



STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

Northern Lights by Philip Pullman

About This Book

The questions, discussion topics, and author information that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of *Northern Lights* (The Golden Compass). We hope that this guide will help you to navigate - alongside the story's young protagonist, Lyra Belacqua - Philip Pullman's richly imagined universe, populated by armored bears, gyptians, witches, and human beings, whose dæmons are never far from their side.

Dæmons are one of the most striking, charming, and powerful images in *Northern Lights*. These spirit-creatures, which seem like physical representations of the human soul, can change form to reflect the myriad of emotional states their humans go through as children. But in adulthood, each dæmon settles into the animal form that best reflects the inner nature of its human counterpart. It is in this unusual and imaginative creation that Pullman turns his sharpest mirror back onto his readers, helping us to imagine our own souls as precious, living extensions of ourselves that we can love, challenge, or even betray.

Northern Lights is a complex story that turns on a simple word: "Dust." This Dust does not gather in the unswept corners of Jordan College, Lyra's Oxford home. Rather, this Dust seems to reveal - or perhaps contain - the thing that makes each human being a unique creature. The concept of Dust provokes fear in some; others realize that mastery over Dust could be the source of great power. Although she does not quite realize it, Lyra - along with her dæmon Pantalaimon - finds her life inextricably entangled with the exploration of Dust. And as her understanding of Dust and her mastery over a mysterious tool called the alethiometer increases, the dangerous journey that she seems destined to make takes some astounding twists and turns.

Discussion Questions

1. The author tells us that *Northern Lights* takes place "in a universe like ours, but different in many ways." How do you think Lyra's universe relates to ours?
2. What is a dæmon? How do they make humans different from other creatures? Why do you think servants' dæmons are always dogs? What sort of dæmons might your friends, relatives, classmates, or coworkers have? Describe your own dæmon.
3. The world of *Northern Lights* is ruled by the Church. However, the nature of its power is unclear. What power do you think the Church holds over its people?
4. On pages 89-90, the General Oblation Board is explained in reference to the historical sacrifice of children to cloistered life. "Oblation" refers to the act of making a religious offering. What offering does the General Oblation Board make and to whom?
5. Human knowledge and experience are made physical in *Dust*. What other psychological, intellectual, or spiritual activities does the author physicalize?
6. What is the relationship between "severing" and death? Is the author using this fantasy to explore the notion of psychic or moral death?
7. Why do you think the author stresses that Lyra is not an imaginative child? Why would "imagination" be dangerous to her? How would it affect her understanding of the alethiometer? Is Lyra a truth-seeker? Who is Lyra Belacqua and/or what does she symbolize?
8. In what ways is gender a significant or stratifying element in the novel? Why do you think all witches are female? Why are dæmons usually the opposite gender of their human counterparts? Is the fact that Lyra is a girl-child relevant to the themes of the story?
9. Alongside human society in *Northern Lights*, there exists the community of the armored bears, who have their own hierarchical structure and moral code. In one way Svalbard seems little more than an interesting foil to the human condition, yet the bear kingdom is also a final destination, the site of the story's climactic conclusion. What do you think is the author's purpose in inventing - and exploring - the world of the armored bear?
10. The author has filled this novel with binary imagery: person-dæmon; mother-father; lorek-lofur; Lyra's universe-the universe in the Aurora. What other binarisms can you find in the structure, landscape imagery, and vocabulary of this fantasy? How do these dualistic elements affect the novel's larger themes?
11. Discuss Lyra's "betrayal" of Roger in relation to other betrayals that occur in the novel. Has reading *Northern Lights* altered your understanding of the act of betrayal?
12. Are Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter in collusion or are they fighting each other? How and in what way?
13. Curiously absent from *Northern Lights* are four words that are prevalent in most fantasy adventures: right, wrong, good, and evil. Can these terms be applied to this story? How and why, or why not?
14. On the last page of the book, Lyra and Pantalaimon recognize that they are still "one being; both of us are one." The expression resonates with a phrase from marriage ceremonies. Contrast this moment in the story with the preceding interplay between Lyra's parents.
15. *Northern Lights* is the first book in the trilogy *His Dark Materials*, which gets its name from a passage in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, quoted at the beginning of the novel. Philip Pullman has said, "Milton's angels are not seriously meant to be believed - beings with wings and halos and white robes. They are psychological qualities, conceived and pictured as personalities. With them, Milton tells one of the central tales of our world: the story of the temptation and fall of humankind." Discuss the passage from *Paradise Lost* and this statement from the author in relation to *Northern Lights*.
16. When Lyra walks "into the sky" at the end of Book One, we can presume that she is walking into the world of Book Two of *His Dark Materials* - "the universe that we know." What do you think will happen to her and Pantalaimon when they cross the bridge?

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