

Oxporn

Colin Burrow accuses Philip Pullman of indulging in Oxporn, quoting from *La Belle Sauvage*: ‘as the grey light faded outside the 600-year-old windows of Duke Humfrey ...’ (*LRB*, 4 January). Pullman also has his dates wrong. The windows in Duke Humfrey’s Library are, at most, 530 years old and were first refurbished 420 years ago. Most existing Oxford college and university buildings date from the plunder of the British Empire, not the tithes of the Middle Ages. Most of the town resulted from even more recent industrialisation. The grey light fades over a city mythologised more than any other by children’s authors. None of this would matter much if it didn’t result in the highest house-price-to-wage ratio in Europe, astronomical rents and the growing dysfunctionality of forty thousand people a day driving cars across a green belt because they cannot live where they work. Oxporn isn’t the real picture.

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It was considerate of Colin Burrow to distance himself from some examples of extremely popular children’s books before quickly moving on to the job of critiquing Philip Pullman’s work. That way he was able to signal that he wasn’t some kind of child-centred critic of children’s books but someone who could treat this material in an appropriately adult way. Putting to one side the claim – not made by Burrow – that popular children’s books are only popular because their popularity has been constructed by canonisation and/or capitalism, is there a role in serious criticism for the discussion of children’s literature as something that has meaning for children?

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