



Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.



## Podcasts | New Scientist

Listen to the full conversation with Philip Pullman on the Big Interview at [newscientist.com/podcasts/](https://www.newscientist.com/podcasts/)



Philip Pullman (left) dreamed up daemons - animal manifestations of the soul. Lyra and her daemon Pan from the BBC version of *His Dark Materials* are below

believe there's not that much difference between them, that there is an imagination going on. Science is clearly a field where the imagination can be triumphant. Einstein wasn't terribly at home with mathematics. But he was good at visualising the physical properties of things and seeing deeply into the nature of them. I suppose a biologist would have the same affinity to think themselves into the being of whatever it is, squirrels, beetles, fish.

### What was your intention with the message about religion in *His Dark Materials*?

I don't believe in a god. But the questions that religion poses and tries to answer are the important questions about human life. Where do we come from? Is there a purpose in our living? How can we be good? Do we have to be good? What happens if we're evil? Those are big, important questions. And the Christian religion did give answers, which worked for most of 2000 years and still do work for people. But then other religions have answers which aren't so different. All that demonstrates is that people need stories. A story will help us make sense of anything. But a story is a story. You don't have to believe everything in the story to find it satisfying.



BBC © BAO WOLF/HBO

there sets your course for the rest of your life. I was about 16. I'm very attracted by what he says, for example, about consciousness: "How do you know but every bird that cuts the airy way is an immense world of delight closed by your senses five?" Or, "Man has no body distinct from his soul, for body that portion of soul discerned by the five senses."

I like that way of thinking. I like that inclusiveness. I like the emotional power he gets from it. "Let me show you a world where every particle of dust is alive with joy." That seems to me highly joyful, highly encouraging and healthy, an all round good way to look at the world.

Going back to the things that Debussy and Keats do, and the things that scientists do, I want to

At the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, the main character Lyra and her daemon Pan say they need to build "the republic of heaven". Do we need to build it? Or has it built itself? William Blake again: "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's." That raises questions too. Do we need a system to live by? Can we build our own? What would it be like to try and live without one? Well, in fact, I don't think you can, because whether you consciously built it or not, your mind, everybody's mind was formed not only by evolution, but also by experiences, by genetic factors that might predispose one to depression or its opposite.

So we have a system, most of us, but it's a ragbag of memories, superstitions, inclinations, things we worked out for ourselves, things we bought wholesale from the nearest church. We all do have a sort of system, a thing that helps us to live in a meaningful way. And I think what Lyra and Pan were agreeing at the end of *The Amber Spyglass* is that we need to do that for ourselves. And poor Lyra is discovering in *The Book of Dust* that it's not as easy as she thought.

### Were the daemons in your fictional worlds created or did they evolve?

The question I've had more often than any other is, how do daemons get born? And I will say, well, you're welcome to come up with any answer you like, but I'm going to answer it for you, because it's a metaphor. It's a very useful metaphor for human psychology. I found it in *The Secret Commonwealth* to be a very good analogy for depression. You don't like your daemon. Or your daemon wants to leave you and go and live with someone else. It's a very tight, neat, easily graspable way of picturing something that isn't easily picturable otherwise. ■

## Don't miss



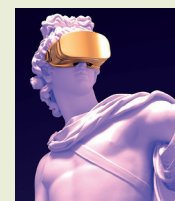
### Visit

**FACT**, a centre for art, film and new technology in Liverpool, UK, is putting together a year-long online programme of podcasts, live streams, videos, challenges and activities exploring our relationship with the natural environment.



### Read

**The Age of Islands** is a work of non-fiction about people who have built their own islands for fun and profit while rising sea levels cause natural ones to disappear. Explorer Alastair Bonnett boards a boat to explore this strange new world.



### Watch

**The Art Newspaper** on YouTube ponders whether art and culture can thrive on the internet. Covid-19 has forced museums and galleries to reinvent themselves, but will it be enough?