



# May We Recommend... Philip Pullman

Article Author:

[Geoff Fox](#) [1]

74 [2]

Article Category:

May We Recommend

Byline:

**Geoff Fox** looks at the novels of **Philip Pullman**.

We asked **Geoff Fox** to take a look at the writer whose first book was **How to be Cool** and who, appropriately for our picture book edition, has recently published two graphic novels.

<!--break-->

In the mail this morning is a xeroxed catalogue advertising old comics. I'm offered a 1939 **Beano** (in 'Very Good' condition, mind you) for £125.00. Its original readers must now be just about drawing their pensions, yet their grandchildren might well be chortling over much the same kind of humour in this week's issue; anarchy everywhere, chaotic chases, terrible puns, sly nudges from artist to reader and, above all, Authority Being Upset.

There's a fair bit of the enduring **Beano** tradition in Philip Pullman's twin volumes, **Spring-Heeled Jack: A Story of Bravery** and **Evil and Count Karlstein, or The Ride of the Demon Huntsman**. His original sources may be Victorian Chillers or Ruritanian Romances - the stuff of Penny Dreadfuls, in fact - but he'll also mix in a dash of Janet and Allan Ahlberg or Prokofiev. The narrative is carried by print, then comic-style pictures-and-speech-bubbles, then back to print. It is a medium full of energy and wit. Both stories began as plays written when Philip Pullman was teaching at a middle school in Oxford - it's not surprising therefore that much of the comic energy stems from situations which are physically funny. A chase across the rooftops, for example, involves our sailor hero who's afraid of heights but nevertheless upends a pursuing policeman into a chimney pot. ('Right, that does it! I've lost my temper now! You're under arrest, and anything you say will be taken down in evidence ... squawks the inverted rozzer, legs kicking above the tiles.)

Witty readers will also enjoy **Beano** artist David Mostyn's scrawny cat and diminutive bed-bug, confiding laid-back asides on the folly of the protagonists from half-in, half-out of **Spring-Heeled Jack's** narrative frames. They'll also like Patrice Aggs' stuffed animal heads in Count Karlstein's hunting lodge muttering, 'What rubbish!' or 'Don't listen to him'; or the ghost, about to be blasted by the globetrotting Miss Augusta Davenport's 'Bellerephon' Hydro-Atmospheric Plunger gun, with its spectral dying (?) moans of 'Down with Progress! Down with Science!'

I wrote to the author about the books and, at a loss for a genre, called them 'graphic novels'. Philip Pullman modified the description: 'The form I have evolved for these two books is a hybrid, and actually I didn't evolve it at all - I stole it lock, stock and barrel from Shirley Hughes, who developed it in **Chips and Jessie** and its sequel (and I acknowledge the theft at the back of **Count Karlstein**). The combination of text and pictures, each doing what the other wasn't or couldn't, appealed to me at once and enormously. "Novel-comic", perhaps?'

Since he is not a graphic artist ('I can't draw'), Philip Pullman had to write the text and describe the pictures, including the words within the pictures, in great detail and then pass the whole package over to the artist. His notes to the the illustrator are precise. He suggests, for example, the angle from which the reader views the action in **Count Karlstein**: 'Over the girls' shoulders, as they look down through the window into a castle courtyard . . .'; 'From the courtyard,

looking up at the grim old lawyer getting out of the carriage. He's gazing up at the towering walls of the Castle, in one high window of which we can see the two girls' heads peering down.'

Novel-reading adults can find this a slippery medium - 'Strange that,' comments Philip Pullman, 'when teenagers not thought of by their teachers as fluent readers manage them so well. The truth is that this kind of text demands a different way of reading - a non-linear way, perhaps.'

Given the chance, and they should be, young readers will pick up the rules of this particular reading game straightaway, including some not yet at home with conventional novels. They'll relish these wild versions of snakes-and-ladders with two or three heroes and heroines simultaneously sliding down or clambering up, usually just missing each other and only coinciding in the safety of 'Home'. And Philip Pullman keeps landing the characters, and his reader, on unexpected squares.

Few writers could have managed these books and also written the extraordinary **Ruby in the Smoke** trilogy (**The Shadow in the North** and **The Tiger in the Well** complete the adventures of the intrepid Sally Lockhart around nineteenth-century London, Europe and Beyond). At one level, **The Tiger in the Well**, for example, tastes delicious like the Penny Dreadfuls beloved of one of the novel's characters-there is the colour and energy, though not the excessive length, which were features of the amazing exploits of Jack Harkaway and the rest. At another level, the book is a social document with the detail of Mayhew and the compassion of Dickens, though Philip Pullman imitates neither. And, at yet another, it has a historical vision that brings alive the plight of immigrant Jews and the unemployed of London at the end of the nineteenth century. Sally Lockhart is not a simplistically drawn feminist, but she is a woman who survives in a society, or an Empire rather, of men. She values some and loves some, and opposes others whose evil is convincingly malign.

The tension between the worlds of private relationships and public concerns which marks the trilogy is also found in Philip Pullman's **The Broken Bridge**: questions of race, homosexuality, father-daughter relationships, adoption. At the outset of her A-level Art course, Ginny must determine what price she's willing to pay for her painting - and where its origins and impulse lie. Do you demand a special kind of indulgence from your friends, use them, even, for the sake of your work? And since Ginny is black and half-Haitian but brought up in white Wales, who are to be her teachers? The Europeans or her own mother, the successful Haitian painter Anielle Baptiste, whom she'd wrongly thought long dead? When they meet, Anielle says, 'I'm a painter, I'm not a mother'; and walks away. It's an uncompromising trustworthy climax from a writer who will excite, delight and disturb many young readers.

### **Books by Philip Pullman**

**Spring-Heeled Jack: A Story of Bravery and Evil**, ill. David Mostyn, Doubleday, 0 385 26975 7, £6.95; Yearling, 0 440 86229 9, £2.50 pbk

**Count Karlstein, or The Ride of the Demon Huntsman**, ill. Patrice Aggs, Doubleday, 0 385 40048 9, £8.99; Yearling (Sept 92), 0 440 86266 3, £2.50 pbk

**The Ruby in the Smoke**, Puffin, 0 14 032209 4, £3.50 pbk

**The Shadow in the North**, Plus, 0 14 032648 0, £2.99 pbk

**The Tiger in the Well**, Viking, 0 670 83279 0, £10.99; Plus (Summer 92), 0 14 034484 5 pbk

**The Broken Bridge**, Macmillan, 0 333 522214, £4.99; Piper, 0 330 32227 3, £3.50 pbk

His latest novel is **The White Mercedes**, Macmillan, 0 333 54392 0, £8.99

**Geoff Fox** is a Senior Lecturer in English at Exeter University. With Michael Benton he wrote **Teaching Literature, Nine to Fourteen**, published in paperback by Oxford University Press (1985) at £7.50.

Page Number:

25

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Jan '20):** <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/74/childrens-books/articles/may-we-recommend/may-we-recommend-philip-pullman>

**Links:**

[1] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>

[2] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/74>