession that's allowed to have a block and lie back and not do any work?

[LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: Your current project is *The Book of Dust*, which is a companion to the *His Dark Materials* books. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

PHILIP PULLMAN: Yes, you called it a companion. That's not a bad way of putting it. It's not a sequel. That's what I want to make clear. Because that story, *His Dark Materials*, is over. It's finished. It's complete. It doesn't need a sequel. This is another story. I could call it a successor to *His Dark Materials*. It's set in Lyra's world, with many of the same characters, including Lyra

and also some new characters as well, who are very important. And it's a new story. And it's called The Book of Dust. And I'm in the middle of it right now.

DR. DANA: Philip Pullman, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

PHILIP PULLMAN: It was a pleasure.

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