BOOK REVIEW

The Soul of Storytelling

Daemon Voices: On Stories and Storytelling
Philip Pullman (Vintage Books 2017), 433 pages

Pamela A. Wilkins, rev'r*

What could a spinner of fantasy tales about armored bears, parallel universes, and humans with daemons—souls in the form of animals—have to say about the art of lawyering? Quite a lot, as it turns out. Philip Pullman's *Daemon Voices: On Stories and Storytelling*[1] is an exquisite guide to the craft of storytelling, useful both to neophytes and to more experienced writers.

Pullman is best known as the author of the *His Dark Materials*[2] trilogy, a reinterpretation of *Paradise Lost* that takes place in a variety of parallel universes, including an Oxford, England at once intimately familiar—consider the hierarchies and airs of the various Oxford colleges; and utterly foreign—consider the externalized souls of humans in animal form. The tale's unwitting heroine is eleven-year-old Lyra Belaqua, a "coarse and greedy little savage, for the most part,"[3] who lives largely unsupervised as a ward of Oxford's (fictitious) Jordan College. The story takes Lyra and Pantalaimon, her daemon, away from the safety of Jordan College to the arctic North and to cities in other worlds (including *our* Oxford), where they encounter, among other things, children severed from their daemons, a boy with a knife that cuts through worlds, and "dust," a mysterious substance somehow connected with human consciousness. Fantasy genre notwithstanding, *His Dark Materials* tastes nothing like the fluff of fan fiction. Rather, it's hearty fare that has the reader ruminating on meaty questions: the human tendency to absolutism, the gains and losses

* Associate Professor of Law, Mercer University School of Law.

1 Philip Pullman, Daemon Voices: On Stories and Storytelling (2017).

2 Philip Pullman, His Dark Materials is comprised of The Golden Compass (1995), The Subtle Knife (1997), and The Amber Spyglass (2005).

3 Pullman, The Golden Compass, *supra* note 2, at 36.

that come with maturity, the very nature of consciousness. The trilogy is also just a rollicking good tale. It tastes good! And, remarkably, Pullman has prepared this hearty, challenging three-course meal for children.

Both a critical success and an international bestseller, *His Dark Materials* has been adapted for screen, stage, and now television with a collaboration between the BBC and HBO. And the trilogy forms only a small part of Pullman's oeuvre. He's written tales for younger children—e.g., *I Was a Rat!*; retellings of classic fairy tales—*Grimm Tales: For Young and Old*; and even a reinterpretation of the Gospels—*The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*. Perhaps Pullman's own daemon is a spider: though he can't spin a web, he can certainly spin a yarn.

But *Daemon Voices* suggests a different daemon entirely—an observant creature committed to plying his craft and ensuring his tools are sharp. Published in 2017, *Daemon Voices* is a collection of thirty-two essays. At first blush, the essays' topics vary. John Milton and William Blake figure prominently. But so does British children's author Phillipa Pearce. As do particle physics, and imaginary friends, and the gravestone of Sophia Ann Goddard (d. 1801), and a lot else besides. In short, the essays are quite a smorgasbord.

But the smorgasbord has a unifying theme: the art and craft of storytelling. Just as important, the selections are tasty and nourishing for both connoisseurs and first-time samplers. (For our purposes, *connoisseurs* refers to lawyers and professors well versed in the art of legal storytelling, and *first-time samplers* or *neophytes* to law students and those without formal knowledge of storytelling norms and structures.) Being neither legal storytelling connoisseur nor neophyte, I found myself foraying to the buffet again and again, eager for fresh takes on old favorites, as well as for new delicacies entirely.

Some fresh takes on old favorites:

"Where do I put the camera?" Here, Pullman borrows from David Mamet's *On Directing Film*. For Pullman, *where do I put the camera* is "*the* basic storytelling question. Where do you see the scene from? What do you tell the reader about it? What's your stance toward the characters?"[4] Take *Paradise Lost*. It begins in hell, with the camera sharply focused on Satan. Thus we feel in our bones that Satan is our protagonist, our tragic, romantic hero. Indeed, we'll probably identify more with Satan than with

4 *The Writing of Stories*, *in* Daemon Voices, *supra* note 1, at 23.

5 *Paradise Lost: An Introduction*, *in* Daemon Voices, *supra* note 1, at 51 ("The opening . . . enlists the reader's sympathy in *this* cause rather than *that*. So when the story of *Paradise Lost* begins, . . . we find ourselves in hell, with the fallen angels groaning on the burning lake. And from then on, part of our awareness is always affected by that. This is a story about devils. It's not a story about God. The fallen angels and their leader are our protagonists . . . .").

other characters, including God.[5] Students, who sometimes think that facts are "just" facts, would do well to think of themselves as filmmakers.

The writer's responsibility toward language. "If human beings can affect the climate," Pullman opines, "we can certainly affect the language, and those of us who use it professionally are responsible for looking after it."[6] This responsibility includes loving, knowing, and caring for words through our command of both vocabulary and grammar:

> If only a few people recognise [British spelling] and object to a dangling participle, for example, and most readers don't notice and sort of get the sense anyway, why bother to get it right? Well, I discovered a very good answer to that, and it goes like this: if most people don't notice when we get it wrong, *they won't mind if we get it right*. And if we *do* get it right, we'll please the few who do know and care about these things, so everyone will be happy.[7]

This responsibility extends not only to words, but to expressions and idioms, with clarity the ultimate goal:

> We should try always to use language to illuminate, reveal and clarify rather than obscure, mislead and conceal. . . . The aim must always be clarity. It's tempting to feel that if a passage of writing is obscure, it must be very deep. But if the water is murky, the bottom might be only an inch below the surface—you just can't tell. It's much better to write in such a way that the readers can see all the way down; but that's not the end of it, because you then have to provide interesting things down there for them to look at.[8]

Like writers of fiction and creative nonfiction, lawyers are entrusted with—for better or worse—our culture's language. We teachers of writing would do well to let our students in on the potential and responsibility of this powerful role.

The primacy of story over theme. Unlike some writers, Pullman does not begin writing with a theme in mind. Rather, he begins with "pictures, images, scenes, moods—like bits of dreams . . . ."[9] The theme emerges from, rather than being imposed upon, the story. The yet-to-be-discovered theme and some idea or image from the story will "leap[]

6 *Magic Carpets: The Writer's Responsibilities*, *in* Daemon Voices, *supra* note 1, at 5.

7 *Id.* at 6.

8 *Id.* at 7.

9 *The Writing of Stories*, *supra* note 4, at 30.

towards each other like a spark and a stream of gas . . . tak[ing] fire when they [come] together."[10]

I have often asked students about their theory of the case (i.e., their theme). Unfortunately, at times I've probably inadvertently given them the impression that a theory is imposed on a case, almost like a misplaced piece is forced into a jigsaw puzzle. But Pullman has me convinced, even in the nonfiction realm that is the legal profession. Once we determine where to put the camera and how to tell a satisfying and convincing story, the theme will emerge unbidden. (To be fair, where we put the camera depends in part on the governing law. We operate within a different set of constraints from fiction writers.)

The realism and moral truthfulness of good stories. The best fantasy works, like all of the best fiction, are steeped in *reality*. Characters and settings can be *non*-real but can never be *un*real:

> The writers we call the greatest of all—Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Proust, George Eliot herself—are those who have created the most lifelike simulacra of real human beings in real human situations. In fact, the more profound and powerful the imagination, the closer to reality are the forms it dreams up. Not the most *unlike* real things, but the most *like*.[11]

This reality includes not only realistic characters, but "moral truthfulness,"[12] the possibility of "those eye-opening moments after which nothing is the same. [The character] will grow up now, and if we pay attention to what's happening in the scene, so will we."[13]

Again, Pullman's insight about the realism and moral truthfulness of good storytelling has made me question both my own teaching and storytelling. *Emphasize and be specific about the positive facts and subtly downplay or generalize the negative ones*, I often tell students. But what if I'm urging a story that ultimately isn't believable, that doesn't have the ring of moral truth? For example, in a capital post-conviction proceeding, if I paint a (guilty) death-sentenced inmate as *merely* a victim of various traumas, am I immersing the court in unreality, thereby reducing my own credibility and hurting my client? Can I tell a realistic, morally truthful story that will also evoke a deeply human, deeply moral response from the court?

I also savored some new (to me) delicacies:

10 *Id.*

11 *Writing Fantasy Realistically: Fantasy, Realism, and Faith*, *in* Daemon Voices, *supra* note 1, at 326.

12 *Id.* at 327.

13 *Id.* at 328.

Phase space. Pullman loves physics. Here, he introduces the physics metaphor of "phase space" as relevant to the storytelling craft. Phase space is "something like the sum of all the consequences that could follow from a given origin."[14] If a story itself is a path (the storyline), the phase space is the forest surrounding the story (the story world)—the world the characters inhabit, along with all of the possibilities of that world.[15] And Pullman stresses that "the business of the storyteller is with the storyline, with the path. You can make your story-wood, your invented world, as rich and full as you like, but be very, very careful not to be tempted off the path."[16]

The recurrence of image schemas within a story. Pullman observes that image schemas tend to recur within stories. An image schema is a "skeletal pattern[] that recur[s] in our sensory and motor experience. Motion along a path, bounded interior, balance and symmetry are typical image schemas."[17] These schemas often recur without the author's conscious awareness, and the consistency of the recurrence provides coherence for the story as a whole. Once a writer becomes conscious of these image schemas, she can make choices about their use. For example, Pullman himself recognized a schema in *His Dark Materials*: things that were once closely bound together—a set of friends, a person and a place, even a person and his daemon—would be split apart. He had created this pattern over and over without being aware of it, but his eventual awareness guided key decisions in the third book of the trilogy: the fate of Lyra and her fellow traveler Will, the course of Lyra's journey into the land of the dead, the closing of traffic between parallel worlds.

As was true of the old favorites, these new delicacies apply almost as much to the lawyer's storytelling craft as to that of the writer of fiction. To be sure, the stories we lawyers tell are grounded in real people, real conflicts, real events, but the stories are still constructed: we privilege one point of view over another; we aim our camera somewhere; we consider what's part of the storyline versus merely the story world.

And, like the reader of fiction, our readers—judges, clients, other lawyers, other academics—get to decide what they think of our story:

> Don't tell the audience what the story means. Given that no one knows what's going on in someone else's head, you can't possibly tell them what it means in any case.

14 *The Path Through the Wood: How Stories Work*, *in* Daemon Voices, *supra* note 1, at 77.

15 *Id.*

16 *Id.* at 79.

17 *The Writing of Stories*, *supra* note 4, at 26–27 (quoting Mark Turner, The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language (1998)).

> Meanings are for the reader to find, not for the storyteller to impose. . . .
> The way to tell a story is to say what happened, and then shut up.[18]

Somewhat unlike the reader of fiction, however, our readers often write the next chapter of the story. In litigation, we tell a story, and a judge or jury then writes our client's next chapter. Thus, our duty is to tell a story that makes certain next chapters possible and other next chapters implausible. But how?

The notion that image schemas recur especially struck me here. As mentioned above, in *His Dark Materials*, the primary image schema was the separation of something that had once been closely connected. Given this image schema, the only sensible ending to the story required the permanent separation—the parting—of the protagonists, initially bound by fate and a common purpose and later bound by love. Pullman seems to be saying that if one or two image schemas dominate (whether consciously or unconsciously) a narrative, then any resolution of that narrative will remain consistent with those schemas.

Let's translate this to law. In rendering a decision, a judge or other decisionmaker may intuitively continue the image schemas we have summoned in our litigation narratives. For example, if a defense lawyer in a capital case unwittingly tells his client's story in a way that emphasizes, say, that the vulnerable client was failed by all of those who ever held power over his life, then, like it or not, the judge may unconsciously continue the story, ensuring its coherence by, you guessed it, "failing" the vulnerable capital defendant yet again.

I don't know whether I'm right about how image schemas work within law. I do know that *Daemon Voices* has given me food for thought, new ideas for both teaching and scholarship (like, say the effect of recurring image schemas on legal decisionmaking), an expanded reading list, and—not least—a renewed sense of wonder and delight in our shared craft. If you care about good storytelling, this book belongs on your shelf.

18 *Children's Literature Without Borders: Stories Shouldn't Need Passports*, *in* Daemon Voices, *supra* note 1, at 127.