

Philip Pullman at the Arts and Humanities Discussion Group: What are stories made of? Rhianedd Jewell

The discussion group held with guest speaker Philip Pullman on the 28th of May was undoubtedly our most popular event to date. Despite doubling capacity, the talk was nonetheless oversubscribed, but those who were lucky enough to attend were far from disappointed. Chairing the discussion group myself, I introduced Mr Pullman as having been educated in various countries before reading English at Exeter College, Oxford. He has spent many years teaching and is now a full-time author, having achieved international renown, been awarded numerous prestigious awards, and published nearly twenty books.

Mr Pullman stressed that the topic of his seminar 'What are stories made of?' is a work in progress, though it is something which has intrigued him for some time. The idea explores the relationship between words and images, surface and structure. It was inspired by his interaction with a project conducted by *Microsoft Research* where an attempt was made to represent his stories in the form of graphic images. Although stories can be viewed as being made up of both words and images, for Pullman, the basis of every story is its events.



Philip Pullman on how stories are made
Photo: Karen Heath

One event was chosen as a focal point for this talk, that of pouring something (perhaps a liquid) from one container to another. It is an abstract 'event', with no feeling immediately attached to it. What possibilities, the discussion group was encouraged to consider, does this event therefore hold?

We were presented with a series of images that illustrated different versions of this event, and their varying implications. The significance of the act of pouring ranged greatly across the pictures. The first image

showed a woman in an historic setting pouring water. The lighting and setting of the painting were its focal point, according to Pullman, whilst the event of pouring was a merely decorative feature. Similarly, the subsequent image taken from a cartoon in *The New Yorker* illustrated a scene from a bar in 1926 in which a man is dispensing bootleg hooch in secret. In this picture, the pouring was a detail furnishing the scenery and background of the image.

The following [cartoon](#), also from *The New Yorker*, placed greater importance on the event of pouring, for here it was the subject of the story. Standing on top of an enormous tower, the Addams family are about to tip a heavy cauldron of some concoction on the innocent carol singers below. The scene portrays the precise moment before the liquid gushes forth. Pullman explained that it is our graphic understanding which allows us to comprehend the action which will follow imminently. When one depicts a story in a single scene or picture, one has to pick the moment which best conveys the story, as was caught here in the moment just prior to the pouring. Pullman claimed that for this reason, photography marked a pivotal moment in the history of storytelling: the reliance on a sequence of pictures both allows one to see time passing without the intervention of language or tense and equally permits freedom from reliance on the implicit nature of an image.

The next image was a Rembrandt painting entitled [*Belshazzar's Feast*](#), a painting which depicts a king distracted by words written on the wall. Turning to see the words, he spills water and this metaphorical discharge represents the chaos that has ensued following the prophetic revelation. Similarly, Piero della Francesca's portrayal of the [*Baptism of Christ*](#) presents the synecdochical image of John pouring water on Jesus's brow. The act of pouring represents the monumental meaning behind the baptism of Jesus, who subsequently brought salvation through the baptism of all Christians that followed him.

There are many everyday sayings which incorporate the act of pouring whose imagery we no longer ponder. Among the examples Pullman suggested were: 'he's feeling absolutely drained', 'spilt milk', 'she poured her heart out'; and 'a drop in the ocean'. We can relate the images to things we know and can thus deduce their meaning, but at this point the process is completed so naturally that the imagery itself is incidental.

Pullman posed the question: 'What does 'a spring' mean?' It is something valuable; a source; a need coming out of something else. We witnessed this life-giving liquid in a painting of baby Jesus at Mary's breast, as well as in Raphael's depiction of angels catching blood flowing from Jesus as he hangs on the cross. In the same way, the 'spring' of a narrative, or the pouring out of a story, is something of great value. Pullman's next project will hinge on the idea that the fundamental particles of stories are their events, and not words. He drew attention to the fact that, in *His Dark Materials*, simultaneous (or 'split') events are led along interweaving threads, though tied together in the narrative. Although reluctant to reveal too much, Pullman described how this new project will be a re-telling of the story of Jesus in the form of a fairy tale. He intends to construct the narrative without exploring the characters' psychology in depth, by inserting just the right amount of imagery and focusing on the events themselves.

The seminar closed with a discussion of the nature of story-telling from an author's point of view. Pullman described the difficulty inherent in choosing the perspective of a proposed narrator. In terms of images, he aptly questioned: 'Where do you put the camera?', and 'How much do you tell the reader about the characters' inner thoughts?' Upon being questioned further about the necessity of an event in any given story, Pullman elaborated on the nature of the thing which he has dubbed so crucial to the telling of a story. An 'event' can be an action, such as giving somebody a gift; a phrase, such as a sentence proclaimed by a judge; or even something as simple as a look expressed by a character. It has to be a change of state in the physical world. Pullman described how the overall arc of a story should be shaped by something going wrong. It has often been said that there are only eleven stories in the world, but Pullman claims that these are in fact all variations on a single story: that is, the quest for the Holy Grail. Something is missing or wrong and needs finding or fixing. Either the problem is righted or not, and this is the crux of every story.

But what of the ending? Pullman argues that one cannot write a novel knowing what's going to happen. For him, writing is discovering, not inventing. He is always intrigued by something which will serve as a starting point for his writing. It can be something quite simple, a single event. Indeed, for *His Dark Materials*, it was the idea of a girl going into a room where she wasn't meant to be. From that point, he knew the mood that he wanted to reach in the last pages but he did not know how he would get there and what adventures he would come across along the way. We are left to wonder, therefore, what event will next inspire Philip Pullman along a path he will find and share with his avid readers.

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