

Philip Pullman. *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*.

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There must be a wicked twist coming, I found myself thinking, having settled into the deceptively simple storytelling that marks avowed atheist Philip Pullman's new addition to the Myths series, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*. Will it be a *Fight Club* style schizophrenia, a case of mistaken identity, or a misappropriation of history on a massive scale? Fortunately, due to the exquisite attention Pullman grants to the ancient tradition built into his story, I can report on the strengths of this book without giving away the secret that clinches its powerfully evocative take on the most charged religious tale in Western history. But does he achieve this level of suspense, intrigue – some might even say shock and awe – without resort to cheap shots at his enormous and bloated target, I hear you ask? Can he treat the story of Christ with respect even while dismantling its Church's mythic proportions? The answer to both of these questions is yes, as long as the reader is prepared to admit the martyr's humanity and the broad range of vested interests involved in any process of editing (especially one with such vast potential). Pullman employs no *deus ex machina* to fulfil the promise built into his tense narrative, instead relying on a mysterious character who coaches the conclusion to its equally enigmatic and – in my opinion – masterful finale.

The tale begins with a premise perhaps as controversial as that employed by Dan Brown (and many before him, most importantly Baigent and Leigh in their *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*), who contended that Jesus had marital relations with Mary Magdalene and bore progeny by her. Pullman

skirts the issue of sexuality, although his Jesus is certainly human enough in his convictions and character to be imagined as a sexual being, instead choosing a possibility that at least allows for vastly more delicacy and intellectual integrity. There is no spuriously speculative new bloodline here, but an invented sibling: Jesus and Christ are twins. Mary Magdalene plays a bit part, but the plot twists are all about the brothers, their disagreements, their varying relations with their parents and community; in short, with their (invented) real lives. A ripple of tension pervades the entire work, however, because you just know that Pullman will treat his reader to no easy or cheap shots in the way this spiritual drama plays out. The mystery is built into early scenes when three visiting astrologers arrive to bless the babe in a manger. Which of the two newborns, one strong (Jesus) and one weakling (Christ, whom Mary favours for its weakness, its neediness), will be honoured as the chosen one? The child in swaddling cloths, laying in a trough by the time they arrive, is the runt of the litter; but the stronger sibling has already been there, was placed there first while the weaker was suckled first, could have been meant as the blessed child, the prophesied saviour...

As Pullman's narrative continues, it is the weaker brother Christ who takes an interest in spiritual matters from the start, and who seems most likely to fulfil the prophecy of a coming leader – but is this the result of his frailty, the compensatory role being played by the physically weak, as we may suspect in our post-Darwinian and post-Freudian age? Or is he, as seems to be revealed according to the conclusion to the collusion, the key colouring that must be given to the physical facts of Jesus' life in order that they be magnified from their place in history to reveal a "timeless" truth? For if there is one thing happening when earthly, human life makes the transition to the alluring impossibility of the mythic, it is the imposition upon what really happened by the possibility of what might – or, for the ideologically biased, should – have happened. The switch integral to the way this scenario is played out in this novel involves exaggeration, as we would expect in any process of mythologisation; but it does so with a keen eye on a shared, not unreasonable take on the desired state of things. The ephemerality that is also key to any myth depends upon the fact that people *do* so often want to believe enough to suspend critical judgement. Pullman recognises this, but what is even more to his credit in this rendition is that the characterisation of Jesus seems so true to the portrait delineated by the Biblical gospels. Jesus' faith is so fiercely strong that he inspires self-healing in a way that could easily be construed as miraculous, especially to those who were not eyewitness to the complete exchange; the loaves and fishes are extended by the power of his suggestion in another

way; a harmless obsessive is cured of excessive mouthiness when Jesus' calm poise awakens him to his own confusion. These matters are all dealt with by Pullman in a way surely only the most fundamentalist of Christian readers could find offensive; Jesus acts as any son of God surely would, with absolute confidence in the capacity for goodness to prevail and with the critical attitude to authority accepted as a hallmark of his unique dispensation. In short, this is the same man depicted by the Apostles, only he hasn't had divinity thrust upon him yet (and we are led to suspect that he would have rejected such a notion, or at least would have struggled with its connotations and egoism, just as any authentic spiritual master would).

The vital aporia between the mortality and spiritual potential of Jesus is likened by Pullman as the same kind of tension that can be found within any myth – it is that between “timeless” truth and the prosaic nature of history. A mysterious stranger convinces the weaker brother Christ that in order for history to make use of Jesus' words and actions – in order to make them last, to build a church that can shelter the poor and provide a way for ordinary people to find God through innocence and honesty, faith and good works – such timeless “truths” must be injected into the real, everyday story of the saviour regardless of their veracity. By slyly pitching to Christ's simple, humble ego and by promising that Jesus will be forgotten, even derided, as so many other false prophets in these times already have been, the mysterious stranger builds an ally in Christ that eventually brings about the transition that, behind the scenes, has obviously been planned all along.

The similarities between Pullman's stranger, who tellingly reveals that he is one of a “legion” (a name often associated with demons) planning this new, universal church, and the Grand Inquisitor of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, are unmissable to those who have read the Russian masterpiece. Would a church set up in Jesus' name really be able to dispense his radical vision of egalitarianism, stay true to his existential struggle with the cosmic power/s behind this enormous, majestic universe, and recognise the metaphorical power of the sacrificial king unless they had already sold the very same prophet for a handful of silver (or its stable equivalent, security)? The scoundrel brother Christ, who is in some ways just a more vacillating version of the good man Jesus (for whom such questions could only ever be dismissed as unworthy), sees the wisdom in falsifying history with recourse to timeless “truth,” or mythicisation. To this end he anguishes over the decisions he makes, but goes along with the plan of the mysterious stranger, even nurturing his own secret and furtive desires to accommodate such embellishments with his own strokes of the mythic brush. He transforms boyish mischief into magic in order to further

enhance the “miracles” Jesus will later perform, adds stars and angels to the night sky around Bethlehem, develops the son of God’s spiritual depths with foreknowledge of the crucifixion and resurrection. Through one and many examples of his storytelling prowess, Christ provides the means by which his brother Jesus will be adored, worshipped, created into the image that will carry his “truth” so far beyond the shores of Galilee and the political crises brought about by the Roman empire and its myriad challengers. When he turns back to his table in the concluding image of the novel, however, Christ will realise that such mythic creativity comes at a horrendous cost. The way Pullman suggests this cost is as evenhandedly simple and devastatingly telling as is his narrative technique throughout.

While occasionally simple to the point of being banal – Pullman’s style parodies the plainness of the testaments in a way that really captures the Biblical style but this borders on the bland at times, especially when his tales are almost exactly the same as those recorded for posterity – the cumulative effect of this neat parody punches home the fatal conclusion all the harder. Without giving too much away, it expresses a theft so deep in the Christian psyche that it almost takes the breath away from the reader with its force. That this is achieved even while remaining so true to the Jesus of scripture, and with a technique so subtle, marks Pullman’s text as an exquisite meditation on the ineradicable force and ideological power of mythologisation throughout the ages. *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* stands in an arena of its own against some of the aforementioned spurious and simplistic acts of attempted textual demythologisation, reminding one better of such modern classics as *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis. The concluding image has stayed with this reader since as a powerful metaphor for the dangers inherent in the transformation of deep human truths into organised religious creeds.

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