

Maria Nikolajeva

Guilt, empathy and the ethical potential of children's literature

*Abstract: The paper takes as its point of departure cognitive criticism, the direction of inquiry that investigates readers' cognitive and affective engagement with literature, partly based on recent brain research. It argues that for young readers who may not yet have developed full comprehension of fundamental moral issues and who have not attained the literary competence necessary to understand fictive characters' mental processes, representation of emotions in literature may produce a problem. Since guilt is a complex social emotion, involving a reconciliation of several contradictory goals, such representation demands well-developed empathy and advanced mind-reading skills, as well as factual knowledge of relevant legislation and understanding of moral implications of crime, guilt and remorse. The paper examines these issues through a reading of two texts for young audience, *Forbidden* (2010), by Tabitha Suzuma, and *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000), by Philip Pullman. The former is totally focused on guilt, in legal as well as moral sense, experienced by two siblings who enter an incestuous relationship. In the latter, guilt is less conspicuous, yet proves on closer consideration to be a major plot engine in the protagonist Lyra's physical and spiritual quest. While Suzuma's novel has an overt educational agenda, it is ambiguous in supporting young readers' ethical position towards the protagonists' guilt. In Pullman's trilogy, guilt becomes closely connected with the fundamental philosophical issues of determinism and free will. Although Pullman does not provide any clear-cut ethical guidance either, the use of emotion discourse, or emotion ekphrasis, is more subtle, not least because the genre allows a outward projection of emotions in the form of dæmons. Lyra's guilt becomes a driving engine in her maturation process. The ultimate argument of the paper is that literature provides an excellent training field for young readers' developing of empathy skills, and the vicarious experience of guilt exposes readers to a wide range of ethical questions.*

Keywords: children's literature, young adult literature, cognitive criticism, emotions, empathy, ethics, emotional education, Pullman, Suzuma

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Guilt is a widely exploited issue in literature. Although every human being has presumably experienced some form of guilt and remorse, few have been exposed to major guilt feelings, comparable with Macbeth's or Raskolnikov's. Literature allows us, through vicarious experience, understand how other people feel when they have committed a crime, with or without repentance, and how they deal with guilt; it also allows us to project our own emotions onto fictional characters and test, in a safe mode, situations that we fortunately will not encounter in real life.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines guilt as (1) "the fact of having committed a specified or implied offence or crime" and (2) "a feeling of having committed wrong or failed in an obligation". The definition highlights the profound difference between the legal and the affective usage of the word, between *being* guilty according to a given legislation, whether accepting it or not, and *feeling* guilty, whether with or without reason. However, the definition does not capture the additional nuance pertinent when discussing the issue of guilt in literature: the distinction between the artistic representation of guilt as experienced by fictional characters and the cognitive engagement of the reader, that is, recognition of the character's legal, ethical and affective guilt, as well as the reader's own moral judgement.

For young readers who may not yet have developed full comprehension of fundamental moral issues and who, in addition, have not attained the literary competence necessary to understand fictive characters' mental processes, guilt as portrayed in literature is a sensitive issue. Guilt may at first glance not appear a prevalent theme in children's and young adult fiction, yet it is omnipresent in fictional children's interactions with other people, adults as well as peers. A child may feel guilty for disobeying parents or generally breaking rules; for lying, cheating or stealing; neglecting a pet or a toy; revealing a secret or betraying a friend – actions perceived as immoral either because they break the social contract or because they contradict the characters' own ethical views. Children tend to feel unreasonably guilty about adults' incomprehensible behaviour such as parents' divorce, or even believe a relative's death to be punishment for something they have done wrong.

However, representation of guilt is a challenging task for writers and an exacting task for readers. A simple statement, whether authorial ("He felt guilty") or figural ("I feel guilty"), is inadequate to convey the complexity of the emotion. Guilt can be portrayed through behaviour such as apology or other actions aimed at

repairing the inflicted harm. Such representation demands more of the reader's engagement and ability to make inferences from actions. Direct statements and actions can contradict each other: a narrator can claim that the character feels guilty while actions show no repentance. According to cognitive scientists, young people may experience difficulties in processing contradictory information and assemble bits of information into a coherent whole (see e.g. Blakemore & Frith 2005). Further, certain types of information extracted from fiction have stronger authority; a statement from an omniscient narrative voice is more persuasive than a character's discourse or actions.

The most elaborate way of representing emotions is emotion discourse, or more precisely emotion ekphrasis: a verbal, visual or multimodal description of an emotional state. This narrative device has not yet been sufficiently explored in children's literature studies, and not even sufficiently investigated generally, because the direction of inquiry that allows examination of readers' engagement with fictional characters' emotions, cognitive criticism, is relatively recent (e.g. Stockwell 2002; Hogan 2003, 2011; Vermeule 2010).

The depiction of guilt in children's literature is a moral issue. Assuming – for the sake of argument – that young readers are unable to judge fictive characters' feelings and actions in terms of right and wrong, the texts (and implicitly the authors who produce texts) should preferably offer some guidance to assist readers in making adequate inferences. Literature is a perfect training field for ethical issues. In assessing guilt ekphrasis, young readers are confronted with fundamental philosophical questions. One of the basic narrative elements of all stories is breaking of rules. Apart from being an indispensable structural element for propelling the plot, prohibition and its violation is a good example of a simple moral issue. It is obviously wrong to break rules, especially rules imposed by parents or other adults, and a child who breaks rules may be expected to feel guilty. Certainly, breaking rules may be unintentional, although legal practices typically state that ignorance of laws does not justify trespassing. More important, breaking rules in children's literature is frequently its very premise, leading to personal growth as well as heroic deeds of a universal nature. Therefore, judging by the outcome, breaking rules is ethically legitimate. If it is wrong to defy curfew to experience hilarious adventures, it is less wrong if the consequence is saving the world. Frequently moral dilemmas are spelled out and delivered either by a didactic narrative voice or an adult character who thus confirms that

a certain action was right or wrong. Yet even when moral judgement is left to the reader, children's and young adult literature is a vast source of moral education. The question is, however, what kind of implicit ethics children's books propagate and how young readers are expected to respond to it, cognitively and emotionally.

Being guilty

Forbidden (2010), by the British author Tabitha Suzuma, depicts an incestuous relationship and is wholly focused on guilt in every sense. There is no rational explanation why incest is morally unacceptable, but it is one of the strongest taboos in most societies and is considered a severe crime in many legislations. However, although the threat of societal disapproval and legal punishment is hovering over the characters, their moral sense of guilt is the pivotal point of the narrative. The conscious breaking of social contract that forbids sexual activity between siblings inevitably leads to an affective response: both experience guilt that amplifies when desire overrides the awareness of social norms. Individual happiness is given priority over social order.

In classic moral philosophy, happiness is not merely an ultimate personal goal, but one of the general virtues. Happiness is beneficial for society and therefore a common goal; jeopardizing this common goal by harming a member of the community is morally deplorable. By initiating a socially unacceptable sexual relationship, the siblings in *Forbidden* not only harm each other on a personal, psychological level, but infringe on the stability of societal institutions: the family, community and society at large.

Happiness is a basic emotion, while love is a social emotion in which two people's personal goals interact and must be reconciled. To love someone implies willingness and ability to sacrifice some of one's own happiness to achieve happiness for the object of one's love. Love thus also demands empathy, that is, understanding of other people's emotions and goals. Empathy allows a person to judge what actions will be beneficial or harmful for the other part, a process that involves mind-reading. Mind-reading (also known as theory of mind or mentalising) is defined in cognitive psychology as the ability to imagine what another person is thinking; in cognitive criticism it also refers to readers' ability to understand what literary characters are thinking and feeling (Keen 2008; Vermeule 2010; Hogan 2011). Autistic children lack empathy; subsequently, they are unable to feel guilt and remorse (Blakemore & Frith 2005). Otherwise, deliberately acting in a way harmful for the object of

love, that is, preventing happiness, is a morally unacceptable act. If the obstacle toward happiness comes from the outside, the subject has no agency, and the outcome is sorrow or grief. However, if the injury is consciously inflicted, the outcome is inevitably guilt (cf. Evans 2001, 34–36). This is what the siblings experience in *Forbidden*, and what readers are expected to respond to.

Empathy and ethics

How does the text manage the delicate balance between promoting young readers' empathy with the characters and encouraging the ability to assess their shortcomings? The characters are aware of the legal and moral consequences of their wrongdoing; they fully realise that their love is harmful for themselves and potentially for society. To protect Maya, Lochan takes on the legal guilt, claiming that he forced himself on her. On realising that this sacrifice is legally ineffective, Lochan commits suicide in prison, escaping from legal punishment and from his own sense of guilt, which may be perceived as an act of cowardice. On the other hand, Lochan does save his sister from prosecution, thus not only proving his love, but erasing her social stigma, a noble action. Yet Maya is left to live with her moral guilt of incest as well as her guilt toward her brother and lover who gave his life to preserve hers. She, too, contemplates suicide, but her sense of duty toward her siblings prevents her. Duty is a social emotion closely connected to guilt. During their illicit relationship, Lochan's and Maya's major concern is that, if revealed, the younger siblings will be taken away by Social Services. Thus their guilt goes beyond law and society, which they could ignore if they chose to, but directly affects the family. While breaking society's rules is abstract and diffuse, harm toward siblings is concrete and tangible. This additional dimension of guilt is arguably an educational agenda that makes the siblings' crime still more dubious.

The use of emotion ekphrasis in the novel is varied in volume and depth. The word "guilt" is used sparsely; in fact, the siblings' guilt about their relationship is foreshadowed through numerous situations in which various characters experience guilt. The word "love", on the other hand, is ambiguous and even treacherous. Maya can tell her brother that she loves him "better than anyone in the world" without any criminal implications; however, as soon as she realises the true nature of her emotion, the statement becomes highly equivocal: "not just in a brotherly way", "in every kind of way". The tension between happiness and guilt invites readers' empathy.

The realisation that two young people are in love, a crucial point in myriad works of world literature, is initially connected with utter happiness and conveyed through physical sensations of body contact, proximity, security, warmth, tactile and olfactory pleasure, strongly suggesting the positive aspect of the relationship. As soon as reason takes over, guilt and despair become dominant emotions. If Lochan and Maya had been lovers divided by external circumstances, such as class differences, religion, or family feud – common tropes in fiction – we would be wholly on their side.

But Lochan and Maya are not simply secret lovers. Are young readers expected to understand that incest is both a legal crime and a morally unacceptable behaviour? Cognitive psychology claims that during adolescence and the development of the social brain, emotions override reason (Blakemore & Frith 2005), and readers may recognise the situation in which desire is stronger than moral obligations or fear to be caught. In Western culture, the idea that romantic love and sexual attraction stand above legal and moral laws, has been strongly perpetuated through literature and popular culture. Morally dubious actions are justified by the irresistibility of desire. The image scheme (Turner 1996) of star-crossed lovers is firmly imprinted on the minds of today's young readers. They may, therefore, fail to acknowledge the siblings' behaviour as morally unacceptable, and they may be ignorant of the legal implications until these are eventually spelled out. The novel does not take into consideration the basic cognitive (in)experience of the implied audience. Further, young readers may take the lovers' part in their conflict with societal norms, since society with its legislation is represented by the adults (parents, teachers, social workers, police officers), and child/adult tension is central for all children's and young adult literature. Literary conventions as such may make young readers supportive of the siblings, against what may be perceived as societal prejudice and oppression. Lochan's suicide further glorifies his protest against societal norms, making him a martyr dying for love.

Forgiving the unforgivable

Lochan and Maya come from a dysfunctional family, struggle against poverty, and take care of their younger siblings neglected by the alcoholic mother. Lochan also suffers from severe social phobia. It is natural for readers, young as well as adult, to empathise with the underdog, but while a mature reader will not be prevented from judging the characters, a less experienced reader may believe

that the characters' underprivileged situation justifies their crime. Mature readers are expected to be able to engage with Raskolnikov's emotions without feeling compelled to justify his actions (cf Feagin 2007). For a younger reader, this may present a problem. The text strongly endorses the idea that Lochan and Maya find consolation in each other's arms because of the unbearable domestic responsibility. Both reiterate that they have always felt being more than siblings; that they are each other's best friends; they can only be themselves in each other's company; they cannot imagine their lives without each other. Doubtless, common difficulties and responsibilities do frequently bring people closer together, but it still does not excuse unacceptable relationships. Maya is underage, and legally, the crime is not consensual sex but child abuse.

A less experienced reader may empathise with one of the siblings and view one as a perpetrator and the other a victim (the reader's gender may contribute to this). However, the antiphonic narrative structure, in which alternating chapters are narrated in first-person by Lochan and Maya, subverts a fixed subject position and a one-directional empathy. The absence of neutral, omniscient and authoritative narrative agency demands advanced mind-reading. The reader is forced not only to partake of two fictional characters' minds, but also to interpret Lochan's understanding of Maya's mind and vice versa. In their emotional discourse, both try to persuade themselves that the beautiful emotion they experience together cannot be wrong when it feels right. Yet the very fact that they need persuasion reveals the underlying uncertainty. They excuse their behaviour by saying that what they have done is not technically against the law, while the excuses clearly indicate that they know it is unacceptable in every other way. They argue that there are no laws or restrictions about feelings. They claim that they do not harm anybody, but they know that they do harm each other as well as their younger siblings, yet continue to live in denial. They dread the other saying they must stop because it is wrong. In other words, both know that it is wrong. Knowing that your actions are wrong causes guilt, and the reader is encouraged to recognise the emotion long before the word first appears in Maya's emotion ekphrasis. Moreover, Lochan admits to himself that in loving Maya physically and emotionally he commits a crime. And yet both try to persuade themselves that things will work out, that people will understand, that modern society is permissive. At times they actually believe that their actions are justifiable.

Yet the implied (adult) author hiding behind the young protagonists' voices must find a way to get her message across. Just as *Romeo and Juliet* is mentioned in the beginning of the novel as an icon of star-crossed lovers, a classroom session on *Hamlet* is employed to introduce the issue of incest. The word has not been used in the text until this episode. The teacher, unbeknownst, puts the label on their guilt. After that Lochan searches the Internet for information, finding out the legal consequences, and the reader is given full details.

The reason we can engage with fictional characters is that the recently discovered mirror neurons in our brains allows us to perceive their fictional goals as our own (Hogan 2003, 2011; Vermeule 2010). The ultimate goal of any human being, real or fictional, is happiness, and in reading fiction, we experience proxy happiness when characters achieve their goals. In *Forbidden*, the characters' goals are incompatible with societal norms; therefore the final outcome is inescapably unhappy. Since contemporary young adult fiction has long ago abandoned the mandatory happy ending, the text presumably expects young readers to be mature enough to accept the closure of a typical tragic plot. Arguably, the narrative structure of the novel precludes anticipation of a positive solution. It is obvious from their emotion discourse, however erroneous and inconsistent, that Lochan and Maya can only be happy together, while society will never permit it. However, there is a radical difference between tragedy effected by fate or external circumstances, and young characters bringing about their own destruction. Depending on whether readers recognise the legal and moral guilt of the two protagonists, the ethical impact of the novel will be different. Whatever the intention, young readers are left with ambiguity.

Guiltless trickster

In Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995, 1997, 2000), guilt is not topical and probably not the first emotion we remember; yet it is a powerful plot engine. Lyra is not legally guilty, and in her world laws are arbitrary if not non-existent. The amount of brutal killing in the trilogy is overwhelming, and the righteous perish as often as the sinners. The Master of Jordan College plans to poison Lord Asriel; Asriel himself has killed a rival, and so has Iorek the armoured bear; Mrs Coulter poisons her accomplice Boreal; John Parry is killed by an avenging witch; Father Gomez sets out to murder Mary; not to mention dozens upon dozens of characters disposed of in endless

battles and vile schemes. None of the unscrupulous murderers feel any guilt, and since murder is the premise in any plot of struggle between good and evil, readers are not expected to empathise with either murderers or victims. Will is the only exception, but he, firstly, comes from a world where manslaughter is against the law, so he is legally guilty, knows it and tries to escape from justice. Secondly, he has neither intention nor motivation to kill other than in self-defence, which in a legal trial may prove extenuating circumstances, but does not stop Will from feeling guilty. When Will later must kill to obtain the subtle knife, this deliberate murder amplifies his moral guilt, even though he is now acting within a heroic plot which renders him above ethics.

One might think that another death in all this bloodshed makes no difference, but the savage murder of Lyra's childhood friend Roger becomes a crucial point. Lyra is a self-centred child without empathy (the didactic narrative voice words this as "she was not imaginative"; *Lights* 249). We may find psychological causes in her deprived childhood, but it is the least intriguing explanation. Lyra has poor chances of developing empathy, since in her world emotions are projected outside of human minds in the form of dæmons. Mind-reading is superfluous; people's emotions are easily visible. Thus the readers are not required to apply their mind-reading skills either; Lyra's emotion ekphrasis is simply the description of her dæmon.

Yet the true reason for Lyra's lack of empathy and the readers' ambivalent affective engagement is that Lyra is reminiscent of the folklore trickster, a figure who achieves his goals through lying, stealing and occasionally killing. Trickster is a character above morals, and we are not supposed to judge or condemn them according to conventional social norms. Tricksters do not feel any guilt, and neither does Lyra until the end of the first volume. Yet since Lyra is a more integral character than the folklore trickster, and since our genre expectations suggest a multi-dimensional protagonist, readers do get affectively engaged, and the working of empathy becomes highly problematic. Here, identification fallacy (Nikolajeva 2011) may prove critical, since the readers will not be able to evaluate Lyra's highly ambiguous inner qualities, behaviour and emotions unless they fully liberate themselves from her subject position.

We first meet Lyra when she is eavesdropping, and subsequently she doesn't eschew lying, stealing, cheating and pretending – actions normally perceived as despicable, but fully acceptable for

a trickster hero. She breaks rules, is punished and feels no remorse. Occasionally she lies to escape punishment, but mostly she enjoys lying for its own sake and has developed the skill to perfection, which repeatedly proves useful during her quest. Lyra is convinced, and the reader is coaxed into believing, that she lies for the good cause. She feels no remorse about betraying Mrs Coulter, which we find fully justifiable since Mrs Coulter has betrayed her. She feels no remorse about tricking Iofur Raknison, and we accept it because Iofur has usurped power. She feels no remorse about eavesdropping in Bolvangar, and we accept it because this is what heroes constantly do in adventure stories, because it is necessary for the plot, and because we believe her antagonists to be evil. Thus we intuitively judge the characters through applying our ethical beliefs of right and wrong, yet use double standard in justifying the protagonist and those who are – or we are made to believe are – on her side. This is a natural interpretative strategy, but it is an immature strategy since it takes us into the identification trap. Initially, we forgive Lyra's wrongdoings simply because she is the protagonist, just as we dismiss the trickster's crimes. This is where Roger's death puts Lyra and the reader to trial.

Feeling guilty

Lyra feels guilty because Roger disappeared just as she was collected by Mrs Coulter to start a new exciting life. Yet every now and then she remembers Roger and feels "uneasy" (*Lights*, 85); she hopes to travel to the North, meet Asriel and rescue her friend. At this point, Lyra has not wronged Roger; she simply feels uncomfortable because he has been kidnapped and she has not; she feels it is her duty to rescue him. She does not know, although the reader does, that Roger is one of the numerous victims of a prodigious sacrifice in an all-encompassing scheme.

Throughout her journey, Lyra's has her mind on Roger incessantly; when she sees a child cut off from his dæmon, her first thought is that it might be Roger; when she is captured, she hopes it brings her closer to Roger and facilitates her rescue of him. Yet when she does rescue him, Lyra decides to continue her quest, not suspecting that she is taking Roger right into death. This realisation and the accompanying guilt is the first time Lyra experiences a strong emotion. So far, all her feelings have been channelled through her dæmon, but guilt cannot be represented through a dæmon's shape or behaviour, and the readers must switch on their empathy to keep up. Guilt propels Lyra's further actions, even though she is

still unaware of another, higher purpose of her quest. The readers have privileged knowledge over Lyra: "... she came all this way to find her friend, not knowing that her friend was brought to the North by the fates, in order that she might follow ...” (*Lights*, 310). Thereby, the readers are prompted to feel guilty on Lyra’s account, since they know that Lyra’s betrayal has been predestined and thus she has no reason to feel guilty. Moreover, this empathic guilt may prove deeper still, a vicarious collective guilt since Lyra’s betrayal of Roger is part of a larger crime committed by Asriel, the Church, and the Oblation Board toward humanity as well as non-human inhabitants of the multiverse.

After Roger’s death, Lyra’s guilt ekphrasis only appears occasionally and implicitly for the whole duration of the second volume, when Lyra tells Will that she has betrayed someone and that it was the worst thing she ever did; “she realized she’d led Roger to his death” (*Knife* 112). It is in the third volume that the full range of Lyra’s sense of guilt is portrayed. Tortured by nightmares of Roger in the world of the dead, Lyra decides that the next phase of her quest must be finding him to beg his forgiveness. Lyra acts on her guilt that is unrelated to the object of her desire. She has no romantic or other interests in rescuing Roger, except that she cannot live with this guilt on her conscience. Her ultimate personal goal, happiness, is dependent on her repairing the evil she has unbeknownst caused. To achieve it, she is prepared to part from her dæmon, an action that would previously have been inconceivable. Since the dæmon is part of Lyra, she leaves her childish egoism behind, instead following the call of duty and putting someone else’s needs before her own. In the parting scene, the scope of emotions are presented succinctly through Pantalaimon: “he didn’t ask whether Lyra loved Roger more than him, because he knew the true answer to that” (*Spyglass* 284); this is an ekphrasis that demands complex embedded mind-reading: the narrator prompts the reader to empathise with the dæmon empathising with Lyra.

Guilt and ethical choice

Guilt thus becomes the driving force behind Lyra’s maturation that is the ultimate goal of the whole narrative. It also becomes central for the primary concern in the trilogy about destiny and free will. The narrative is highly contradictory about this issue, and since there is no given mouthpiece for the implicit ideology, the readers are left without guidance. The idea of choice is first introduced in the comment on the Master of Jordan College: “whatever he chooses

will do harm; but maybe if he does the right thing, a little less harm will come about than if he chooses wrong" (*Lights* 129). This statement suggests that the Master has a free will and is able to choose; however, fate interferes: Lyra eavesdrops on him and saves Asriel, which at the moment may seem not only "a little less harm", but a huge deal of good. Later events reveal that Lyra's action leads to unimaginable harm involving the whole multiverse. Does then Lyra have a free will and did she make a choice without knowing it? If she did, should she feel guilty about disrupting the order or, given that the order is evil, is her temporary transgression justifiable since the ultimate outcome is everybody's good? The well-exploited motif of the Chosen child is more nuanced in the trilogy than in most fantasy novels for young readers in which the Chosen without further hesitation accept and fulfil their destiny. Lyra "must fulfil this destiny in ignorance of what she is doing, because only in her ignorance can we be saved . . . What it means is that she must be free to make mistakes" (*Lights* 176). If this is the premise of the narrative, it is not pursued consistently, since not only Lyra, but everyone around her have no other choice than to take sides. Obviously, Lyra's guilt toward Roger is imposed on her exclusively for the purpose of leading her to her destiny.

The balloonist Lee Scoresby is the only character in the trilogy who propagates free will, and yet he also gets inevitably involved in Lyra's quest. The instrumental role of the characters around Lyra is best illustrated by the fates of Will's father, John Parry, and Scoresby, who claims to have no interest in any power games, yet altruistically sets out to find Parry. Scoresby's motive may be guilt toward Lyra whom he left in a precarious situation, or his awakened sense of right and wrong; but as in most actions in the trilogy, he has his own destiny, which brings him to Parry and allows him to die defending Parry. Parry, in his turn, dies just as he has recognised Will, and the murderer comments cynically that Parry's role is fulfilled since he has told Will about the knife. Parry's death adds to Will's guilt, which makes him accompany Lyra to the world of the dead to find Roger. Roger, in turn, is dissolved as he re-enters the world of the living; Lyra has atoned her purported wrongdoing, but, again, her quest to save Roger is merely a minor step in a large scheme. Since the central philosophical issue of the trilogy is original sin and subsequent guilt propagated by the Christian church, Lyra's personal guilt is woven into a larger pattern, and at the end of the trilogy, readers are left with more questions than answers.

The complexity in the literary representation of guilt puts high demands on the maturity of the reader, especially in terms of empathy. Readers are expected to be able to empathise even with characters who are guilty and feel guilty, and sharing extreme sensation of guilt is one of those vicarious experiences that literature can offer us as readers. Moreover, guilt ekphrasis enables the discussion of the most profound ethical and metaphysical issues, which can be done as blandly as in *Forbidden* or as subtly as in *His Dark Materials*.

Biographical information: Maria Nikolajeva is a Professor of Education at the University of Cambridge. Her most recent book is Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers (2010).

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