

05 All Saints

A young man is exploring an old desk in his father's study. He opens a drawer - and at once he finds himself in another world. That's how the story starts. The storyteller was George MacDonald and he called his strange story *Phantastes*. MacDonald died a century ago but in many ways his *Phantastes* is a modern myth, the first of "the modern myths of good and evil" we're thinking about this morning. The start of that story reminds us of how C. S. Lewis's Narnia stories begin, with Lucy finding her way into Narnia through the back of an old wardrobe. *Phantastes* is the source of the stream, the stream which has become today's torrent of fantasy-writing flooding our bookshops.

The main thing about the great myths, ancient or modern, is that they are true. Not because they record what happened but because they tell the truth. George MacDonald said, "Even if wholly fictitious, a good story is wholly true". Myths tell the truth that there is a war raging, the immemorial conflict between light and darkness, good and evil. Story-tellers can of course make up all sorts of far-fetched creatures. (Puddlegum the Marshwiggle is my favourite. I always look out for him when I wander across Hackney Marshes.) They can concoct these weird creatures but they can never invent new laws of right and wrong. "Moral laws" said George MacDonald, "must be everywhere the same". And in all the worlds that have ever been or have ever been imagined the supreme law is this: we must live - and sometimes die - for one another.

There's a war on and there are no neutrals. We must decide which side we're on.

Think of Hogwarts, the world Harry Potter travels to from Platform 9¾ at Kings Cross Station. That world is charged with magic. Those who say that J. K. Rowling's talk about witches and wizards is harmful really have got hold of the wrong end of the broomstick. Most of it is as playful and as innocent as stink-bombs or whoopee-cushions. But there are dark forces at work at Hogwarts - as in our own world - and Harry and his friends must confront them. We're never in doubt about what is fun and what is far from fun. We all must learn that laughter sometimes has to stop and that tough moral choices have to be made. These choices aren't always clear-cut. Harry Potter must sometimes choose between right and wrong but, like us, often he has to choose between what's bad and what's even worse.

Whatever else they are, these "modern myths" are not "escapist". We may find them fun but if that's all we find them we've not been paying attention! They are far too disturbing. They make us think again about how things are. Go to King's Cross Station today and you'll see that between platform nine and ten there's a sign saying Platform 9¾. As you look at that sign - just for a moment, before that sometimes misleading thing called "commonsense" kicks in - you'll wonder. Just for a moment - but what an important moment it is! - the frontier between two worlds, the magical and the mundane, fades. That's what these books do for us; it's how they work, it's one reason why they're so important. They make us wonder whether everything is quite as it seems.

Our modern myths make us think again about how things are. More important, they make us think again about how things should be. These are deeply subversive stories. They challenge power-structures. They are manifestos for social change. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* is such a story. It's about the struggle between 'those who want us to know more and be wiser and stronger and those who want us to obey and be humble and submit'. Pullman's great trilogy isn't really about the death of God and the defeat of the church! To be sure, Pullman doesn't like the church and he thinks Christianity is a bad mistake. But his real target isn't the church. The church in Pullman's trilogy is a symbol standing for the real enemy. That enemy is whoever or whatever suppresses the free spirit, any and every despot or tyranny that stops children and those no longer children from living life to the full. *His Dark Materials* is about setting the human spirit free. And that deliverance, Philip Pullman makes clear, is won - and can only be won - through costly love. If there are echoes here of another story, so be it.

At the heart of these modern myths there is an aching longing for things to change. In their different ways they all look forward. George MacDonald's *Phantastes* ends with a voice whispering in the wind, "A great good is coming ...". Frodo must sail to the lands west of west for the healing of his wounds. The Narnia stories close with the good news that "the term is over: the holidays have begun". (Goodness knows - but goodness does know - what will happen to Harry Potter.) Philip Pullman looks forward too - but he also brings us back to here and now. "We have to be all those difficult things like cheerful and kind and curious and brave and patient, and we've got to study and think and work hard all of us and then we'll build ... the republic of heaven'. Pullman calls it 'the republic of heaven'. Christians call it the Kingdom of God which is not the same - except in what we have to get on and do.