Children's Literature in Education, Vol. 23, No. 3, 1992

Philip Pullman grew up in what was then Southern Rhodesia, in Australia and in North Wales. He took an English degree at Oxford, and taught in middle schools in that city for thirteen years. He now divides his time between writing and lecturing at Westminster College, Oxford. His novel *The Ruby In The Smoke*, the first part of a trilogy, won the International Reading Association Children's Book Award in 1988, and the other parts both made the ALA Best Book for Young Adults list. He has also written two 'illustrated novels' for younger readers, books for teenagers and an adult novel.

Philip Pullman

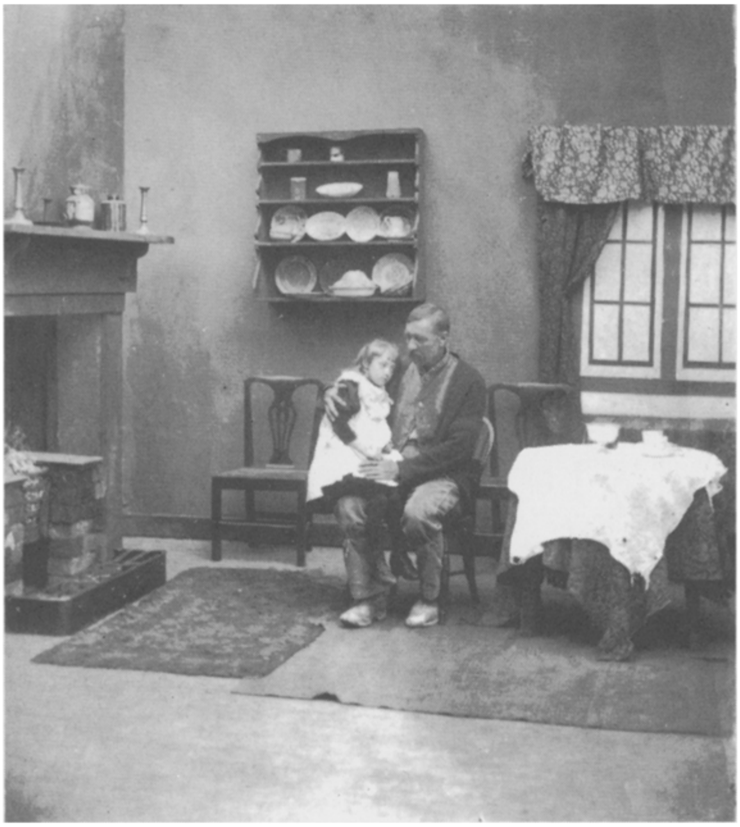
Daddy, or Serendipity

Some years ago, I used to work in a library in the Charing Cross Road, and every lunchtime I'd wander around the little courts and alleys nearby, or go up to Covent Garden, still a real market then; and when I had a shilling or two (it was as long ago as that) in my pocket, I'd go into a shop in Cecil Court and browse through the theatrical memorabilia in search of something that was simultaneously interesting and cheap.

One day I found, in a box of old postcards, a couple that intrigued me. They were a pair: photographs, with the verses of a sentimental poem printed underneath. The poem is called *Daddy*, and it's told in the voice of a little girl whose birthday it is. She and her father are sitting miserably in their poorly furnished room, and they're miserable because Mother has died. "I wonder if Mother is thinking of us Because it's my birthday night," say the last two lines. The first photograph shows a man dressed as a labourer, even to the strings around the legs of his trousers, holding a little girl of eight or nine on his lap. (Those lengths of string tied under the knee are called bowyangs. I found that out recently by accident, and now that I know it, I shall certainly use it. It's another example of research by serendipity.) The second shows him weeping, the little girl tenderly stroking his head, and Mother gazing down from Heaven, dressed in white and surrounded by wisps of cotton wool.

The postcards are undated, but I'd guess they're Edwardian rather than Victorian. There was clearly a flourishing trade in such things: They're published by Bamforth, who are still producing picture postcards, though now of the comic-saucy variety. I kept the pictures on my desk for years, but didn't look very closely at them until, one day, I noticed something I hadn't seen before: how obviously stagey the

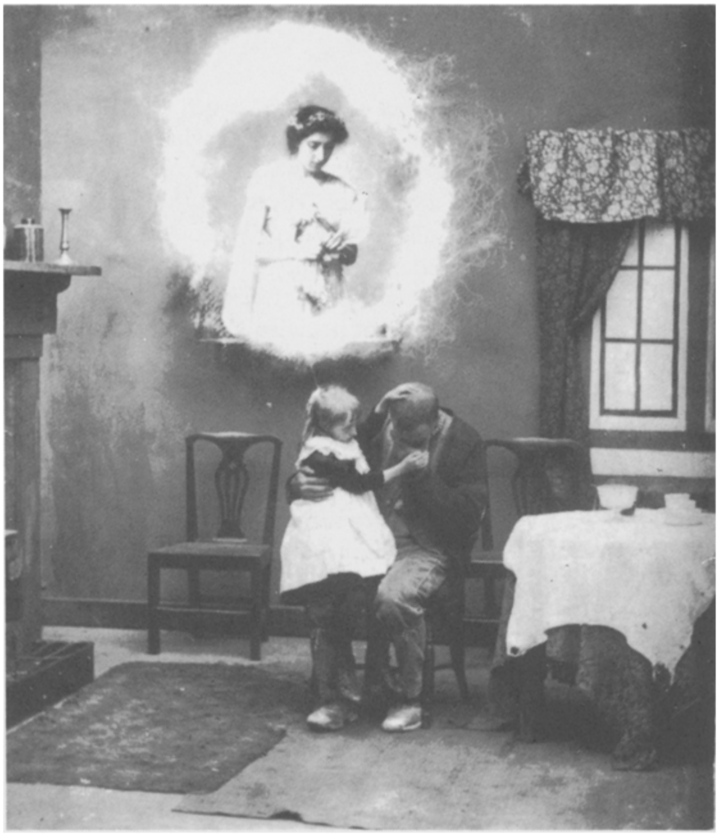
0045-6713/92/0900-0157$06.50/0 © 1992 Human Sciences Press, Inc.



DADDY

Take my head on your shoulder, Daddy,
Turn your face to the west,
It is just the hour when the sky turns gold,
The hour that mother loves best.
The day has been long without you, Daddy,
You've been such a while away,
And now you're as tired of your work, Daddy,
As I am tired of play. But I've got you,
And you've got me, so everything seems right,
I wonder if Mother is thinking of us,
Because it is my birthday night.

setting was. The windows are not real windows, but white sheets with black strips painted on to represent glazing bars; the fireplace is hastily put together out of bricks and planks; and so on. The idea of a photographic studio where they took pictures of invented scenes—a sort of precursor of the movie studio: not movies but stillies, per-



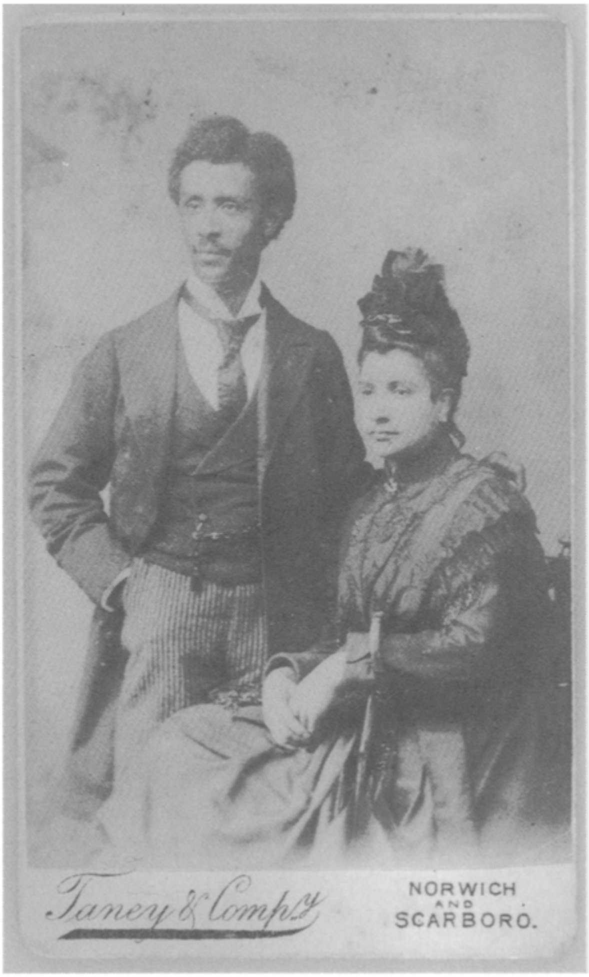
"Why do your big tears fall, Daddy,
Mother's not far away,
I often seem to hear her voice
Falling across my play,
And it sometimes makes me cry, Daddy,
To think that it's none of it true,
Till I fall asleep to dream, Daddy,
Of home and Mother and you;
For I've got you and you've got me,
So everything seems right,
We're all the world to each other, Daddy,
For Mother, dear Mother, once told me so."

haps—seemed such a richly promising setting that I couldn't resist the cheerful improvisatory vigour of it. It came to rest in the part of my mind where stories grow, and many years later the taking of that photograph emerged on page 122 of *The Ruby in the Smoke* (Puffin, 1987), by which time the little girl had a name and a history. She didn't stop there. I'm writing about her now, in a book called *The Tin Princess.*

I tell that story because it illustrates part of the serendipity of research—if I can dignify what I do to find out about the background of my stories with a name that really implies a procedure more scholarly altogether. There's nothing scholarly about the way I "research": The material is largely brought to me by luck, and I read what interests me, and stop when I'm bored. I read in order to be able to invent convincingly. And I read material about the time of Queen Victoria not because I've decided to write a novel set in 1872, say: I set a novel then because I'm already fascinated by that period. I could never write a novel set in the time of the Crusades: the period doesn't pull me toward it. The interest comes first.

The Victorian period is easier to research, or serendipitise, than the Middle Ages not only because there's a lot more material lying about but because of the nature of some of that material. In one sense, the Victorians are more real to us than any age before them: The real-ness (I don't quite mean reality) of, say, Dr Johnson or Elizabeth I is of a different kind, as different as painting is from photography. A loose bootlace, a splash of mud on a trouser leg, a clumsily folded shawl—a million details which a painter would have to choose whether or not to include, and then would probably leave out—confirm the real-ness of the subject. And then there are the subjects themselves. Dr Johnson and Elizabeth I were painted because they were eminent; there are far fewer representations of their servants, or men and women in the street. But we're all familiar with the great Victorian photographs of slum children, of fishermen mending their nets, of farmers holding horses. They're easy to come by—the series of Victorian and Edwardian books of photographs, published by Batsford, is widely available—and they're enormously popular.

And there are plenty of original photographs about. Originals are better than reproductions in books; they're often sharper and clearer, but more to the point, they are real. The subject of the photograph might have handled this very piece of card. I have a sense—I wouldn't say that it was remotely connected with anything psychic, but it does induce a subtle thrill—of real connection with the past when I touch them. I'm thinking of two in particular that I own. One shows a young couple who look as if they've just become engaged. It's a studio portrait taken (to judge by their clothes) in about 1870, in either Norwich or Scarborough, because the photographer had studios in both places, according to the florid label on the back. Nothing out of the ordinary so far; but they were an unusual couple to find in Norwich or Scarborough in the latter half of the nineteenth



century. Did he come from somewhere else? Did they settle there? Did they have children? What they must have met in the way of prejudice and suspicion can only be imagined. But it *can* be imagined—and that's my point: there's a story in it.

The other photograph shows a murky-looking cemetery, with a newly dug grave covered in flowers. When I show this to primary school children I say, "Can you see the ghost?" and then point him out: Standing behind the grave there's the figure of a man in a cloth cap, his right arm bent, his hand on his heart. It's only vaguely visible, because at some stage during the printing someone has scratched the image very carefully off the negative, and left a man-shaped space. And there's a story in that. Why go to those lengths? What kind of family tensions, hatreds, jealousies . . . I don't need to go on. There's no shortage of stories begging to be told.

But stories live in language, and that demands research as well, because the further away we go from the present day, the more salient a certain problem becomes. In simple terms it poses itself like this: "Do I write in present-day English or English of the period?" The Middle Ages, for instance: if the characters are speaking modern English, why are they wearing armour? Or: if they're going on a Crusade, why aren't they speaking Middle English? To write about Crusaders in their kind of English would allow the dialogue to sound authentic, but would grievously restrict the readership. If you want readers, you have to use present-day English; but that can easily sound incongruous. Would a knight in armour be able to say something like "Come off it"? You'd have to find an equivalent that had the force of the idiom without being too closely anchored in a speech-society that didn't yet exist. (The *parole* of the speaker's utterance would have to match the *langue* of his clothes.) The best you can hope for is a sort of dignified neutrality that reads like a good translation, because a translation is what it would inevitably be. A similar thing is true, incidentally, of science-fiction set in the future, or in distant parts of the universe: everything spoken is a translation from a language that doesn't exist.

(There's a curious parallel here with the phenomenon of period plays on videotape. In the early, unsophisticated days of TV drama, when the classic serial was still in vogue, costume drama was often made on video. Seeing it repeated now produces an odd dislocation: We associate the brightness and immediacy of the video image with "live" TV like news broadcasts, where we know that what we are seeing is taking place at this very moment in a studio. The subtlety of lighting and the different kind of sharpness—the different *quality* of image—we see on film has an entirely different effect. Film, we know, can't be taking place now: it has had to be processed, developed, and so on; it belongs to the past. So we accept costume drama on film much more readily than on video: the past-ness and the present-ness don't clash.)

So although the language in which I write about Victorian characters can't be Victorian English, it has to work like it. I have to know what's possible. A word like *competence*, for example: "Margaret, like Sally, valued competence when she saw it; it was one of the reasons they liked each other" (*The Tiger in the Well*, p. 270) has undergone a slight semantic shift since the year 1881 in which *The Tiger in the*

Well is set. Then, it would have been easier to see it out of the corner of one's eye and half understand the meaning "sufficient income to live on." That meaning has retreated a little since then. I've explained more fully elsewhere (*Signal* 60, September 1989) the technique I call *leakage*, whereby I make use of this phenomenon of subliminal "misreading" by planting a word that can have a different, but reinforcing, meaning. Here is a case in point. The older meaning of *competence* is actually relevant here, since the two characters in this scene have just been discussing how to prevent the theft of Sally's money. The proximity of "value" reinforces this (I'm not talking about close attention to the text here, but the sort of thing that happens when we read in a hurry, impatient for the story).

But the knot is tighter than this. *Competence* also has a legal meaning: "capable of being brought forward, admissible; within the jurisdiction of a court." And again this association is reinforced, because Margaret is talking to a lawyer, and they are discussing the details of a legal case. Furthermore, readers have met that notion already, because when Sally herself is talking to the lawyer on p. 245, he says, "Extradition would not be competent" and goes on to explain, "It wouldn't apply," thus demonstrating his competence . . .

Do I really expect any reader to be conscious of all that?

No, of course not. But I am. It's a game I play for my own pleasure. And in order to satisfy myself that these connections work, I have to use various dictionaries, notably (of course) the complete *Oxford English Dictionary*, with magnifying glass. I need to be sure that a sense I want to suggest was current in 1881 (or whenever), and no other dictionary will do.

But as well as the semantic aspect of language there's something less easy to describe. I think it's located in the rhythm, though irony comes into it as well. I have in mind a quality I see in three writers who flourished around the end of the last and the beginning of this century: Jerome K. Jerome, W. W. Jacobs, and the unjustly forgotten Australian author Norman Lindsay. The particular note, the special flavour, of the tone of Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* is one I've enjoyed since I first read it at the age of nine:

> George goes to sleep at a bank from ten to four each day, except Saturdays, when they wake him up and put him outside at two.

You find the same tone in W. W. Jacobs:

> "Boys!" he said, at last. "That's the third time this week, and yet if I was to catch one and skin 'im alive I suppose I should get into trouble over

> it. Even 'is own father and mother would make a fuss, most likely." (*Deep Waters*, 1919)

And Norman Lindsay has a touch of it too:

> "While you do the fighting," said Bunyip bravely, "I shall mind the Puddin'."
>
> "The trouble is," said Bill, "that this is a very secret, crafty Puddin', an' if you wasn't up to his game he'd be askin' you to look at a spider an' then run away while your back is turned."
>
> "That's right," said the Puddin', gloomily. "Take a Puddin's character away. Don't mind his feelings."
>
> "We don't mind your feelin's, Albert," said Bill. "What we minds is your treacherous 'abits." (*The Magic Pudding*, 1918)

Once it's heard, that tone is unmistakable. If there's anything of that tone in my writing I'd be glad, because its ironic astringency pleases me enormously, and if it has a location in time it's roughly at the period I'm writing about or a little later, so if I get something like it I'm not too far off.

What about originality, though? Aren't I just parroting? Isn't it derivative? We make too much of this quality called originality: I think that we learn by imitation. Everything is an imitation of something else, in a way; and literary theory comes up with nice words like intertextuality to account for it. Writing is about writing as well as about life, and if you sincerely imitate the models that are congenial to you, you can't help but improve your command of the material. The danger comes, I suppose, when you begin to imitate yourself. So I read and imitate the writers I admire, and many of them—by chance—happen to have flourished around the turn of the century. It all reinforces that tone I referred to.

I thought, incidentally, before I'd read any, that I'd find an appropriate tone to imitate in penny dreadfuls: *Boys of England, Deadwood Dick, Jack Harkaway*, and the like. I was wrong, because there's no place for irony in tales of that sort. They were written, most of them, in too much of a hurry and far too earnestly. The prose they contain is extremely interesting, but for the light it throws on the authors' and readers' understanding of narrative—and on the various ideologies nakedly on display—rather than for any qualities that are worth imitating.

However, we can't avoid displaying an ideology of some sort, whether veiled or naked, so the best we can do is to be intelligent about it. What I write is art of a sort, I hope; it has to work in terms of story and pattern, but nothing is unmixed, thank God; everything is confused and impure, and there's a sense in which I would have chosen to write about the late nineteenth century even if the other considerations hadn't brought me to it. Because I've got another purpose in mind as well. That was a time when the seeds of the present day were germinating. Feminism, to take an obvious example. I didn't set out to write a trilogy with a female protagonist and give her exciting and interesting things to do: the story chose me. But I was glad to find a medium in which I could show how feminism, for example, didn't spring fully armed from the head of Germaine Greer but was being discussed, and was influencing people, a hundred or more years ago. The drug trade has a past as well; it didn't begin with *Miami Vice*; it's intimately entwined with our economic history. Terrorism—the modern sense of that very word first appeared then, and one of the characters in *The Tiger in the Well* learns it.

And finally, in the same book, I wanted to talk about socialism. It's had a bad press in the past few years; it's been depicted as the dreary source of every kind of repression, misery, and failure. I wanted to show that it has a better history than that, that there was a time when it was the best response of the best people to the conditions around them. I wanted to celebrate a little: to celebrate the efforts of working people to educate themselves: the Workingmen's Literary and Philosophical Institute, in *The Shadow in the North*; the efforts of middle-class philanthropists to alleviate suffering among the poor; the Spitalfields Social Mission in *The Tiger in the Well.* (Here, as in many other places, I owe a great debt to William J. Fishman's *East End 1888* (Duckworth, 1988)—a book full of horror and darkness, laid out with enormous learning and lit with a steady, unflinching compassion. Reading and re-reading it is an experience more like life than like research). So my ideology is educational. I was a teacher for too many years to stop teaching just because I'm no longer paid to do it; and as teachers used to know long before the National Curriculum gave them other things to think about, stories are a pretty good way to teach.

Books by Philip Pullman

Ruby. O.U.P., 1985; Puffin 1987.
The Shadow in the Plate. O.U.P., 1986. Revised as *The Shadow in the North.* Puffin, 1988.
The Tiger in the Well. Viking, 1991.
Tiger. Puffin, forthcoming.
Spring-Heeled Jack. Doubleday, 1989; (pbk), Yearling, 1991.
Court Karlstein. Doubleday, 1991; (pbk), forthcoming.
The Broken Bridge. Macmillan, 1990; (pbk), Pan, 1991.
The White Mercedes. Macmillan, 1992.