The first years of the new millennium have been miraculous ones for crossover literature, books and films that cross from child to adult audiences or vice versa. J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2000) was snatched up by child and adult readers, taking sales of the series to over 40 million in 200 countries, with translations into forty languages. Her fifth novel, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, became an Amazon.co bestseller six months before its publication date of June 2003. Shooting for the first Harry Potter film began in October 2000, and its opening night was a glittering event attended by adult stars as well as children. In the milder shades of the book world, the Whitbread Book of the Year rules had been changed in 1999 to include children’s books as...
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By 2002, the top thirty books on Amazon.co's general (that is, not children's) bestseller list regularly included children's books by Rowling, Pullman, Terry Pratchett and Tolkien. At the same time, most of the top thirty children's bestsellers sported covers with a crossover, rather than a specifically 'childish', appeal. For example, C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia were reissued with a dramatic lion's head staring directly out of the cover, instead of the classic illustrations by Pauline Baynes featuring children in pigtails, shorts and knee socks. The Lord of the Rings was reissued in covers representing scenes and characters from the Peter Jackson film. The Harry Potter books were reissued for adult readers, in understated silver, black and orange or blue covers - and at a higher price. In W. H. Smith, the major British book retailers, it became commonplace to find, shelved alongside adult popular reading, such contemporary children's books as Eoin Colfer's Artemis Fowl and sequel, the Lemonly Snicket books (for example, A Bad Beginning), Terry Pratchett's Carnegie award-winning The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents alongside his Discworld novels, and box sets of the first four Harry Potters and Pullman's His Dark Materials.

At the same time, crossover films achieved greater mainstream recognition and attracted larger mixed audiences than ever before. For film, the process had begun somewhat earlier, with Spielberg's E.T. and Indiana Jones, Lasseter's Toy Story and its sequel, and the crossover adaptation of Anne Fine's Madame Doubtfire (1987) as Mrs Doubtfire (1993) starring Robin Williams consolidating the mixed-age genre of family entertainment. In their at times banal appeal to a common cultural denominator, films like these aimed to amuse, comfort and delight audiences, rather than unsettle them. By contrast, George Lucas's Star Wars stimulated a crossover appetite for altogether more ambitious material. Epic in scale and mythic resonance, Star Wars was and is a nation-fashionsing narrative in which both child and adult audiences have become deeply involved. But even with such established precedents, 2000+ were still landmark years for crossover film. In 2000, Minkoff's screen version of E. B. White's Stuart Little (1999) earned an Oscar nomination for best visual effects and an ASCAP Award for top box office film. The sequel, Stuart Little 2 (2002), starring the voices of A-list actors such as Geena Davis, Hugh Laurie and Michael J. Fox, proved just as popular. The brilliant animated features, Adamson and Jenson's Shrek and Docter and Silverman's Monsters, Inc., were both released in 2001. The following year, both films earned several Oscar nominations and other awards, Shrek proving particularly successful. After a nomination for a Golden Palm award at Cannes, Shrek won a Bafta for Best Adapted Screenplay and an Oscar for Best Animated Feature. The year 2001 also saw the release of Chris Columbus's adaptation of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone and Peter Jackson's adaptation of The Fellowship of the Ring, both of which attracted record numbers of mixed-age audiences. Of the two, it was Jackson's, with its magnificent New Zealand landscapes and an epic narrative to rival Star Wars, that swept up the major awards (Baftas for best film and direction; Oscars for best cinematography, and more). In 2001, Jackson's adaptation of Tolkien achieved for film what The Amber Spyglass achieved for fiction: it established the crossover text as 'serious' art, worthy of critical recognition as well as popular acclaim. This situation seems set to last the next decade at very least, with a sequel to Shrek, and further episodes of Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings already on general release or in production, and plans underway for a film version of the Pullman trilogy.

For reasons discussed at the end of this essay, I would consider 'crossover literature' as something distinct from writing 'for all ages'. But even setting this point aside, 'crossover' is still rather a slippery term that can be used to signify very different things. In postcolonial studies, for example, crossover is the critical term for texts that cross cultures or (like Rushdie's The Ground beneath Her Feet) represent such cultural shifts in the narrative. In gender studies, crossover is used to signify shifts in gender perspective (as in Carter's The Passion of New Eve). In children's literature criticism, however, crossover is generally meant to refer to a crossing between age boundaries, the boundaries (for example, young child, nine to fourteen, young adult, adult) themselves being subject to constant redefinition. Even in this field, 'crossover' can refer to different aspects of the narrative communication act: the relation between authors and texts, the internal attributes of texts, or the relation between texts and readers, for example. Surprisingly, more has been written about cross-writing and dual address (with a focus on authors and narrators) than about texts or crossover reading. Barbara Wall's The Narrator's Voice focuses on narratorial dual address in children's fiction (Wall 1991); Shavit argues that children's literature participates in two systems (child and adult) simultaneously (Shavit 1986: 63-92; for an opposing view see Grenz 1988). Children's Literature 25 is devoted to 'Cross-Writing', although it includes one article specifically on reader reception (Kooistra's 'Goblin Market as a Cross-Audienced Poem'). Sandra Beckett's Transcending Boundaries (Beckett 1999) is subtitled 'Writing for a Dual Audience of Children and Adults', and seven of its fourteen essays are concerned with cross-writing, in the Netherlands, France, the former Soviet Union and Italy. The other seven address a wide variety of issues, however, including crossover implied and actual readers, double attribution of texts, and post-postmodern configurations of childhood. With this range of perspectives, Beckett's is arguably the best single-volume introduction to crossover literature yet available.

Cross-writing includes authors who write sometimes for children and sometimes for adults, as well as writers (or intra-textually,
Publishers have recently been directly involved in promoting this kind of crossover writing, for the obvious reason that a fan-base has already been established in one reading age group and may the more easily cross over into another. The publisher Hyperion has recently supported crossover titles from Alice Hoffman, Rudolfo Anaya and Michael Dorris. Rarer are writers like Michel Tournier, who rewrites the same texts for different age groups. (see Beckett 1999a). Dual-address fiction, the subject of Wall’s study, is sometimes difficult to distinguish from children’s texts that have acquired the status of ‘classic’ literature and passed into adult reading. All three early editions of Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland were designed to be read by children, though of different ages. But it has since become an adult classic, while many modern children now find the unabridged Alice quite a difficult text with which to engage. (For the use of the child focaliser in Alice, see Cameron 1999.) Market trends, rather than dual addressivity, presumably underlie the success of recent children’s publications by such celebrity figures as Sophie Dahl (The Man with Dancing Eyes (2003)).

The examples cited so far are works by crossover writers, or works with dual localisation or address. But there has been comparatively little analysis of the experience of cross-reading which is, in many ways, the better indicator of a significant shift in cultural attitudes and, arguably, the more interesting for specialists in narrative theory. (For an excellent exception, see van Lierop-Debraver 1999.) If we think of narrative not only as something constructed by an author, mediated by a narrator, but also as a script or a score that is activated by a reader’s participation, it becomes evident how potent the crossover phenomenon is, how intimately connected it is with the workings of narrative temporality, and time as narrative. Narrative has been characterised as a reflexive process, which discovers or creates repetitive and closural patterns; equally, it is future-oriented, with an instinct for amplification, differentiation and deferral. (On narrative difference and deferral, see for example, Derrida 1978; Ricoeur 1984; Lacan 1984.) In crossover literature, the subject of narrative (whether character, text or reader) gets split into two temporal states, ‘earlier’ and ‘later’, in a way that renders it acutely susceptible to narrative’s opposing dynamics of closure and deferral. (On plot as a narrative dynamic of Freud’s pleasure and death drives, see Brooks 1984.) Bakhtin defines the chronotope as the narrative organisation of time and space in any text (‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope’, Bakhtin 1984: 84-258); to adopt his term, the readers of crossover books and films are bi-chronotopically oriented. They occupy two positions in the narrative simultaneously, and are thus doubly subjected to narrative’s twin temporal drives.

Without the gloss of literary theory, many adults have registered such a response to reading Harry Potter or Artemis Fowl or any other crossover novels which cannot easily ‘pass’ for an adult work. They are easily engrossed by the story itself, but they are also recollecting former reading selves, who are in turn reading themselves into future identities. On the face of it, crossover reading can be explained in very straightforward terms: adults are rediscovering the addictive pleasure of a good story, told directly and without any (post)modernist angst about the problems of representation. But considered a little more deeply, ‘rediscovery’, ‘addictive pleasure’ and ‘a good story’ take us to the most complex aspects of narrative, psychoanalytic and deconstructive theory. Francis Spufford gives a powerful account of the connection between his own earlier and later reading selves in The Child That Books Built (2002). But there has been surprisingly little discussion of such reading experiences in specialist children’s literary criticism. U. C. Knoepflmacher explores ideas similar to Spufford’s though more briefly, in ‘The Critic as Former Child: A Personal Narrative’ (Knoepflmacher 2002). (On the influence of children’s books on Virginia Woolf and other modernists, see Dusinberre 1987.) Another area that has been productively explored is the childhood reading of writers for adults.

But a good starting point for further study would be to adopt a dialogic approach to crossover literature, an approach which would resist universalising statements about the range of texts this appellation signifies (we are not just talking about the Harry Potter books), and would recognise in such narratives the vertiginous play between younger and older, between former, present and future selves, both intra- and extra-textually. The editors of Children’s Literature 25 lay the ground for such an approach, stating in their introduction, ‘we believe that a dialogic mix of older and younger voices occurs in texts too often read as univocal’ (Myers and Knoepflmacher 1997: vii; and see IRSCL 1987). But their understanding of dialogism curiously emphasises consensus over difference. Do Huckleberry Finn and Robinson Crusoe ‘dissolve the binaries and contraries that our culture has rigidified and fixed’ (Myers and Knoepflmacher 1997: viii)? To me, these are crossover narratives that demonstrate the very ‘hostile internal crossfire’ Myers and Knoepflmacher seem keen to transcend (vii); and this internal polemic is what makes Huck and Crusoe dialogic texts.
Three Bakhtinian concepts are of particular relevance to this field. The idea that identity is dialogically constructed, always the product of a confluence of voices, is essential for any theoretical account of crossover literature. The concept of heteroglossia, representing the other’s speech, offers flexible, nuanced ways of accounting for the relation between child and adult discourses. And chronotopicity, the materialisation of space and time in narrative, helps us to consider the ways in which texts shift audiences over time, the way the categories of ‘child’ and ‘adult’ are constructed differently over time, and the way readers are created out of a composite of different temporal perspectives. But since it is ‘the chronotope that defines genres and generic distinctions’ (Bakhtin 1984: 85), an appropriate starting point might be to identify the specific genres that are currently crossing over from adult to child, or more dramatically, child to adult audiences. In the survey that follows, my choice of crossover titles is primarily guided by actual audience response. But since this account focuses on contemporary examples which may or may not have had time to acquire a mixed audience base, I am also guided by publishers’ marketing strategies, advance reviews and other indicators of intended audience. (An intended actual audience is not the same as an author’s ideal or implied audience, in Wayne Booth’s sense in The Rhetoric of Fiction (Booth 1961). The latter can be inferred from within the text itself, the former requires a dialogic consideration of text in relation to actual, historical reader or viewer. Obviously, though, all these categories of reader are interlinked.)

The major areas of ‘crossover’ in contemporary literature and film are in the genres of magic fantasy, epic fantasy, science fiction, gothic, history and historical legend. There is also considerable crossover appeal in contemporary picture books, comics and graphic novels, and (though in a different way) social realism. Most of the crossover genres make use of ancient myth, traditional fairy tale or legend, while science fiction and fantasy reproduce the scale and thematic foci of northern and/or classical epic narratives. Many crossover books belong to more than one genre (for example, Harry Potter is both school story and magic fantasy); indeed, it is rare to find a work of fiction with only one chrono-toppe, one generic world-view. And many genres, particular historical legend, science fiction, magic and epic fantasy, already have a long history of crossover between child and adult audiences. All these genres are offshoots of the adventure narrative, an ‘ur-genre’ that forms the basis of much adult as well as children’s fiction. The chronotope of adventure-time is a common feature of many adult classics that have crossed over into children’s literature, sometimes adapted and abridged, sometimes entire. (On the chronotope of adventure-time in ancient Greek romance, see Bakhtin 1984: 86-110.) Pre-twentieth-century examples include abridged translations of the Odyssey (rather than the Iliad) and Don Quixote, and abridged versions of The Pilgrim’s Progress, Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver’s Travels and Stevenson’s Treasure Island. Unabridged versions of Dickens’s Oliver Twist and The Old Curiosity Shop were read to, or by, children in their original versions, and some adventure novels appealed strictly to one gender, but crossed age boundaries seamlessly: for example, Henty’s novels appealed to boys and men, and Charlotte Yonge’s to girls and women.

Genres that have crossed over in the past, but are not ‘cross-breeding’ on a large scale at present, include religious allegory and spiritual writing; dystopias; family and school stories; and nonsense verse and prose. In the genre of religious allegory, John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress was one of the first English crossover books, being very quickly modified and adapted for children after its original publication in 1678. Its adaptation took place at a time when much literature published specifically for children was didactic or religious in content (see Jackson 1989). Twentieth-century crossovers in the same genre, although crossing in the other direction, include Saint-Exupéry’s The Little Prince and Richard Bach’s Jonathan Livingston Seagull. Dystopias were another form of early crossover which are rarer on the contemporary scene (Peter Dickinson has written dystopian children’s literature that sometimes crosses to adult readerships). Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1745) was very soon adapted for children, though in its edited version it reads as a more straightforward adventure story (the first, Lilliputian volume was often published on its own for children) (Cunliffe 2000). Twentieth-century dystopias for adults which have become children’s classics include: Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye, Golding’s Lord of the Flies, Huxley’s Brave New World and Orwell’s 1984. In the case of Lord of the Flies and other dark, satirical works, such unlikely crossover might partly be explained by the focalisation of the narrative through a child character.

Family and school stories that have crossed from child to adult audiences in the past (and still do so) include Montgomery’s Anne of Green Gables, Alcott’s Little Women, which domesticates Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress, and Wilder’s Little House on the Prairie. Works of this genre were often overtly didactic and/or nostalgic about family life. Often consciously anti-domestic (though not, for all that, necessarily less conservative) were the Victorian ‘nonsense’ writers, Edward Lear (Nonsense Songs), Hilaire Belloc (Cautionary Tales for Children) and Lewis Carroll. Something of their legacy survives in Ogden Nash, Dr Seuss, Roald Dahl, in Spike Milligan’s The Goon Show (1950s-60s), in the films Python and the Holy Grail (1975) and The Life of Brian (1979), and in the work of crossover comedians Billy Connolly and Robin Williams.

By the mid-1970s, such chronotopic spaces as the home, playground or classroom were more often the ground for gritty, even brutalising, social realism. In the twenty-first century, school stories are more likely to cross age groups, if generically they are crossed with something else. The TV series Buffy the Vampire Slayer situates gothic plots and characters in a conventional American high school. The films American Beauty (1999) and Donnie Darko (2001) cross high school narratives with, respectively, magic realism and gothic thriller. As evidenced by the current, odd popularity of ‘School Disco’ parties among adults, school narratives acquire a crossover appeal when they are divorced from real life, when they are made to signify the possibility of an outlandish transformation.

Some genres that have traditionally crossed over in the past are mutating into different genres but retaining their crossover appeal. For example, animal fables are developing into natural science and environment narratives, which less overtly anthropomorphise their animal protagonists. Classic crossover animal fables include Kipling’s Just So Stories and Jungle Books, Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh, Grahame’s Wind in the Willows, E. B. White’s Charlotte’s Web and Jack London’s Call of the Wild. Like the earlier Tarka the Otter (1928) by Henry Williamson, Gavin Maxwell’s Ring of Bright Water (1960) has moved well away from animal fable to nature study. Another mutation of the animal fable is into epic fantasy. Adams’s Watership Down (1972) was an early, outstanding success in this genre, and currently Brian Jacques’s Redwall series about rabbits, rats, ferrets and other animals, and Steven Oppell’s Silverwing trilogy about bats, are beginning to attract adult readers as well as children. Animal fables can also
obviously be employed for political allegory. According to Larissa Klein Tumanov, Aesopian children’s literature in the former Soviet Union became a vehicle to convey dissident views to both child and adult readerships (Tumanov 1999). The animal fable also survives in works such as Allende’s The City of Beasts (for children) and Yann Martel’s Life of Pi. Martel crosses Latin American fable with natural science (the tiger named Richard Parker is always represented as a dangerous wild animal, never (beyond his name) personified) and Crusoeque survival narrative. The result is a ‘boy’s novel for adults’, according to its dust-jacket, successful enough to win the 2002 Booker Prize.

But unquestionably the genre that is crossing age groups most frequently in western countries today is fantasy; and the most visible direction of crossover is from child to adult audiences. Within this genre, there is an important distinction to be made between the sub-genres of what I would call magic and epic fantasy (but the choice of labels is unimportant). Furthermore, these two should be distinguished from ‘magic realism’ or ‘the fantastic’. It seems absurd to compare Rowling’s Harry Potter series (magic fantasies) and Pullman’s His Dark Materials (epic fantasy); such a comparison usually ends by judging Harry Potter to be conventional, derivative and superficial. But this is the result of reading all fantasy, and indeed all child-to-adult crossovers, as texts of the same kind. Bakhtin defined epic as a genre formally oriented towards the past, which is arguably a more reliable means of distinguishing it from other genres than length or extent of detailed realisation of a fictional world. In Pullman’s case, the attitude is one of irreverence, but the trilogy is still oriented towards the past in its extensive polemic against traditional interpretations of Genesis and Milton’s Paradise Lost. Rowling’s novels may be long (the fifth Harry Potter book is over eight hundred pages), but they are not concerned with questions of species origin; they do not cross swords with Genesis, or Icelandic saga, or classical or eastern myth. The Harry Potter books have been criticised as lightweight, but they are not built to convey epic gravitas. The same was said in an earlier generation of Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia (again magic fantasy), when contrasted with Tolkien’s epic trilogy.

Despite the presence of Dementors and death scenes, the Potter books are light reading in a certain sense. In my view, their lightness is their strength (the same might be argued for many novels in this genre). In Six Memos for the Next Generation, Italo Calvino, himself an outstanding crossover writer, describes what he thinks literature will still be uniquely capable of providing us, in a technologically accelerated world (Calvino 1996: 3-30; and see Poeti 1999). The first thing literature will still be able to give us is lightness, which for Calvino has to do with an orientation towards the real world that is not escapist, but that refuses to be ruled by immediate context. It suggests a mobility of perspective that resists the ‘slow petrification’ which Calvino saw occurring across the globe (Calvino 1996: 4). At the end of The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, Aslan de-ossifies the animals turned to stone by the White Witch. And in The Silver Chair, when Eustace falls off a cliff, Aslan reverses the gravitational fall and blows him safely into Narnia. Both episodes convey Calvino’s sense of lightness; chronotopically they define the Chronicles of Narnia as magic rather than epic fantasy.

The highly popular German writer Cornelia Funke has written a magic fantasy that places age-crossover at the centre of the narrative. Published in English as The Thief Lord, it involves a magical carousel that can turn children into adults, and vice versa. Among the most successful is Eoin Colfer’s Artemis Fowl, which pits an unscrupulous venture capitalist (equipped like James Bond with technological gadgetry, but conspicuously lacking Bond’s civil servant sense of duty) against a feminist detective elf. The capitalist and the elf are children (over 100 years old, Holly is still young for an elf) but this book and its sequel Artemis Fowl: The Arctic Incident frequently appear in adult sections of major bookshops. Michael Chabon’s Summerland (2002) is another recent magic fantasy selling extremely well to children and adults.

Magic fantasy is also not magic realism, although both are governed by a threshold chronotope, in which characters instantaneously cross over into different realities or states of being. The back of a wardrobe and King’s Cross Station Platform 9% are chronotopic images of the magic threshold. A. N. Wilson defines C. S. Lewis’s type of fantasy as ‘the interpenetration of worlds ... quite different’ to Tolkien’s (Wilson 1991: 226). Todorov described the ‘fantastic’ in terms that have become canonical for any definition of magic realist fiction. Such a text ‘oblige(s) the reader to ... hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described’ (Todorov 1993: 33; and see Armit 1996). In Todorov’s view, most texts resolve into one of these two modes of explanation. If events are explained rationally, the fantastic resolves into the uncanny; if explained supernaturally, the fantastic resolves into the marvellous.

Adult magic realism makes frequent use of the child’s perspective. The use of the child focaliser in Bruno Shultz’s short stories, for example, heightens the reader’s sense of disorientation as the narrative shifts from natural to supernatural worlds. One can agree or disagree with Todorov’s view of textual closure, but essentially the fantastic ‘occupies the duration of uncertainty’ and consists of ‘that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event’ (Todorov 1993: 25). But if magic realism hesitates on the threshold between two realities, magic fantasy crosses the threshold and continues ‘further up and further in’. In Todorov’s terms, magic fantasy opts for the supernatural explanation; it crosses over from the fantastic into the marvellous.

There are magic realist works for children, characterised by this hesitation between realities, but they cross over to adult audiences less frequently than magic fantasy at present. An early example is E. T. A. Hoffmann’s first collection of fairy tales for children, The Nutcracker and the Mouse-King (1816), which, according to Dagmar Grenz, resembles his fairy tales for adult readers in its doubling of realistic and fantastic worlds (Grenz 1988). And while his second collection, The Strange Child (1817), simplifies plot development and characterisation for child readers, it is the former work that has since proved more popular with child and adult readers. According to Teya Rosenberg, magic realist works for children share many of the same characteristics as those for adults, including: the combination of naturalistic and supernatural effects, use of folklore, political content or subtext, and repetitions in plot and imagery (Rosenberg 2001: 14). Furthermore, Grenz argues that magic realism produces an opposite kind of hesitation in child readers to that described by Todorov:
Twentieth-century examples of magic realist works for children include Philippa Pearce’s Tom’s Midnight Garden (1958), Alan Garner’s Elidor (1965) and Louis Sacher’s Holes (1998). More recently, in Neil Gaiman’s Coraline (2002), the eponymous heroine discovers a parallel, counterfeit world in the corridors of her own house. The eeriness of the story derives from the deceptive similarities between the two worlds and the difficulty of keeping them apart. This is a magic realist novel that is clearly being marketed for a crossover audience, the dust-jacket bearing Bloomsbury’s prediction that the novel ‘will appeal to adults and children alike’ and a quotation from Norman Mailer describing it as ‘a comic strip for intellectuals’.

But the crossover genre that has garnered the most critical (in addition to popular) acclaim in recent years is epic fantasy. It is in contemporary children’s, rather than adult, fiction that readers are most likely to find the revival of the mythic narrative, heroic quests to discover and test the self, battles between the archetypal forces of good and evil, stories that aspire to shape national histories as destiny. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings (1954-5) largely set the parameters of the genre. Initially intended as a sequel to The Hobbit (1937), The Lord of the Rings gestated into an entirely different kind of narrative, one which publishers were uncertain whether to class as child or adult fiction (see White 2001: 172-5). Richard Adams’s Watership Down was also enormously influential in defining the ambitious scope of this genre, as well as its crossover appeal. S. F. Said calls Watership Down ‘one of the original popular culture crossovers: a book that hooked adults and children on such a vast scale that it made publishing history’ (Said 2002). This is a Virgilian epic transposed to an English landscape, with the rabbit Hazel as the pious Aeneas who leads his people to a new and better country. Hazel and the other rabbits are distinguished by their Trojan capacity for suffering and survival against the odds, an epic theme that captured child and adult imaginations in the 1970s. At around the same time, Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea trilogy (1968, 1971, 1972) explored epic questions common to classical epic narrative and the Book of Genesis, such as how or whether human beings can be reconciled to loss and death. Contemporary epic fantasies such as Philip Pullman’s trilogy, His Dark Materials (1995, 1997, 2000) and Terry Pratchett’s Discworld series have had little difficulty in crossing between child and adult readings. Also attracting substantial adult audiences are Susan Cooper’s Seaward, Raymond Feist’s Riftwar saga, Robert Jordan’s Wheel of Time, Michael Moorcock’s Eric of Melnibone, William Nicholson’s The Wind Singer, Susan Price’s The Sterkarm Handshake, the Australian Garth Nix’s Sabrie and the Canadian Steven Oppell’s Silverwing trilogy.

One way that epic expresses its orientation to the past is in the retelling of foundational myths to strengthen a community or nation’s sense of present identity. We see such retellings in the tales of El-ahrairah in Watership Down, and in the ballads sung in Elrond’s house in Tolkien’s Rivendell. The embedded narratives of Brian Patten’s The Story Giant are networks of myths that sustain fragmented and endangered communities. Like Scheherezade, characters in these works survive through telling and listening to stories. The epic hero’s individual quest for self-knowledge is thus metaphorically linked to the quest of an entire community for recognition and stability. In Oppell’s Silverwing trilogy, the hero - appropriately named Shade - survives only in the memories and stories told of his exploits. These become part of the bat colony’s collective memory, lodged in the echo chambers that house the colony’s myths of origin. In film, George Lucas’s Star Wars begins in medias res, the first three episodes recounting the middle of the saga, the next three looping back, and the projected final three recounting the end of the war; nine rings, then, will complete this Wagnerian cycle of films. Given the strong precedence for crossover epic film which Star Wars established, Jackson’s adaptation of The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring hardly needed the massive support of Tolkien enthusiasts to ensure its success with a dual-aged audience. Dreamworks, the company producing the trilogy of Lord of the Rings films, plans to follow with an adaptation of Pullman’s His Dark Materials, also in trilogy. Crossover epic fantasy, then, seems set to fill bookshelves, and cinema screens, for years to come.

The story goes that Tolkien and Lewis once agreed to write a complementary pair of fantasy novels; Tolkien was to take time, and Lewis space (Wilson 1991: 154). Tolkien dawdled over The Lost Road, while Lewis speedily produced the science fiction novel Out of the Silent Planet (1938), eventually the first of a trilogy. The continuities between epic fantasy and science fiction are too many to be disentangled here (Star Wars is certainly both). But in the chronotope of science fiction, space (outer or inner) is generally dominant over time, and its temporal orientation is generally towards the future rather than the past. From Jules Verne’s Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea and H. G. Wells’s The War of the Worlds to present-day bestsellers, science fiction has successfully drawn a mixed-age audience. Some of Philip K. Dick’s novels, such as The Man in the High Castle (1965), develop alternative futures out of hypothetically altered historical events; these, along with his collected short stories, have crossed audience ages on a mass scale. His science fiction novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? inspired the beautifully made crossover film Blade Runner. Robert Heinlein’s Stranger in a Strange Land (1961) is ostensibly an adult book, while Farmer in the Sky (1950), Starman Jones (1953) and Starship Troopers (1959, also later adapted as a film) are young adult books. But readers of science fiction enjoy the conventions of the genre, whatever its level of address. Dick and Heinlein enthusiasts have generally read the whole of the author’s output, not just the books intended for their age category. The same could also be argued for novels by Ben Bova, Alan Nourse, Robert Sheckley and Dean Koontz. Roger Zelazny’s The Amber Chronicle, Marion Zimmer Bradley’s feminist Clingfire trilogy and Alastair Reynolds’ Revelation Space are a just few of the crossover titles selling particularly well currently.

If there are crossover space fictions, there are also crossover fictions about different historical times. Closely allied to fantasy are fictions drawing on historical legend. What T. H. White’s The Sword in the Stone did for mixed audiences of the 1940s, writers like Kevin Crossley-Holland (The Seeing Stone) and Catherine Fisher (Corbenic) are doing for crossover readships in the new millennium. Alan Garner’s The Owl Service (1967), Rosemary Sutcliff’s The Lantern Bearers (1959) and Susan Cooper’s The Dark Is
all crossover social realism is dark, disturbing and violent. Francesca Lia Block's Weetzie Bat stories (1990-) give an off-beat view of teenagers the subject of her novel Falling (now adapted as a film), because they were at a stage in their lives when it was still In a 2001 conference at the Roehampton Institute in London, the Dutch crossover author Anne Provoost remarked that she made realism' (Magrs 2002). Strange Boy is 'for people of thirteen and older', but it explores threshold crossings of several kinds, including has written an adult book for children; 'all of my books have been crossover: between fiction and theory, straight and gay, fantasy and class, gender and chronology.

Concerns about the appropriateness of ‘adult material’ in children's books is also recurrently voiced in discussions of children's social realist fiction (see, for example, Brennan 1996; Baer 2000; Koehnecke 2000). By ‘social realism’, I mean broadly speaking any fiction that represents the actual, material world and focuses on social relations rather than individual, heroic quests or journeys (for example, the desire to be identified through a social group or conversely the need to express a distinct selfhood within a community). ‘Crossover’ in this context can mean either texts that cross from child to adult audiences and vice versa, or texts that are aimed at teenagers crossing over into adulthood (‘young adult’ literature) (see Irving 1996). In practice, though, there is substantial overlap between these two types of crossover. An early example of adult to young adult crossover is Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird (1960). Robert Cormier's The Chocolate War (1974), a bleak novel about school corruption, was also written as an adult novel but marketed very successfully for young adults. More recently, Cisneros's The House on Mango Street (1992) and Guterson's Snow Falling on Cedars (1994) were marketed as adult novels, but soon attracted large numbers of teenage readers.

The controversies raised by crossover in this genre are slightly different to the ones discussed so far. What worries parents, teachers and journalists is the extent to which contemporary literature for children or teenagers deals explicitly with ‘adult’ themes: racism, class warfare, mental illness, drug abuse, sexual practices, violence and crime. The crossover is in the material, which then stimulates (it is feared, damaging) changes in perspective in the reader. In effect, this is a reaction against the ‘tweenager’ phenomenon (children developing ‘too quickly’ into adults), which is a direct counterpart to ‘kiddul- tery’ (adults masquerading as children).

One of the first such ‘tweenager’ novels was Judy Bloom’s Forever (1975), which dealt with teenage sex with a directness heretofore not attempted for this age group. The prolific author Jacqueline Wilson, described as ‘the voice of the “tweenage” generation’ (O’Brien 2002), writes ever more explicitly about divorce, abandonment and mental disorders. Wilson’s novel Secrets (2002) concerns the friendship of two girls, one with a violent stepfather, the other with a mother who forces her on to fad diets. Secrets quickly made it to the bestseller lists of children's literature but, as one reviewer notes, is the sort of book that ‘children like, but that makes adults uncomfortable’ (O’Brien 2002). Julie Myerson similarly finds Anne Fine's Up on Cloud Nine (2002) a disturbing read. She describes the novel, which concerns a child with suicidal tendencies, as ‘a strange, dark, slippery beast of a book’, but she is also sure her own children will love it (Myerson 2002). The treatment of teenage sex in Melvin Burgess's Lady, My Life as a Bitch (2001), Doing It (2003) and Filth (2003) have provoked hostile reactions from adult reviewers (see Burgess 2001). While such novels may not attract adult audiences in the way children's fantasy currently does, they are in some respects more ground-breaking in the way they dramatise cultural and chronological crossover at the level of style and theme. An example of stylistic crossover is Chloe Hooper's A Child's Book of True Crime, which received mixed reviews because of its disturbing treatment of sexuality and murder. The central character is a teacher who thinks like a pathologically disturbed child, and her narration problematises Wall's conception of dual-address fiction. Focalised through this schizophrenic character, the narration 'veers from childlike to adolescent, to would-be mature dirty-realist', according to one reviewer (Joughin 2002).

An example of the thematic treatment of crossover is Paul Magr's Strange Boy (2002), which relates the experiences of a boy on a council estate who discovers he is gay. Magr's, however, testily rejects such simplifying synopses, as well as the criticism that he has written an adult book for children; 'all of my books have been crossover: between fiction and theory, straight and gay, fantasy and realism' (Magrs 2002). Strange Boy is ‘for people of thirteen and older’, but it explores threshold crossings of several kinds, including class, gender and chronology.

Realistic representation of the threshold crossing is perhaps the distinguishing feature of the chronotope of young adult literature. In a 2001 conference at the Roehampton Institute in London, the Dutch crossover author Anne Provoost remarked that she made teenagers the subject of her novel Falling (now adapted as a film), because they were at a stage in their lives when it was still ‘possible to swerve’, an idea that is as likely to appeal to middle-aged adults as young ones. It is worth pointing out, though, that not all crossover social realism is dark, disturbing and violent. Francesca Lia Block's Weetzie Bat stories (1990-) give an off-beat view of
While this article has concentrated on text-based crossover fiction, one could argue that the visual media first created, and still sustain, the largest crossover audiences (on the history of children's film, see Wojcik-Andrews 2002). In the 1930s in the USA, Bugs Bunny cartoons were screened between newsreels and feature films and watched by adult audiences. Major American newspapers all had (and mostly still have) comic pages, which mixed together child and adult strips (the latter being soap operas, or detective strips like Dick Tracy). If strips like Schultz’s Charlie Brown could be said to appeal to the adult in the child, Watterson’s Calvin and Hobbes (in which a stuffed tiger comes alive only when there is no adult figure in the frame) appeals to the child in the adult; both, in any case, have become crossover classics. Gothic thrillers and monster movies drew mixed audiences from a very early date. King Kong was apparently one of the few films that C. S. Lewis liked (Wilson 1991: 160). The film (rather than the original book) of The Wizard of Oz still has cult followings among adults and children, and was a seminal influence on Salman Rushdie (Rushdie 1992). As in text-based fiction, films that are focalised through children tend to attract mixed-age audiences, though they may be initially aimed at adult viewers. The searing film of Barry Hines’s novel Kes is one such; more recently, Little Voice and Billy Elliot have put a more upbeat (fairy-tale?) spin on the story of the deprived northern English child. The American comic-book heroes Batman, Superman and Spider-Man have all been adapted for film, moving from children’s reading to crossover viewing. Out of the Hollywood mainstream, Ghostworld and From Hell began life as young adult graphic novels before becoming successful young adult and adult films. Walter Moers’s two comic-strip series, Professor Schimauksi and Kapt’n Blaubar, attracted a huge crossover audience in Germany, and Captain Bluebeard in particular has become an international crossover success. At 750 pages long, The 13V Lives of Captain Bluebear (2000) is not for the fainthearted, but the combination of Vonnegut pace and Swiftian humour is as likely to attract child as adult readers.

Children’s cartoon animation developed alongside adult cinema and television shows, in many cases parasitically so. As Matt Groening put it in an episode of The Simpsons (Episode 3F16, ‘The Day the Violence Died’), ‘Animation is built on plagiarism. If it weren’t for someone plagiarising The Honeymooners, we wouldn’t have The Flintstones. If someone hadn’t ripped off Sergeant Bilko, there’d be no Top Cat.’ Recently, both South Park and The Simpsons have transformed the early evening cartoon slot into an hour of brilliantly observed social satire; The Simpsons especially is consumed additively by adults as well as children. TV sit-coms like Friends also attract enormous mixed-age audiences. Animation films are now extremely sophisticated technically, and have developed storylines of increasing complexity and depth. Nick Park’s A Grand Day Out and The Wrong Trousers turned Wallace and Gromit into favourite comic icons, for both adults and children (see Abbotson 2000). Monsters, Inc. is an inventive portrait of adult corporate identity, where the corporation is sustained by the energy (shrieks or laughter) of unwitting children. In many ways, the film’s satirical view of US big business is sharper and more perceptive than many adult films (The Matrix, for example).

Children’s fantasy novels, in particular, are attracting film producers almost as soon as they have established substantial crossover readships. Tolkien and Rowling are soon to be followed by film adaptations of Hearn’s Across the Nightingale Floor and Colfer’s Artemis Fowl. But the adaptation of children’s fiction into crossover film has such a long and illustrious history, a history that is bound up with the larger story of the development of cinema, that it can only be touched on here.

The crossover appeal of contemporary picture books is a particularly interesting case, since these books have traditionally been marketed for the youngest readships (see Scott 1999; McGillis 1999). Wegman’s photographic book Puppies is clearly aimed at child readers, but it was previewed for dual audiences in The New York Times Magazine, and appeared on the adult TV show Oprah. But experimental picture books, such as those of Dr Seuss and Maurice Sendak, have done more than perhaps any other genre to call into question assumptions about what distinguishes children’s from adult literature. Myles McDowell once listed the essential characteristics of children’s literature, which included: a clear-cut moral schema, optimism, orderly plots, an emphasis on magic and adventure, use of conventions, dialogue rather than description, shorter length and simplicity (McDowell 1972/1976). Contemporary experimental picture books call into question every one of these ‘essential’ characteristics. John Burningham’s Would You Rather ... (1978) is a narrative with an open ending comparable to adult experimental fiction (for example, Fowles’s French Lieutenant’s Woman). Jon Scieszka’s The Stinky Cheese Man (1992) re-invents traditional fairy tales and comments on its own textuality, in the manner of metafictional works such as Calvino’s If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller or Spark’s The Comforters (Grieve 1998: 11). Shel Silverstein’s Where the Sidewalk Ends (1974) and The Giving Tree (1964) are children’s picture books that are becoming adult classics in the USA. Sometimes the reference system seems aimed at the adult (parent?) reader, rather than the child. According to John Stephens, Anthony Browne’s Willie the Dreamer (1997) ‘establishes a dialogic relationship with Magritte and Dalí’, which would most likely pass unnoticed by a very young child (Stephens 2000: 18). But this is not to assume that the adult reader sees more than the child (assuming the adult picks up the references to modern art at all). As Stephens points out, the child reader is often quicker to notice the complex inter- and intra-textual references which characterise Browne’s work.

Some picture books are also crossover in the sense that young adult and social realist fiction is: that is, they present adult themes to child readers. In this respect, they have attracted the same kind of controversy as discussed above. This is particularly true of picture books that represent war or genocide (books on the Holocaust and Hiroshima, for example) (Harrison 1987). Judith Kerr’s ostensibly light-hearted picture book The Tiger Who Came to Tea (1968) touches on the darker material of her autobiographical novel about Nazism, When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit (1971) (see Sylvester 2002). Raymond Briggs’s When the Wind Blows (1982) is a far from optimistic critique of the nuclear arms industry, possibly aimed at young readers. Briggs’s The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman (1984) satirises Margaret Thatcher’s role in the Falklands War, and assumes a sophisticated level of interpretation.

It would be nice to think that the current high profile of crossover books and films could be explained solely as a response to the merit of the works in question. But such crossover activity needs to be understood as part of a broader cultural context. Some argue that social and economic changes have made adults more disposed to take notice of children’s culture. Single-parent and higher-income families, working children and ‘kiddults’ may all have contributed to the dramatic rise in consumption of children’s products.
Like it or not, children in western capitalist countries are big business. And over the past twenty years, more and more young adults have become involved in the running of powerful corporations, especially in the USA. In a special issue of The Economist devoted to youth cultures in the USA, Europe and Japan, Chris Anderson charts the ‘growing influence of young adults in the working world’ (Anderson 2000: 3). He identifies three factors as being chiefly responsible for the dominance of youth in new corporations like Microsoft; all three are linked in some way to the importance of new technologies in the workplace. First, the Internet ‘has triggered the first industrial revolution in history to be led by the young’; young people are growing up with technological skills that older employees have to learn, and learn more slowly (4). Michael Schrage of MIT is quoted as saying that this is the ‘age of ageism’ (8), an age in which ‘Enfantrepreneurs’ are favoured to run ‘immature technologies’ (9). Second, corporate restructurings of the 1980s and 1990s, in breaking down traditional hierarchies, placed greater value on younger employees. Since that restructuring, the most-sought-after employees are not those with a record of loyal service, but ‘free agents who stay only as long as they are challenged and rewarded; flitting from job to job, once a trait of fickle youth, is now an admired sign of ambition and initiative’ (5). And finally, like sexual preference, age is becoming a matter of choice. You can opt to be young, culturally if not chronologically; at thirty-five, you can dress and behave as a twenty-year-old, listen to the same music, play the same sports, lead the same social life. New York and San Francisco are societies ‘converging on a virtual age somewhere between twenty and thirty’, and other American cities are not far behind (5).

Such changes in working practice may have influenced the cultural habits of an enormous number of people, not only their consumption of books and films but also their decisions when and whether to find full-time work, have sex, drink, use drugs, marry, have (or not have) children, in what manner to dress, eat, and socialise. In July 2000, it was estimated that 10,000 people a week in Britain were buying Sony Playstations, that the sale of small scooters went up by 31 per cent and large scooters and motorbikes by 47 per cent, and that the consumers of these products were aged anywhere from eighteen to forty (Summerskill 2000). ‘Kidult’ clothes became high fashion, and models dressed as ‘Goldilocks’, ‘Sleeping Beauty’ and ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ were expected to appeal to adult consumers. Gucci sent a parade of baby-doll dresses down the catwalk; adults sported ‘Babe’ tee-shirts; sales of Reeboks and Adidas fashion trainers soared; Emma Bunton as ‘Baby Spice’ became a cultural icon; and Elspeth Gibson designed her winter 2002 collection after Lord of the Rings. And while adults regressed to ‘kidults’, ‘chadults’ and ‘middlescents’, children aged to ‘tweeneragers’, using mobile phones, reading glossy magazines like Cosmogirl for under-elevens, buying sexualised clothes, make-up and perfumes. For example, BBC 2’s Little Women documented the lives of a group of seven- to twelve-year-old girls who shopped at Harrods, watched wrestling on Sky Sports, discussed rape and dressed like their favourite pop idols.

Critical reactions to ‘kidult’ and ‘tweenerager’ cultures have been extremely mixed in Britain and continental Europe. In part, this is because the phenomenon is viewed as an export from the USA, and if within the USA youth culture is associated (correctly or not) with underground, anti-establishment movements, once it is marketed abroad it may come to stand for exactly the opposite: political conformism, global homogenisation, the erasure of cultural difference. In Britain, the reaction to crossover products and images has, again, been mixed: for example, on the negative side, some complain that children are being made to grow up too fast; others accuse adults of refusing to grow up. Thus David Aaronvitch writes, ‘I don’t like to see adults reading Harry Potter when they haven’t read Nabokov, or men on shiny scooters when they should be on foot’ (Aaronvitch 2001). According to Philip Hensher, adult nostalgia for the past is perfectly acceptable and normal; what is suspect is ‘the new and ... strange phenomenon ... of adults buying and reading new children’s books, which can carry no weight of nostalgia for them’ (Hensher 2001).

The culture of ‘kidology’ is seen by some commentators to have infiltrated British politics, with detrimental effect. For some critics kidultery is a sign of increasing American influence on British politics and culture, but for Timothy Garton Ash it betokens a return to English public school values. Garton Ash claims that the three main British exports of 2001, Harry Potter, Frodo Baggins and Tony Blair - all have something in common. Inside a very modern, hi-tech, movie packaging, you discover a remarkably traditional Englishness ... Britain must be Gryffindor among the houses of Europe, and Harry Blair - Sir Frodo of the Shire - will lead us there. But Blair’s notions of British leadership in Europe seems hardly comparable either to Harry’s exuberant acrobatics in Quidditch, or Frodo’s anxious journey into Mordor.

(Garton Ash 2002: 21)

In fashioning a political critique of Blair, Garton Ash at the same time fuses into a single entity all the varied books and films that are consumed by children of different ages, interests and social groups. Thus simplified, children’s literature is made to signify, on the one hand, American cultural imperialism and, on the other, traditional English insularity.

A similar range of opinions is evident in specialist academic criticism about contemporary crossover literature. Some critics applaud the fact that children’s literature has ‘finally come of age’, a curious phrase which, if it were accurate, would spell the end of the entity it celebrates (see Nikolajeva 1996). Others, by contrast, are worried that children’s literature is disappearing under the pressures of adult consumerism. For example, Neil Postman, in The Disappearance of Childhood (1983), and Jack Zipes, in Sticks and Stones or the Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature (2002), argue that children are being de- individualised, or homogenised, by a bombardment of consumerist messages from TV, pop culture, games, popular films and pulp books. To my mind, Postman’s study really only proves that a certain kind of childhood (his) is disappearing, while Zipes’s stimulating collection of essays is flawed by inconsistency. In the final essay, he argues on the one hand that Harry Potter is only being bought and read by adults, not children, and on the other hand that this kind of derivative, sexist and banal book is responsible for turning children into consumerist clones. But it is hard to see how the Potter books could exert such influence on children, if they are not actually reading...
The claim to transcendence should be distinguished from that of crossover potential, since there must be recognised age boundaries in order for texts to cross over them. The argument that good children's literature is 'for all ages' is not new. Many authors have maintained that they do not write specifically for children. C. S. Lewis claimed that if a book is not worth reading at sixty it is not worth reading at six, and Richard Adams insisted, 'I do not, myself, recognise the distinction between publications for children and for adults ... In my view, the distinction may do more harm than good' (Eccleshare 2002: 90).

But authorial intentions, however interesting, do not determine the relationship between readers and texts (and not all authors would agree that transcendence is something to aim for). For the most part, children's literature has attracted a distinct group of readers since at least the mid-eighteenth century. This group certainly includes adults - parents, librarians, educators, students, publishers and booksellers, writers and journalists - but it is still a group distinct from readers of mainstream 'adult' literature. Even these adult readers do not respond to children's literature agelessly, any more than children do. A text may activate an adult's 'inner child' or indeed any number of argumentative and mutually incompatible inner children. Equally, a text may activate a child's 'inner parent', as Don Latham argues of Lois Lowry's Annemarie, in Number the Stars (1989) and The Giver (1997) (Latham 2002: 8). Crossover books and films are interesting precisely because of the shifts and slides of temporal perspective they induce in their readers and viewers.

The argument that children's literature is 'for all ages' can also be framed negatively. As Jacqueline Rose points out, children's literature is primarily written, sold, chosen, bought and consumed by adults, so it has always been only secondarily for children (Rose 1984). But children only come 'afterwards' in discussions of children's literature, as she claims, if we decide a priori to begin the discussion with authors and end it with readers. Rose passes over child readers in silence because, she says, their motives are not recoverable. But this is to mystify children unnecessarily, to reduce them to the status of Spivak's subalterns. Children can articulate their views about reading, and these views can and should be incorporated into specialist critical analysis. Moreover, in applying the familiar postcolonial and/or feminist critique of 'Otherness' to the arena of children's literature, Rose fails to account for the continuum between children's and adults' experience, a continuum that does not exist in gender or race relations. Many children are curious about adult perspectives, and one reason they read books and watch films is to gain insight into adult discourses and constructions of reality - as Juliet McMaster notes, child writers don't usually write about children, but about adult worlds (McMaster 2001: 281).

From the brief survey above, it should be apparent that there are different types of crossover in different genres, and there are many different genres of literature that are currently crossing from child to adult, and adult to child audiences. Some of this traffic from one age of audience to another is new; some has ample historical precedent. But it seems certain that in recent years we have witnessed crossover literature entering a new and important phase. Adults are arguably more engaged with contemporary children's literature than they ever have been. This engagement could become merely predatory or manipulative, as some critics fear. It could be one-sided, but it could also be the basis for a more dialogic understanding of children's and adults' cultures, their interdependence, and their inter-illumination.

References


Further reading


Apseloff, M. F. (1989) They Wrote for Children Too: An Annotated Bibliography of Children's Literature by Famous Writers for


Forms and genres. 43. Crossover literature. Rachel Falconer. The first years of the new millennium have been miraculous ones for crossover literature, books and films that cross from child to adult audiences or vice versa. J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2000) was snatched up by child and adult readers, taking sales of the series to over 40 million in 200 countries, with translations into forty languages. But such crossover activity needs to be understood as part of a broader cultural context. Some argue that social and economic changes have made adults more disposed to take notice of children’s culture. Single-parent and higher-income families, working children and ‘kiddults’ may all have contributed to the dramatic rise in consumption of children’s products.