
A Chosen Sacrifice: The Doomed Destiny of the Child Messiah in Late Twentieth-Century Children's Fantasy

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The story is familiar. A child is born. It is identified by a mark, prophecy, auspicious birth, or wise soothsayer. A lightning bolt on a forehead. The world rejoices at the birth of the Child Messiah, and hope for the future is restored. Though it may be a happy event for the world, what does it signify for the Child Messiahs? We assume that the heroic destiny is the stuff of dreams for children, and that they are, or at least should be, honoured by destiny's choice. But perhaps being chosen as the Child Messiah in today's world is not as rewarding as it once was. In this paper, I propose that the Child Messiah of late-twentieth-century children's fantasy is not the luckily chosen one, but a doomed sacrifice to Fate in exchange for the future survival of the human race.

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy of *The Northern Lights* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (1999), and Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1985) are texts written in the past thirty years that write into the messianic trope of children's fantasy. *His Dark Materials* features two Child Messiahs – Lyra Belacqua and Will Parry; *Ender's Game* features one Child Messiah – Ender Wiggin – and a large number of other child characters who are also pushed to military heroism. Pullman's and Card's Child Messiahs are doomed; both texts are active participants in a discourse that has been increasing over the past thirty or so years. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, for example, falls also into this discourse of doomed Child Messiahs.

Why do we so often come across children or adolescents on whom the fate of the world depends? Aside from the fact that the child reader of children's fantasy will be able to empathise with a child protagonist, the child also embodies the future of any society. Although it may be that adults aid the Child Messiah during his or her quest, the pivotal action must come from the children themselves. This is not exclusive to children's fantasy; it extends to such works of classic fantasy as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, where the childlike Frodo must bear the Ring, though the adult Gandalf and Aragorn have crucial roles in the action. In Pullman's trilogy, Will and Lyra are aided by adult characters, but at the critical moment, these characters know that the Child Messiahs are more important than they are, and make the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. Similarly, although an

adult world manipulates Ender in *Ender's Game*, adults are reduced to spectators as Ender and his army finally ensure Earth's future. The Child Messiah stands representative for the younger generations who will continue the world that the Child Messiah has saved.

There is a darker side to this generational logic. While children represent a nebulous, future, adults work in the immediacy of the present. Because of the standard power differential between adult and child, adults are assumed to be the ones who will, after the Child Messiahs have worked their magic, step in to take control of the situation. They are not always beneficent in this endeavour, and they can in fact be the agents of a more threatening future. In such cases, they often represent a corrupt old world; these scenarios are a familiar feature of many post-apocalyptic texts. For example, Card's *Shadow* series, written as a sequel to the *Ender* series, reveals that the vying adult factions on Earth have returned to a global war all too soon after Ender has nearly destroyed himself saving them. Although the adults cannot save their own world, they see their supportive role as crucial – the Child Messiahs ensure that there is a future, but it is the adult world that will construct it. After the world has been saved, it is returned to adult hands to do with it what they will, regardless of the children that have been expended to purchase the chance for a new future. The Child Messiah therefore does not affirm the indispensability of the child, but works instead on the principle that the child is dispensable. One child is ultimately the same as another, and Child Messiahs, for all the auspiciousness of their births, seem to be in abundance when the world is threatened. They are used, and then discarded after they have served their purpose.

Hence, the Child Messiah is doomed. Superficially, 'doomed' refers to death. But death is ultimately simplified into one thing – an end. It may be a painful or unwanted end, but, an afterlife notwithstanding, it is the cessation of suffering. In the Child Messiah's struggle for salvation, death may be a blessing in disguise. C. S. Lewis's Narnia series, for example, ends in *The Last Battle* (1956) with the seven Child Messiahs ascending to Narnia after they perish in a train wreck. This ending, however, is celebratory, not tragic. After being tantalised with paradisaical Narnia in their childhoods, the Child Messiahs must return to



a shadow world. Although some of them have reached adulthood, they have retained the childlike wonder of Narnia throughout their lives. It is only Susan Pevensie who has thrown off the influence of Narnia and 'aged', interested only in 'nylons, lipstick and invitations' (Lewis 1995, p.128) and '[racing] on to the silliest time of one's life as quick as she can and then stop there as long as she can' (Lewis 1995, p.128). She has lost her innocence and is punished for it accordingly; she cannot achieve the Narnian afterlife. In their deaths, Lewis rewards the faithful Child Messiahs who have remained constant to the 'innocence' of Narnia. The finale of *The Last Battle* may be tragic for us, still languishing on Earth, but is ecstatic for the Child Messiahs.

Death is not the worst possible outcome for the Child Messiah. Instead, I would suggest that the worst outcome is the loss of childhood itself. For much of the twentieth century our cultural reading of the child has been as 'innocent'. This is not innocence as we see it in some nineteenth-century works such as Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode, where the child is almost divine in its innocence. Rather, our current interpretation of 'childhood' focuses on the notion of the child as 'immature', in the sense of being unbound by social and legal obligation. A mature child, in this sense, is something of an anomaly. In the *Bildungsroman*, the child hero moves from the preliminal innocence of childhood, through the liminal space of adolescence, to arrives, finally, at the postliminal world of the adult (Hourihan 1997, 48). In our contemporary cultural context, then, 'proper' childhood provides the space to be 'immature'; there is time enough to shoulder the responsibilities and disappointments of adulthood.

Yet this is exactly the time that the Child Messiah in children's fantasy of the past thirty or so years is denied. The Child Messiah truly is a 'chosen sacrifice'. From birth, such children are destined to make decisions and assume leadership at times we try to avoid throughout the entirety of our lives. On their shoulders rests the fate of the world, and they must sacrifice their childhood for the 'greater good'. It is the ultimate irony that the Child Messiah is not permitted to be childlike, and must forego the essence of the 'child' identity in order to fulfil the messianic destiny. In this they have no choice – the idea of

the 'fated' or prophesised Child Messiah removes agency from the child. Their heroic destiny is literally forced upon them. While it is possible to say that they could choose to ignore their destiny, destiny has a habit of catching up to its victims, regardless of personal situation or sentiment. In any case, Child Messiahs cannot turn their backs on an imperilled world, particularly as they are invariably burdened by the traits of decency and selflessness. They are thus fated to sacrifice everything for a world that may be less than deserving, and it is this relentless, inevitable pull towards their own destruction that allows me to say they are 'doomed'.

The doomed Messiah is more realistic a character than the rewarded Messiah in the contemporary context. The human condition seems to be to repeat mistakes, and so the hard-won utopia that the Messiah brings is fated to be short-lived. The expectation that one last, major battle will herald a new, perfect world signifies a refusal to acknowledge the darker side of human existence (Bettelheim 1991, p.7). It is therefore unrealistic to expect that the Messiah will be able to hang up his or her sword and settle into a happily unremarkable life, undisturbed by yet another calamitous threat. Chances are, apocalypse will soon threaten again, and the Child Messiahs will again be sent out to lead the battle. The Child Messiahs from Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydain* or Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising*, for example, are made to be the rulers of a nation – the responsibility they are forced to shoulder is not taken away, but consolidated.

Furthermore, all experiences change us in some way. It is impossible to return to the idyllic Eden we once inhabited. This is another sacrifice – the Child Messiah must leave childhood's nest of gladness with no possibility of return to that prelapsarian state. Hence Tolkien's by-line for his 1937 *The Hobbit* – 'There and Back Again' – is a pipe dream. Bilbo returns to the Shire a necessarily changed man. *The Lord of the Rings* reveals that Bilbo, and Frodo after him, does not go 'There and Back Again'. The Shire they return to is no longer home – they do not perpetuate their line, and ultimately fade into the West. Tolkien leaves such dark imaginings for an 'adult' fantasy – this nihilism has migrated into children's fantasy in the seventy years since *The Hobbit's* publication.

Ender's Game starkly represents this doomed destiny. Ender Wiggin is specifically engineered to be the Child Messiah because the adults of his world have become mired in a war with an insectoid species, the 'Buggers'. Under threat of annihilation, they are now in need of salvation. Ender's treatment by the adults in power reveals the capacity for cruelty at their core. He is made to suffer the torments of his status as a 'Third' child in a society that accepts only two children per family, up to the point where he is forced to commit murder, albeit unknowingly, in order to protect himself when no adult authority cares to step in. Nor is Ender even offered the comforts of knowing that he is the 'chosen one', but instead left to grow in the care of indifferent parents and a psychopathic elder brother whose mission in life is to destroy him.

Throughout this time, the adult world simply watches, assessing Ender's appropriateness as the Child Messiah. He is appointed a 'handler', Colonel Graff, who as the agent for the adult world, manipulates and 'handles' Ender, the way one would an assassin or weapon. Ender is removed to the Battle School, a space station above Earth where he and other children are pitted against each other in mock armies, in order to hone their skills and differentiate them between commander and soldier. His term at the Battle School is characterised by Graff's determined isolation of him – he is moved swiftly from Army to Army in order to prevent him from bonding with any of his classmates, and then alienated further when he is elevated up the student ranks to Army commander because of his exceptional talent. This promotion makes him the target of the worst bullies in the school, and leads again to his being forced, again unknowingly, to commit murder to protect himself. It is a mark of the purity of Ender's character that he manages to gather around him a close circle of friends despite such machinations. After this, he is removed to Command School. Here, his skills are further honed and then exploited, when he is reunited with his Battle School Army and made to play what he thinks are simulations of battles. These battles are his ultimate undoing – what he is not told is that the soldiers and ships he is controlling are in fact real; they are conducting real attacks against the Buggers in order to finish the war. Not knowing the true

consequences of his decisions, Ender destroys the Bugger planet, and annihilates the entire species.

The unknowing capacity for such slaughter is a significant one. Ender is engineered in order that he may have two specific qualities – the ability to kill, and the ability to empathise. His two elder siblings, Peter and Valentine, represent two previous failures to engineer such a child – the former can kill without compunction, whilst the latter is too constrained by compunction to kill; neither can do both. Ender can, because here Graff exhibits a Machiavellian stroke of reasoning (Collings 1990, p.32). Ender's ability to empathise necessarily paralyses his ability to kill, so he is deliberately kept ignorant of the deaths for which he is responsible. Superficially, this is a successful idea. Ender neutralises threats to his existence during his training without the adults having to expose themselves or their project, and he succeeds in permanently neutralising the Bugger threat. The world is saved, people rejoice. But what has not been taken into the equation is the effect that this manipulation has on Ender. His ability to empathise now turns on him, and he is filled with such self-loathing he is made physically ill by it:

Well, I'm your man. I'm the bloody bastard you wanted when you had me spawned. I'm your tool, and what difference does it make if I hate the part of me that you most need? What difference does it make that when the little serpents killed me in the game, I agreed with them, and was glad.

(Card 1999, pp.118-19)

There is no period to heal; his friends are removed and he is exiled to the colonies. The adults are uninterested in his healing process, even going so far as to scapegoat him for the xenocide he is made to commit. Ender is the sole agent of his own incomplete redemption when he resettles the Bugger Queen in a new home world (Collings 1990, p.56).

His Dark Materials features fated Child Messiahs. Lyra is prophesised to destroy the 'Authority' of God and bring about the 'Republic of Heaven'. A lofty destiny, but it entails her poor upbringing by utterly unfit parents; her father, Lord Asriel, and mother, Mrs. Coulter, are ruthless megalomaniacs who will commit any act in order to achieve

more power. Will is forced to raise himself after his father vanishes, for his mother is mentally ill. Lyra is destined to betray her best friend Roger, regardless of the guilt she suffers because of it. Will's destiny is darker – compelled to become a murderer, he has difficulty reconciling himself to the idea of taking life because of the sensitivity of his character. He is very similar to Ender; both are forced to commit atrocities, and their isolation is both the cause and product of this capacity for murder. Ender, however, has murder on a far greater scale on his hands, and no parallel greatness of purpose to assuage the guilt.

In essence, Ender and his fellows in *Ender's Game* are cannon fodder – their genius is wrung out of them and they are cast off. Ender is made responsible for the creation of a new world, but not permitted to stay in the world that he has saved. These children are not people, but instruments. The conversation between Graff and Ender at the beginning of *Ender's Game* shows us the bleak ethos of a world at war:

“...*Human beings are free except when humanity needs them. Maybe humanity needs you. To do something. Maybe humanity needs me – to find out what you're good for. We might both do despicable things, Ender, but if humankind survives, then we were good tools.*”
(Card 1999, p.35)

As tools, these children have to be contained, as any dangerous weapon is contained.

His Dark Materials finds a more peaceable solution to the intergenerational problem, but with no lack of tragedy. Pullman's solution is to kill off the older generation in the battle for salvation. He fashions Will and Lyra as a new Adam and Eve; along with their love and sexual awakening for each other comes a maturity that allows them to step into the breach left by the likes of Lyra's parents with the fall of the Authority. They must rebuild the world, so they do not need to be destroyed or exiled to remove the threat they pose to the older generation. This is more consistent with the pattern of the older fairy stories and linear time in the trope of the heroic journey. By fashioning the quest as a *Bildungsroman*, it is possible to retain the Child Messiahs, instead of condemning them

to exile. The linear progression of time pushes Lyra and Will into the position previously held by the adults in the series as the replacements for the older generation that has died off (Hourihan 1997, 46).

However, being permitted to return to the life they once led is not a blessing. Both Will and Lyra have been irrevocably changed by their destinies, and are forced to sacrifice their love for each other. It is important to realise how deeply significant this love is – neither child was raised in a normal environment with the unconditional love of a parent. Lyra, to a certain extent, did experience love and affection, but it was always from secondary characters, many of whom are dead before the conclusion of the trilogy. Will literally has had no one. After being thrown together in the cataclysmic establishment of the Republic of Heaven, their ties to one another go far beyond sexual love, and we are told explicitly that neither of them will ever love another so deeply and purely.

Nevertheless, they are expected to abandon this love in favour of the 'greater good'; had they not, the entire trilogy would be nullified. They have their entire lives ahead of them, and their love would have been the agent for a happier future. But they are told that only one window can remain open between the worlds – one that allows them to be with each other, or one that allows the dead to find rest. Given such a decision, it is unthinkable that either Will or Lyra will choose their love over the release of the dead. There is no hope for them, for Will's knife that cuts windows between worlds has been broken, and neither child can live in the other's world for longer than ten years. They are not willing to sacrifice each other's lives in order to be together, and so they must be apart.

And for what? The Republic of Heaven is predestined to failure, by Pullman's own hand. His revolutionary vision of the Republic of Heaven is inherently flawed because it assigns all malignant agency to the tyranny of God. He does not allow for the basic foible of the human condition to repeat mistakes, and so even though the Church and its tyranny have been destroyed, no steps have been taken to similarly quash the human capacity for cruelty (Rayment-Pickard 2004). Into the void of authority that the Church has left behind, it can be expected that another tyrant

will spring up. As Lord Asriel says early in *The Northern Lights*, 'All good things pass away' (Pullman 1995, p.12). All that remains to fight for the cause of good are a pair of twelve-year-olds. Their adult allies, who might have been powerful enough to help them, are dead. They are condemned to fight for the entirety of their lives.

The battle for the future of humanity is an unending one. Its popularity in the fantasy genre for both children and adults is testament to the resonance it has for readers of all ages throughout history. Something has changed, however, in the representation of the Child Messiah in recent children's fantasy. Far from the glorious fate of a chosen one, there is now no future as utterly bleak in contemporary children's fantasy to be 'fated' as the next Child Messiah. Let me catalogue the casualties. Ender Wiggin commits his first murder and is removed from his family at age six, commits xenocide at eleven, and is exiled at twelve. Lyra Belacqua betrays her best friend to his death at eleven, destroys God, and finds and loses love at twelve. Will Parry commits his first murder at twelve, destroys God, and finds and loses love at thirteen. At the conclusion of both *Ender's Game* and *His Dark Materials*, one thing stands out above all else – these three Child Messiahs are ultimately alone. They are pawns of prophecy, made to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and mature before their time, and then are cast off with the broken pieces of their lives with which to venture into the bleak future.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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