

You will be beguiled and challenged by

## Jonathan Stroud's *Bartimaeus Trilogy*

*The temperature in the room dropped fast. Ice formed on the curtains and crusted thickly around the lights in the ceiling. The glowing filaments in each bulb shrank and dimmed ...*

*The darkened room filled with a yellow, choking cloud of brimstone, in which indistinct black shadows writhed and roiled ... and invisible mouths whispered wicked things ...*

*Then two yellow staring eyes materialized in the heart of the smoke.*



**B**artimaeus is not, after all, the kind of character who slips modestly into a room. "Hey, it was his first time. I wanted to scare him," he says and

we know then that if the trembling boy magician who has conjured up this formidable magical creature is to survive, he will have to be a lot brighter than Harry Potter. This is how we start with *The Amulet of Samarkand* and the edgy partnership develops through two more books: *The Golem's Eye* and *Ptolemy's Gate*. The pleasure of the Bartimaeus Trilogy is in the colour of the inventive detail, the wit and the humanity. The books have gone on to sell in millions and win British and foreign awards, partly a tribute, one suspects, to the characters' tendency to evoke a warm sympathy with the reader. Especially the outrageous Bartimaeus.

While Jonathan Stroud was becoming an avid young reader, books of 'social realism' were very popular but he developed a taste for fantasy, reading not only the *Narnia* books and Tolkien but Diana Wynne Jones, too. What he was really looking for was a chance to be creative and he also began to write. He wrote long stories (rather longer than his teacher had hoped for, it seems,) and wrote and drew comics. These, he says, were probably rather heavily based on *The Beano*. He also used to create games. He would make them in cheerful rivalry with a friend but they would probably only play them once. What mattered was the making.

After University, he worked for Walker Books producing non-fiction but he was still writing fiction and produced a first novel, *Buried Fire*. His real area of interest was what he calls 'high fantasy'. As a young writer, Jonathan is 'post-J. K. Rowling', if it can be put like that, but her overwhelming popularity clearly did not daunt him. Instead, he began to think of a different kind of world where human magicians might be the evil characters and the magical creatures would be the force for good. Right from the beginning, he had a very insistent voice in his head:

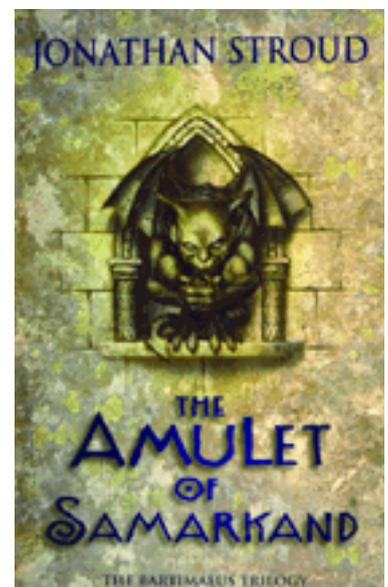
Bartimaeus, a character as old as time, energetic and humorous. He proved to be the key to a trilogy.

The first book appears to have been started in the white heat of invention with a period of fast writing. Bartimaeus, a powerful magical being with a long and colourful past is surprised to be summoned by "a scrawny kid". Having set the opening events, Jonathan paused. He says he knew he had to get a structure in place and he realised that Bartimaeus's voice was so powerful, he would need other voices. The pleasure this character gave him is evident on the page but he needed to be balanced so Nathaniel, the

boy at the centre of the story, is a contrasting personality. Young, inexperienced and vulnerable, he astonishes Bartimaeus by his power. He is restricted in his language, careful and blinkered by his narrow experience whereas the djinni is expansive in language and flamboyant in action.

Unusually for young fiction, some of Bartimaeus's wit and wisdom appears in footnotes. (And they *are* witty which is a treat for us all.) This use surprises some adults but children seem to have no problem with it. For Jonathan, they proved useful. He says they help to undercut the pomposity that the genre is sometimes affected by and the jokes display Bartimaeus's playfulness. It also allows for more information about this character to be conveyed.

After all, the djinni has a long history, what Jonathan calls the 'deep time backstory', and Bartimaeus's backstory is very eventful indeed. It also shows his complexity. This is a character who lives in many forms and thinks on many levels. Jonathan also sees an element of the game book in this treatment. The notes offer the reader an alternative route into the story and the choice to use it or not is up to the reader.



In this first book, Bartimaeus is commanded by the twelve year old Nathaniel to steal one of the most powerful objects of magic in London from one of the most powerful magicians. Bartimaeus is taken aback, but he is under compulsion, because this boy is good. He'd been taken from his parents at an early age and apprenticed to a minor magician who is high on self importance and low on skills. He has no idea that Nathaniel is capable of summoning an entity like Bartimaeus. Nathaniel, idealistically, wants to use his power for his country's good. He wants to place the Amulet in the hands of the Prime Minister. The readers, and Bartimaeus, see his innocence and ignorance but we also see his power and courage.

Asked whether Bartimaeus is, in a sense, the adult character, Jonathan says he never thought of him like this though he acknowledges that Bartimaeus is indeed linked to the childhood of both Nathaniel and the Ancient Egyptian, Ptolemy. For all his sarcastic wit, Bartimaeus shows a concern for his two young masters which he does not care to admit.

By the time we come to the second book, *The Golem's Eye*, Nathaniel has been admitted to the inner circle of the ruling magicians and is now full of self importance himself. As a member of the Government, he sees little of the lives of the ordinary people and dismisses them. The vulnerable little boy of the first book has become an objectionable youth. He is the youngest in the Government and concerned to slick back his hair, dress sharply and get to the top. Asked whether he had not taken a risk in making Nathaniel so unsympathetic, Jonathan answers that he had been worse until his Editor discussed it with him. The books are about Nathaniel's moral journey in one sense but "he was never the hero". To an adult observer, it seems daring but, on reflection, one sees that Jonathan is, of course, right to take the risk. We know he is because when Bartimaeus is absent from the scene, we miss him and relish his return.

In the first two books, there have been references to a character called Kitty. As a commoner, she suffers at the hands of the magicians and has joined the Resistance. She becomes the key character of the third book, *Ptolemy's Gate*. Discussing whether this is another bold move, moving away from the emphasis on

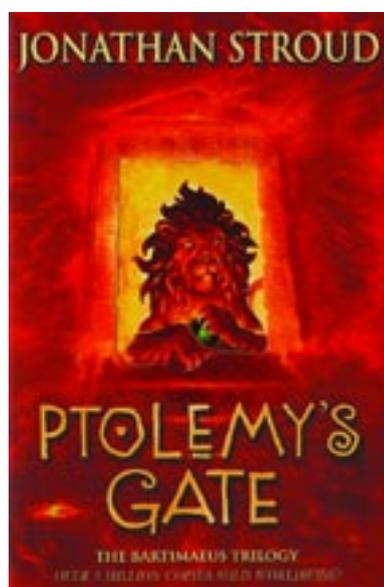
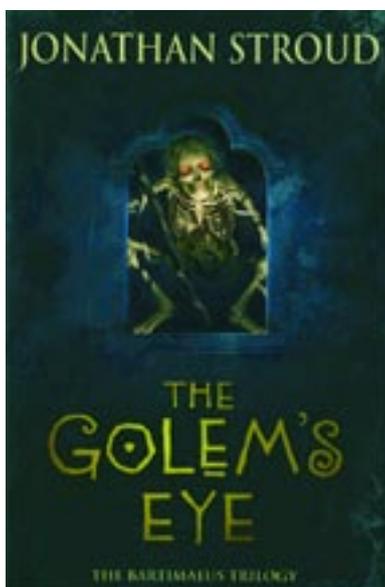
the established male characters, Jonathan says he is not interested in making it easy. Kitty's role makes the story more morally complex. When Kitty comes to the centre as a commoner who has been damaged by the ruling magicians, readers see the imbalance of power. The book becomes darker and there is more suffering. The reader witnesses injustice.

The book is set, like the other two, in a London we recognise but this London has a different history. Nevertheless, there are familiar aspects. The government is fighting a war abroad, the commoners taking the brunt of it. There is a political elite: the magicians take control because they can. There is hatred between groups and terrorism on the streets. One suspects that in as much that Jonathan Stroud writes politically, he does so because he is an intelligent author, writing now, who treats his readers as equals but when asked if the book is consciously political, he makes an interesting point. He wrote this book before conditions are as they are now. The world has actually become more like the book. He feels that readers will respond to the story, seeing it in their own context. Pressed further, we discuss Kitty's visit to the abandoned London Library. Was this degeneration of learning a deliberate indication of the State's collapse? Jonathan explains that Nathaniel's education had been very specific. He learned how to achieve power. Kitty's has been blinkered, too. She has been trained not to question the elite. There is only one 'good' magician, Mr Button, in whose house Kitty educates herself. Mr Button responds to knowledge, not power – and he survives. This is not irrelevant for us now.

It seems that Jonathan envisaged a 'slim volume' with the three main characters all in a single book. It was when he stopped to consider the structure that he saw he needed the three books. He did not know all the detail then but he knew where he was going. He really did not want the kind of fantasy that ends with the clashing of vast armies and, instead, we see Kitty, Nathaniel and Bartimaeus in a final, touching partnership.

The trilogy is read by children and adults. For an adult reader, the ending is a justified powerful atonement. How do younger readers see it? Jonathan has had no complaint from boys but one or two girls have written to him wistfully, yearning for more tender things. One sent him her own ending which he found affecting. In the last book, however, the forces that have to be employed to put right great wrongs are costly and all three characters make some kind of sacrifice. Some trilogies seem to be a needless extension but in this one, the expansion is essential for a full and satisfactory development. This is an intelligent reading of us and our world, made fascinating and challenging by its transference to an imagined setting. This is what fantasy is for.

Pat Thomson



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 The Amulet of Samarkand 0-552-55029-9  
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