

Fantastic pull

Tolkien, Lewis had nothing on author Philip Pullman

By MICHAEL GILTZ

British author Philip Pullman has achieved almost everything he could imagine with his fantasy trilogy, "His Dark Materials."

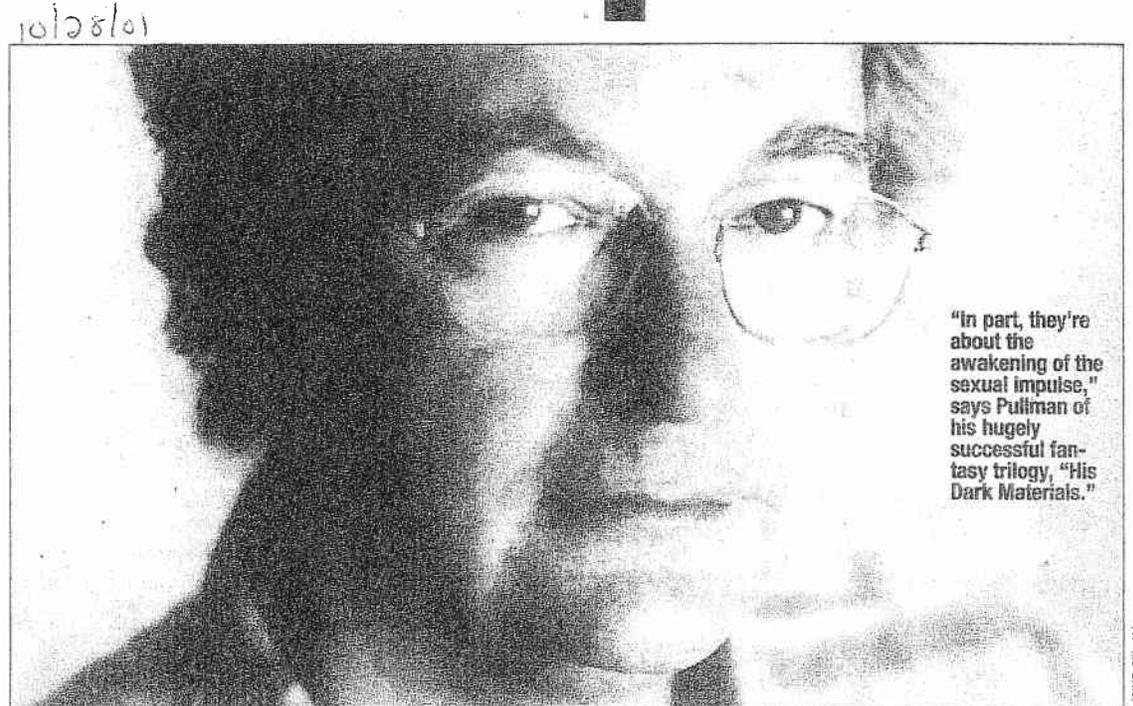
The 55-year-old writer, interviewed from his home in Oxford on his birthday, has received critical praise, sold more than a million copies of the series and staked a claim as the latest professor from that university — along with J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Lewis Carroll — to write a great work of fantasy.

But there's one thing Pullman hasn't achieved with the trilogy, which comprises "The Golden Compass," "The Subtle Knife" and "The Amber Spyglass," and which Del Rey has just published in paperback: controversy.

"I must confess, I am a little surprised," admits Pullman, who will be at the Union Square Barnes & Noble at 6 p.m. Tuesday to promote the paperback release, along with the charming audio version, which features an entire cast and Pullman as narrator (Listening Library).

"After all, here I am killing God," says Pullman, referring to the rebellious angels in his trilogy who battle a God-like "Authority."

"I would have thought in a country as religious as the United States, there might have been one or



two readers picking up on that," he says. "But nobody seems to have noticed yet."

Nobody, that is, except fellow authors. They've long been familiar with his work, especially the marvelous Victorian trilogy featuring Sally Lockhart.

J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books (that some have tried to ban from school libraries), has trumpeted Pullman, whose works, like hers, are read by both kids and adults.

Rowling told me years ago in one of her first American interviews, "If he wrote in any genre other than children's fiction, he would be much better known and acclaimed as one of the best writers working today."

Horror and fantasy novelist Clive Barker is also a fan.

"Oh, I love them," says Barker of Pullman's books.

"They're wonderful. But why hasn't anybody noticed how shocking they are? Are we the only ones?"

In "The Golden Compass," we meet Lyra, a strong-willed young girl who lives in a fantasy world similar to ours but notably different. She stumbles into an adventure traveling to the North, meeting armored bears, witches and other creatures while trying to rescue a friend captured by the Gobblers.

You almost don't notice that in Lyra's world, virtually everything is controlled by the all-powerful Church.

Only as the books unfold and the scope of Lyra's journey widens do you realize the magnitude of what Pullman is tackling: Basically, it's a reimagining of Milton's "Paradise Lost," with Pullman staging an epic battle between

rebellious angels and God (known as the "Authority").

What makes this trilogy the children's equivalent of Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" is Pullman's arguments about sex and original sin, and whether it's best if the rebellious angels triumph.

Fantasy stories are usually about the epic struggle between good and evil. The real drama in Pullman's story is figuring out which side is which.

Pullman takes delight in tweaking the masterpieces of his Oxford predecessors, criticizing "The Lord of the Rings" and Lewis' "Narnia" books for what he sees as their lack of believable, flesh-and-blood characters.

"Can you imagine anyone in 'The Lord of the Rings' having sex?" Pullman asked during an earlier interview at his home. "Of course not."

At the time, he was half-

"In part, they're about the awakening of the sexual impulse," says Pullman of his hugely successful fantasy trilogy, "His Dark Materials."