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Spying Out The Amber Spyglass

Let me first note that I am a fan of science fiction and fantasy. I highly recommend Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and C. S. Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles* for children and his space trilogy for adults. Certainly I am no curmudgeon on the science fiction and fantasy genres. I think Christians can read and write them with profit, and they need to be more perceptive of the means and messages in good fantasy.

However, *The Amber Spyglass* by Philip Pullman is not good fantasy; it is literary, moral, and philosophical trash. Pullman does have some writing ability, but even that is often lost to his desire to rail against Christianity. His assaults are not even artistic; they tumble out in plain, blunt language. His fiction world is an unclear blend of the real and imagined, allowing him absolute power to reconstruct reality as the exact opposite of that which the Bible portrays. He systematically redefines good as evil and evil as good.

Consider two quotations: “The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty—those were all names he gave himself. He was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves—the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are. . . . He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie. One of those who came later was wiser than he was, and she found out the truth, so he banished her. We serve her still” (31-32).

[The speaker is a Christian martyr in the abode of the dead.] “When we were alive, they told us that when we died we’d go to Heaven. And they said that Heaven was a place of joy and glory and we would spend eternity in the company of saints and angels praising the Almighty, in a state of bliss. That’s what they said. And that’s what led some of us to give our lives, and others to spend years in solitary prayer, while all the joy of life was going to waste around us and we never knew. Because the land of the dead isn’t a place of reward or a place of punishment. It’s a place of nothing. The good come here as well as the wicked, and all of us languish in this gloom forever, with no hope of freedom, or joy, or sleep, or rest, or peace. But now this child has come offering us a way out and I’m going to follow her. Even if it means oblivion, friends, I’ll welcome it, because it won’t be nothing. We’ll be alive again in a thousand blades of grass, and a million leaves; we’ll be falling in the raindrops and blowing in the fresh breeze; we’ll be glittering in the dew under the stars and the moon out there in the

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To Help the Fatherless

We all know about the rapid increase in crime, drug use, gangs, homicides, school failure and dropouts, depression, suicides, and poverty among teens. But what is not so well known is one major cause for such problems: fatherless homes. The United States is now the leader in fatherless homes

through death, abandonment, divorce, and even emotional distance. Studies show that seventy percent of all teenage criminals come from homes without fathers (U.S. Department of Commerce). This epidemic and its results, however, are not always being sufficiently addressed in schools.

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What the Bible Says About the Fatherless

If we desire to be Christ-like, we will have the same concern for the fatherless that God has for them. He is a father and a helper (Ps. 10:14) to them. He hears their cries (Exod. 22:23-24). He punishes those who oppress them (Exod. 22:4; Isa. 10:1-3; Mal. 3:5). God warns us not to defraud (Prov. 23:10), afflict (Exod. 22:22), or do violence (Jer. 22:3) to them. In the New Testament we are instructed to visit the fatherless and widows to prove that our religion is genuine (James 1:27). We must be patient and gentle, not judgmental, always ready to teach and help them, especially concerning spiritual matters (II Tim. 2:24-26).

What We Should Know

In our current American culture with its relative moral standards and rising litigation, teachers, helpers, and others need to guard their testimony and our children's safety.

Avoid being alone with the opposite sex, especially teens, for extended periods. Husband-and-wife teams are ideal to work with fatherless children.

Be matter-of-fact and never joke about sex or bathroom functions, and be discreet about physical contact. Use proper terms, never "street talk."

Keep the mother informed about the times and places of activities with the child and explain any unusual situations or questions that arise.

Encourage the child to discuss with his mother any inappropriate or unusual behavior, situations, or remarks he tells you about.

What We Can Do

Helpers, including teachers, need to know how to build and maintain relationships with fatherless children and their mothers:

1. Identify the fatherless children in your own classroom, neighborhood, or church. The school or church records should have this information.

2. Fatherless children need stability in relationships, so think in terms of working with them over extended periods.

3. Be as positive as possible and encourage with praise and “good words fitly spoken.” Use public praise and private reprimand. Let the mother do most of the correction.

4. Be alert and sensitive to the counseling needs of these children. Ask them, “How are things going?” “Can I help you?” “Do you have a problem you want to talk about?” Many times they do not want counseling; they just want someone to listen. Fatherless children, especially teens, often act and dress tough and callused, but they are really insecure and feel rejected. They want acceptance, a “listening ear,” and answers to life’s questions.

5. Look for opportunities to give spiritual help.

- a. Pray for them.
- b. Encourage the mother to be in a good church with a youth program.
- c. Take them with you on soul-winning visitation or another ministry in which they can participate.
- d. Encourage and check on their personal devotions.
- e. Pay their way to a Christian camp or help provide tuition to a Christian school.

f. Take or send them on a mission trip.

g. Include them in your family activities when feasible. If you are married with children, make sure that in your home the father is the leader and is interacting with the children in family activities. A model home is a silent but very effective testimony.

6. Participate with them in social activities.

- a. Arrange a special day when you take the child and sometimes the mother on an outing, such as a picnic, a trip to the zoo or the park, or a day at a nearby attraction.
- b. Take them on a father/son campout or a mother/daughter banquet or tea.
- c. Encourage them to get involved in a sport or an organization.
- d. Take them with you on community service work, such as serving meals at a mission.

What Our Involvement Can Mean

As concerned teachers, caring neighbors, and compassionate Christians, we must take some action to offset the problems of the fatherless before the consequences overwhelm society. We must be always ready to help, especially in spiritual matters. Pointing students to Jesus Christ and the sure Word of God will produce a life that glorifies God (Heb. 12:2; II Pet. 1:3-4).

Walter G. Fremont, Ed.D., is a retired teacher and Dean Emeritus of Education at Bob Jones University.

THE *Praying* TEACHER

A Godly Example

In his book *Working with God Through Intercessory Prayer*, Dr. D. Edmond Hiebert tells of a godly preacher from the days of family pews, who had a thriving congregation. Every Saturday afternoon the old pastor left his study and went into the church, not to emerge again until the evening. One Saturday a curious neighbor followed the minister to watch him. He observed the preacher going from pew to pew and praying for the members of his congregation by name. The onlooker knew that he had discovered the secret of the life of the church.

A Holy Charge

Perhaps we teachers can go from desk to desk, thinking about and praying for the growing lives in our hands. It will be easier to pray for those we know well. But quieter students, who tend to keep in the background, will benefit from prayers that our work with them will have an impact on their lives for Christ. Diligent prayer for students helps us remember that each one is God’s and that each has been “appointed” by Him to our care. Visiting each seat and “seeing” each student will assure that no one is neglected.

A Shared Blessing

One teacher relates the story of a physically challenged student who was struggling with mathematics. The teacher could not seem to find the problem, and the student seemed doomed to fail the course repeatedly. Rather than just giving up, the teacher prayed for insight from the Lord to figure out how to get the subject to “click” for his pupil. As he was looking over the student’s first test in his third time in the course, the teacher

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Planting a New Year: A Resolution

When I was very small (and so, consequently, the world was very small) my grandmother and I would walk out on a mild day with snow still underfoot to “survey the grounds.” Crunching around the house, our coats open and our heads hatless, we stopped by the cellar door to ponder where the columbine would appear. And by the front porch to see how the roses kept. And under the apple trees to remark on last year’s violet crop and to imagine how far they would spill out into the coming spring. And last by the back door to plan the kitchen garden—the one place where the flowers were always different, depending on what Grandma sent for in the seed catalog in winter. We would “walk it”: fifteen footsteps long, four wide. Then we would go inside and page through the catalog—zinnias? daisies? coneflowers? a mystery mix?

I am older now (and so, I see, is the world). I have since “surveyed” much larger grounds: Biltmore gardens for example, with acre upon acre of splendid, extraordinary flora, and Kensington gardens, tilled to perfection after generations of gardeners—quite the best in the world—have labored there. And private gardens of wealthy acquaintances complete with statuary and fountains and peacocks. Spectacular places, all.

And yet I find that the plot behind my apartment—fifteen steps by four—calls out to be surveyed this time of year, every year. It takes a little while, and so I must choose a day when I will have adequate leisure to do it properly. First stop, the peony—this year the shorn stalks poked through snow like the weathered posts of a minuscule corral. The peony is terribly important: I planted it upon a year and nurtured it for five years and then, oh wonder of wonders, it at last gushed great drooping cabbages of softest pink, and I, finally, could say I was an adult: I all alone had got a peony to bloom.



There are many other stops: the little lilac, tipping out too soon again with little bits of green; the mints; the spiky asparagus fern; the bare spaces where lilies of the valley faithfully push through; the hostas; the day lilies; the periwinkle vines; the hardy spurge and ivy; blank circles waiting for goatsbeard; and ah! the brown crowns where giant ferns from the woods of home will unroll and feather out with such generosity I will have to go out every day to wonder at them.

And it seems it is just so with my life this time of year. I feel compelled to walk around what is mine, considering the blooms of the year past and thinking ahead to what I might next plant and later cherish. A survey of these grounds may seem rather unremarkable to those who have larger gifts and larger experiences and larger circles. I, in fact, used to be just a little ashamed of my small gardens (both in and out) and their ordinary blooms, and a little jealous of those bigger gardens that look so perfect from outside the gates.

But now I see it is no matter, the circumference of the place. The pleasure is in the composition. There is as much joy in one fine peony bloom, so long as it be mine to enjoy, as in a thousand nodding roses belonging to someone else.

And as I walk my “inner grounds” again this year, I resolve to be as pleased with the gardens that have been given to me there as I am with the little Kensington behind my place. I resolve to look more carefully and appreciatively at the small moments that spring up and even crowd that garden, for is not life but the compilation of little things? I shall not ask for any larger garden, for I find I cannot take in all the wonders that this one I have affords me, nor can I even keep it perfectly weeded.

Both in and out, I have the garden God knows is best for me. He plants one and I the other. And both, as I survey the grounds at this turn of year, seem to me very large and very full indeed.

Alice Bronson is an English teacher and a freelance writer.

physical world, which is our true home and always was” (320).

Other ideas in Pullman’s work are equally dangerous and often more subtle. The physical is in all ways superior to the spiritual. Humans are stronger than angels. Technology is the way to gain power and insight into the universe as well as the means to master it—spirit world included. Will (a human boy) has a knife that can carve doors into other universes. It is a technological innovation, but it is the most powerful weapon in the universe. It can cut spirit beings into shreds. This triumph of the physical world is backward from the Bible’s portrayal of spirit reality.

Furthermore, everyone has a daemon, a being that is you but not identical to you. These daemons appear in animal form. In Lyra’s world (a universe Will has entered by cutting a door with his all-powerful knife), they are visible and tangible (hers is named Pantalaimon),

but Will discovers that he has one too. The danger of this is that it invites the inner search for a companion being other than the Holy Spirit of God. The parallel concepts of spirit guides and familiar spirits are charlatany at best, demonism at worst.

Third, everything hinges on a combination of theoretical physics and Hinduism. Evolution is a given. But matter is not inert; it feels, evolves, and becomes living beings. There is no creator. What’s more, there is the Dust, a substance that is presented as both the explanation for the mystic Oneness of all things and the missing “dark matter” of modern cosmology. It is not one or many living beings, but it has consciousness and purpose, guiding characters like Lyra to accomplish its ends. In short, it is the Hindu equivalent of God, whether Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, or whatever name he goes by, explained in terms of modern science. The Dust is the real motivator of all action and

the true “good guy” of the series. Thus, a reader is led as far from Christianity as it is possible to go. In the clothing of both respectable science and traditional religion, Pullman presents the ultimate anti-God religion: he who claims to be God is evil, but you and I can be our own God if only we choose to be.

Pullman’s knowledge of Christianity is primarily Roman Catholicism, but his target is the Bible itself, and his goal is to turn young people’s minds permanently against the one true God. In His place, Pullman offers a weak humanistic religion where there is no explanation for sin, no ultimate good, and no hope for eternal life. It doesn’t take a spyglass to see this enemy of Truth for what he is.

Coart Ramey is a former author of Bible textbooks for BJU Press. He currently teaches Bible and History in Anderson, South Carolina.



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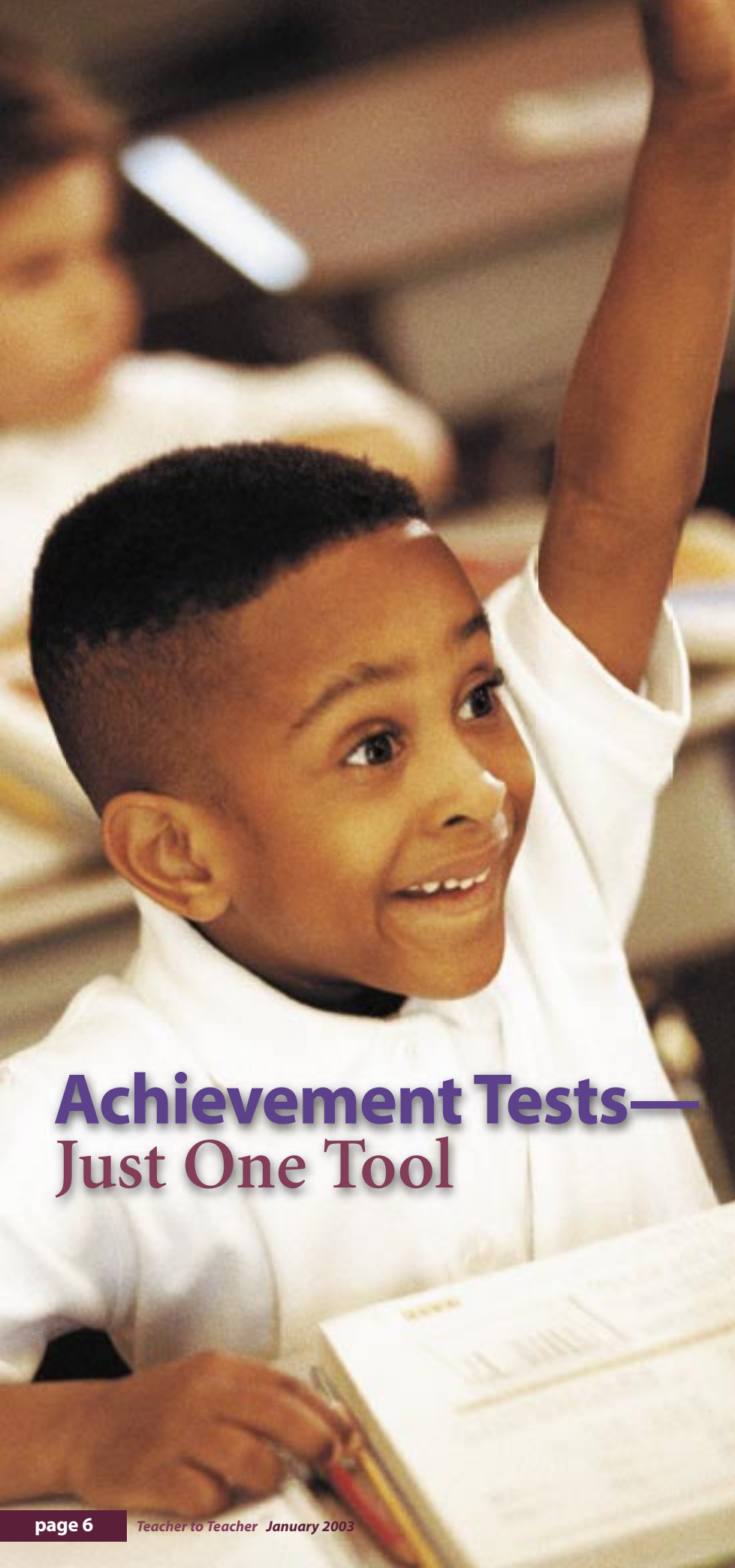
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Achievement Tests— Just One Tool

Nationally standardized achievement tests have been an expanding part of education in America since the end of World War II. In recent years they have been looked upon as tools to measure whether a child is suited to progress to the next grade or to be accepted into college. These tests have also been used to judge what students are taught and whether the quality of schooling is satisfactory. But are achievement tests up to that?

Such tests are meant to assess a child's general knowledge of subject matter and to relate to parents and teachers a student's general progression in a particular field of study compared to other students across the board. At their best, tests help to pinpoint a student's successes and shortcomings; but if results are misapplied, the same tests can stir up anger and dissension between parents and educators and leave many pondering how much, if any, education goes on at school.

One reason that achievement tests cannot do more than they are intended to do is that standardized tests sometimes focus on out-of-classroom knowledge or knowledge a child already possesses. Dr. James Popham, an expert on educational testing and professor emeritus at the University of California at Los Angeles, uses an example to explain this thought. A certain test question asks the child which item of food is not a fruit. The correct answer is celery, but as Dr. Popham points out, a child whose family rarely purchases celery is at a disadvantage compared to the child who may see celery on his plate routinely.

Also, classrooms and curriculums can differ in what is taught and at what level it is taught, which makes it difficult for test writers to make tests completely fair for everyone. According to Popham's article "Why Standardized Tests Don't Measure Educational Quality," some studies gather that as much as fifty percent of materials on standardized tests may not be sufficiently covered by the textbooks students use. This gap demonstrates testing companies' nearly impossible task of finding the similar elements of various textbooks and incorporating them into an hour-long test that acts as more than just a basic knowledge examination.

Another challenge of the standardized test makers is testing a student's written or oral skills, which in many cases are a student's

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strongest. For instance, some students may finish in the 90th percentile when a test is read to them; but after taking the same test alone, they may receive much poorer results. Some colleges have begun experimenting with open-ended questions in their entrance examinations, but these are few and far between. They still leave room for dispute over who grades them and how to make questions that are unaffected by bias.

The overriding principle we all need to hold onto is that tests are not the only means for determining a child's performance in school. It is important to look at not only the tests themselves but also a myriad of other factors. We must look at grades, the amount of effort being put forth by the child, the student's natural ability, child's ability to apply what he learns, and his eventual pursuit of more learning, to name a few. A test score is only one channel by which we can assess education. Because without tests, an education can still be valued; but apart from an education, tests have no value.

J. Bennett Harris is a staff writer for *Teacher to Teacher*.

Quotes

Be useful where thou livest.

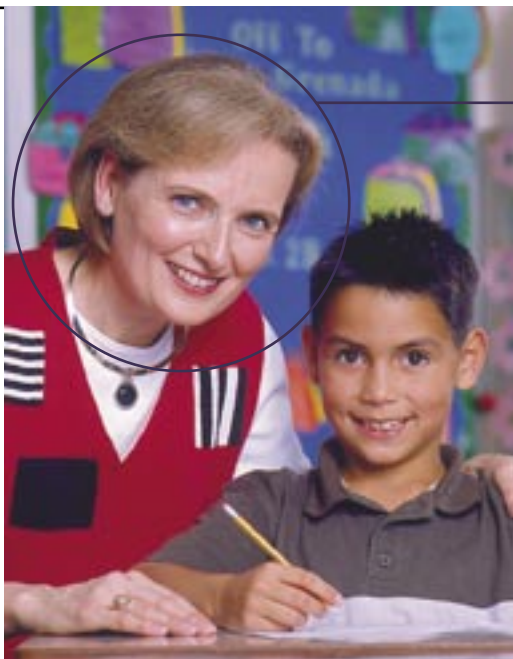
Beautiful where thou livest.
George Herbert

Education is ... hanging around until you've caught on.

Education is ... hanging around until you've caught on.
Robert Frost

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No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.
Aesop



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noticed something he had previously overlooked. The student performed considerably better on the first half of the test but did very poorly after the halfway point. Could it be, he wondered, that an additional, less obvious physical limitation existed and that this student was simply getting tired halfway through? The teacher decided to split all of the student's tests in half and give them at two different times. He knew the Lord had given him the answer when his greatly heartened student finished with a B average.

Another teacher prayed for seven years for a child whom she suspected had taken something from her desk. Although the item was small and inexpensive, the teacher was deeply concerned by this evidence that the boy's heart was not right. Years later when the teacher was at a summer camp, she noticed the same young man hanging

around, determined to talk to her even though he had to wait awhile for the opportunity. When they were finally able to get together, the former student asked the teacher's forgiveness for stealing from her those several years ago, and he appeared genuinely repentant for his actions.

A High Calling

The writer of the popular hymn "O Zion Haste" says in one of the stanzas "All that thou spendest Jesus will repay." No matter how much we enjoy teaching, taking time to consider the student's individual needs and asking God to meet those needs will add a joy and richness no other part of the work could possibly produce. And the benefits to students of having a teacher-prayer warrior will be measured only in eternity.

Brian Forrester is a writer for *Teacher to Teacher*.