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Negotiating the Age Divide in British Teen and Young Adult Fiction from the 1970s to the Present

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The Minor vs. Major Question

The title of this collection of essays, "Minor Voices?", first induced in me the usual resigned, slightly annoyed reaction of a children's literature scholar who has had a long experience of having to legitimize his/her field of study before being able to start engaging with it. Then I thought to myself that, in spite of the somewhat patronizing subtitle, "When Major Literary Authors Write for Children,"[1] the promising question mark after "Minor Voices" might be a sign of the times and reveal the change that children's literature studies have undergone in the last decades, ever since a few major publishing phenomena started altering the way these books were perceived. Matthew Grenby efficiently sums up this new status of children's literature, remarking that

> [a]n increase in the attention paid to children's literature is probably tied up with its new-found centrality in culture: the *Harry Potter* effect as it might succinctly be called. Children's books [...] have become the bestsellers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. They have crossed over into the reading lives of adults, and into cinema, theatre, computer games and many other media. (Grenby 200)

What used to be a minor genre has clearly become sociologically, economically and literarily legitimized. Children's books have indeed shown, especially in recent years, their ability to achieve publishing and economic success (not only J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* but also Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* or the more recent *bit lit* or dystopia), as well as literary accomplishment. Awards and prizes may highlight the high literary merit of some children's or young adult (YA) books. In 2001, novelist Philip Pullman was given the prestigious Whitbread Book of the Year Award (named Costa Book Awards since 2006) for *The Amber Spyglass*, the third book in *His Dark Materials* trilogy. It was the first time that a children's book had been awarded such a prize in the overall category, and not in the category of children's books. This new recognition of YA novels was confirmed in 2003 when Mark Haddon won the Whitbread award in the overall category as well for *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. As for YA author Patrick Ness, in addition to the Costa award for his *Chaos Walking* trilogy, he won the Carnegie Medal, one of the top literary prizes for children's literature, both in 2011 and in 2012, for *Monsters of Men* (the third book in the trilogy) and for *A Monster Calls,* making his YA books far more successful than the adult

[1] A title reminiscent of the title of Canadian children's literature scholar Sandra Beckett's 1996 study about French novelists writing both for adults and children: *De grands romanciers écrivent pour les enfants*.

ones. This profusion of prizes confirms that children's literature writers publish not only popular but also highly commendable books.

The prescient title of Maria Nikolajeva's 1996 study *Children's Literature Comes of Age* has eventually been proven right. The relationship between children's and adult books has evolved to the extent that construing it in binary–even antagonistic–terms seems to have become more and more irrelevant. Especially as there is actually nothing minor about children's literature. Not only does it hold a central place in culture; it also plays a major role in what the child reader is going to turn into as an adult, as Margaret Meek, a pioneer in British criticism of children's literature, pointed out in the early 1990s: "From the stories we hear as children we inherit the ways in which we talk about how we feel, the values which we hold to be important, and what we regard as the truth" (Meek 103).

Authors themselves have become ever less uncomfortable about writing children's books over the last half-century, making the notions of minor vs. major genres beside the point. Prize-winning authors have explored both kinds of writing and writing for children is not necessarily a secondary activity for them. This is the case for Penelope Lively, Salman Rushdie, and Ian McEwan (as "mostly adults'" authors also writing for children) or, most recently, Philip Pullman or Patrick Ness as "mostly children's" authors also writing for adults. Diana Wynne Jones, a British fantasy author who wrote only two novels for adults and about forty for children or teenagers from the 1960s to her death in 2011, was even famously reluctant to write for adults, whom she found far less skilled as readers than youngsters. In a 1990 essay entitled "Two Kinds of Writing?", she recalls:

> when I was asked if I'd like to try my hand at an adult novel, I most joyfully agreed. To my great surprise, writing it and after that receiving the comments of an editor revealed all sorts of additional hidden assumptions about the two kinds of writing. […] They […] affected almost everything: from the length of the book to its style and subject matter. And nearly all of them–this was what disturbed me most–acted to deprive me of the freedom I experience when I write for children. […] I found myself thinking as I wrote, "These poor adults are never going to understand this; I must explain it to them twice more and then remind them again later in different terms." Now this is something I never have to think when I write for younger readers. […] I can make my plots for them as complex as I please, and yet I know I never have to explain them more than once (or twice at the very most). (Jones 1-4)

This significant change in the representations of the adult/child relationship on which children's literature is based thus leads me to slightly rework the topic of the conference. This paper will start from the assumption that the minor vs major opposition needs to be challenged, but that this opposition is worth paying attention to as it is based on a central concern of children's books, which is indeed related to size and proportion: the issue of age and the difference it implies between adults and children. I will engage with this essential

paradox by proposing a theoretical approach to the issue of age—both that of the characters in the story and that of the readers outside it—drawing on a corpus of British novels published mainly in the last fifty years for teenagers and young adults, a category that has considerably developed since the 1970s. I will show that adults and children are not antithetical forces any more and that their relationship is (and more and more so) the result of a complex negotiation.

Writing for Children and Young Adults: An Ambiguous Endeavour

Children's literature has frequently been depicted as inherently paradoxical since adult authors endeavor to recapture, or get as close as possible to the child's point of view s/he has long lost (Douglas 72-84). In her influential yet much debated study *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984), Jacqueline Rose claims that children's literature does not actually exist since it can only hope to achieve its purpose of describing and addressing real children but unavoidably fails to do so, as it is based on constructions of childhood, on the author's fantasized perception of children. This argument was taken up by Karín Lesnik-Oberstein who, in *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (1994) and *Children's Literature: New Approaches* (2004), develops the idea that not only children's literature in general, but also the work of critics and commentators writing in this field, are stained by wrong assumptions about childhood. And yet I would contend, as many other critics do, that it is precisely this essential paradox, this seminal impossibility, which makes children's literature exist and which results in its fruitfulness.[2] Arguably all literature is based on representations and constructions, and if they did not produce fantasies of childhood, children's books could probably not be called "literature." The difficulty lies in the fact that it is the only kind of literature that is defined by its intended readership, making age a central issue in theorising the field. Admittedly such a definition is far from being unproblematic as children are seldom the only audience children's books are aimed at and many critics have stressed the dual readership of this literature and the complexity involved in its definition.[3] However, even if one acknowledges that the implied addressee of the children's author is an intricate construction rather that a clear-cut entity, writing for a young readership still requires negotiating the relationship between two dimensions which are at

[2] See for instance David Rudd, "Theorising and Theories: The Conditions of Possibility of Children's Literature", in *The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*: "Although children's literature might be seen as 'impossible' [...], there is no question of its social and economic reality." (Rudd 34)

[3] See for instance: Marah Gubar, "On not defining children's literature", in *PMLA* 126.1 (January 2011): 209-21, or Virginie Douglas, "Desperately Seeking the Child in Children's Books", in Rosie Findlay & Sébastien Salbayre (ed.). *Stories for Children, Histories of Childhood/Histoires d'enfant, histoires d'enfance*. Publications du GRAAT n°36, vol. 2. Tours: Presses Universitaires François Rabelais, 2007: 72-84.

the heart of the author's endeavour: recognising the child's specificity and separateness on one hand and depicting his/her growing up and coming of age—i.e. the transition towards adulthood—on the other.

The recognition of the child's specificity, which can be traced to early modern Europe as historian Philippe Ariès has shown in *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien régime/Centuries of Childhood* (1960), has often materialized in children's books in the equation of childhood with particular circumscribed spaces. This "space necessarily separate from the world of adults," to borrow Perry Nodelman's phrase (Nodelman 3), served as a metaphor of childhood most blatantly in classics from the Golden Age of children's literature, with such fantasy lands as Alice's Wonderland, Mowgli's jungle or Peter Pan's Neverland. The more distinct the child was acknowledged to be, the more its constructions estranged him/her from the adult, making him/her an object of curiosity, fantasy or even desire. Describing the Golden Age of the end of the Victorian era and the Edwardian period, Julia Briggs shows that the separateness of childhood was then often expressed in terms of an antithesis between children and adults: "As childhood came to be seen as a state distinct from and potentially opposed to being 'grown-up', so it came to be figured as 'other', with all the idealization, horror, and projection that such a status implies" (Briggs 168).

Since then the child's specificity has recurrently been embodied in children's books by settings conveniently yet unrealistically deserted by adults, or in isolated, out-of-the-way places like dens or hideouts. We could mention such examples as the den of the gang of the Outlaws—i.e. the hero and his friends—in the *Just William* series by Richmal Crompton (1922-1970); or the children's hidden fort, "Fortress Caporetto", in Robert Westall's *The Machine-Gunners* (1975), set during World War II, where the group of friends hide the wounded German soldier they have found. Islands, too, are a common feature of children's books signifying separateness and they profitably suggest adventure through the reference to Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. This is the case for Wild Cat Island in Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* series (1930-1947), which is the place where the Walker children live an adventurous life away from their parents and is in its turn a probable inspiration for Kirrin Island, the setting of many an adventure in Enid Blyton's *Famous Five series*, from the very first book *Five on a Treasure Island* in 1942. Both are clearly meant as places where to get rid of adult–especially parental–company.

From Separateness to In-Betweenness

On the other hand, despite the specificity and distinctiveness of childhood that some authors, like J.M. Barrie, with Peter Pan—"the boy who wouldn't grow up"—, have sometimes wanted to confine the child to, authors through children's books cannot help trying to depict what

childhood is all about: the process of growing up and coming of age, i.e. experiencing the transition from one state to another. My argument is that there is less of a break between the world of children and that of adults today, both in the representation of childhood, which now includes adolescence, a much-neglected age category in the past, and in generic terms, with the development of intermediate subcategories in the children's book, like the teenage novel or the YA novel. By its very terminological choice, the latter lays the stress on the new maturity the young reader gradually reaches.

This is why recent novels for teenagers or young adults have more forcefully combined the specificity and separateness of childhood or youth with the notion of a transition towards adulthood. Instead of the circumscribed, isolated spaces of the Golden Age, they now deliberately focus on spaces that are only partly disconnected from adulthood and which are emblematic of a passage by their in-between status. The fact that teenage characters are halfway between two different states is emphasized by their recurrent visits to unclassifiable places, usually located between nature (or wildness) and civilisation: wastelands, for instance, are common settings for teenage protagonists in YA novels. The description of the eponymous wilderness of David Almond's novel *Kit's Wilderness* (1999) is particularly significant:

> In Stoneygate there was a wilderness. It was an empty space between the houses and the river, where the ancient pit, the mine, had been. That's where we played Askew's game, the game called Death. We used to gather at the school's gates after the bell had rung. We stood there whispering and giggling. After five minutes, Bobby Carr told us it was time and he led us through the wilderness to Askew's den, a deep hole dug into the earth with old doors slung across it as an entrance and a roof. The place was hidden from the school and from the houses of Stoneygate by the slope and by the tall grasses growing around it. (Almond 5)

The move from one threshold ("the school's gates") to another (the "old doors slung across" the entrance of the den), from education and civilisation to wildness, in addition to the ambivalence of a place both natural and imprinted by human activity, is clearly an attempt at portraying the in-betweenness of adolescence.

Another book by David Almond, *The Savage* (2008), shows a similar place halfway between nature and civilisation, the ruined chapel of Burgess woods, where the young narrator finds a refuge after his father's death and gradually succeeds in coming to terms with his loss, growing from the wildness and primitiveness of anger and grief into the maturity of acceptance and solace. Space in Almond's novels is always related both to the rural and the urban, to nature—the wild—and civilisation, insofar as it pictures the uneven transition of adolescence.

These slightly illicit, marginal spaces which the teenage characters seem to be drawn to are also recurrent in Kevin Brooks's fiction. In *Black Rabbit Summer* (2008), fifteen-year old Pete, the narrator, cannot help returning to the den he has built with a group of friends near the river, a hut which differs from traditional children's literature dens insofar as it is made of a mixture of natural elements and discarded human objects, just as he cannot help returning to the wasteland which lies in-between the town itself and its outskirts, however dangerous both places turn out to be. Another novel by Kevin Brooks, *Lucas* (2003), is emblematic of the halfway position of adolescent protagonists: the eponymous outcast, a young adult whose age remains meaningfully unknown,[4] builds a den in which he settles on arriving on the island of Hale, which, strikingly enough, is not an island like those previously mentioned, but a peninsula, both separated and linked to the mainland. Secret dens have thus evolved into special places that are more midway places than isolated ones. More and more often lately, metaphors of separateness have become combined with metaphors of in-betweenness.

From Subversion to Transition

This is no surprise as the evolution of children's literature has followed that of Western society's representation of and relationship to childhood: challenging the establishment and especially adult authority has become acceptable behaviour on the part of children and teenagers. Kim Reynolds sums up this change of focus in the adult/child relationship described in children's books, remarking that

> [t]he "Great Tradition" in children's literature has always been characterized by its elevation of childhood and its questioning of adult wisdom and orthodoxy. But a new dynamic has entered the situation. [...] Greater understanding of young people's needs, the mass-media attention to youth culture, a tendency to admire rebels [...] have meant that much which had previously been classified as "rubbish" is now officially approved and purchased by parents. The consequence is, of course, that new forms of subversion have to be found [...]. (Reynolds 72)

In the post-war decades, often referred to as the Second Golden Age of children's literature, adults were often still perceived as distinct from, or even opposed to, children. Subversive children's books then regularly featured children confronting adult figures or challenging their authority, and they even sometimes literally excluded them from the narrative. This is what happens most blatantly in Roald Dahl's novels from the 1960s to the 1980s, in which the child's physical and social inferiority to the adult is deliberately exaggerated, and the emphasis is generally laid on the failure of childhood and adulthood to meet except through fights which persistently resort to the very nonsensical motif of inversion—turning someone

[4] "I remembered picturing his face and trying to guess how old he was. Thirteen? Eighteen, nineteen, twenty...? Now that I could see him at close quarters, it still wasn't easy." (Brooks 2003 89-90)

upside down—and the revenge of the child hero. In other post-war novels, adults are either pushed into the background to the extent that they become unrealistically absent from children's lives and adventures, as in the case of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* series, or the escape into a fantasy world (as in C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia,* 1950-56, or Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, 1958) makes parents and educators conveniently scarce.

In today's children's/YA literature, things are not so clear-cut any longer. For instance, by calling the political order of their oppressive societies into question, the young heroes of recent dystopias re-enact, in a very different way, the subversion against adult authority formerly pictured by Roald Dahl. In two recent sophisticated dystopian cycles, Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* quartet (2001-2008) and Patrick Ness's *Chaos Walking* trilogy (2008-2010), fighting against illegitimate authority has nothing to do with the direct, often brutal clash of the individual, solipsistic rebellion of Dahl's heroes against figures of authority and adulthood; it is closely linked with the process of maturing and of socialization as it is the future of the whole society which is at stake, especially since the revolt is led by several young people, not just one person.

Blurring Borders: A New Hybridity

This recent attempt to picture the transition from childhood to adulthood in terms of a continuum rather than a break is confirmed by the phenomenon of "crossover literature," that is to say books read across age barriers by children and adults alike.[5] In many of these crossover novels, the appeal of the books to both categories of audience seems related to the fact that growing up and the transition towards adulthood is at the heart of the narrative. It is the case for Harry Potter, which could be described as a Bildungsroman on the scale of seven books, highlighting the stages of the hero's growth. In the same way, Ian McEwan's *The Daydreamer* (1994), with its focus on the motif of metamorphosis—the child character assuming different identities one after the other in each chapter and turning into an adult in the last one—, is particularly apt to appeal to a dual readership. In this case as in many other instances of crossover fiction, it is not completely obvious whether the dual readership consists of a child audience and of an adult audience who both find the book appealing, or of "a single audience of hybrid adult-child readers" (Beckett 2008: 3).

This shift in mentality has resulted in an overall shift in age of the addressees of children's literature, at least for those books that are the main focus of critical and public attention today. YA fiction, which developed in the United States in the 1970s before reaching Britain

[5] See the two 2008 books, *Crossover Fiction* by Sandra Beckett and *The Crossover Novel* by Rachel Falconer.

in the 1980s, has now achieved such recognition that popular subgenres (problem novels, bit lit, dystopias…) multiply into ever more numerous new subgenres (urban fantasy, sick lit, etc.) This popularity and the ensuing market fragmentation linked with the increase in subgenres and in "new" age categories within children's literature (with such recent terminological additions as "tweens," "older teenagers," "young adults" or "new adults") also have a generic effect on authors' writing. YA writers combine their reflection on the ambiguous transition from childhood to adulthood with experiments in form by toying with generic hybridity in their books.

YA fiction of the late 20th century and the early 21st century repeatedly exemplifies this generic hybridity. In *His Dark Materials*, Philip Pullman invents a new kind of fantasy which he wishes to be as remote as possible from that of C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* by introducing science fiction in the fantasy (he once called the books "science fantasies"). Authors like Melvin Burgess switch from harsh realism (*Junk*, 1996, or *Doing It*, 2003) to fantasy, even going as far as mingling the two modes within the same novel: *Bloodtide* (1999) and its sequel *Bloodsong* (2005) in particular are a disturbingly eclectic mixture of fantasy, science fiction, post-apocalyptic dystopia, hyper-realism and a retelling of Norse Mythology. A similar combination of modes and genres can be found in Kevin Brooks's *iBoy* (2010), which offers a thought-provoking reworking of the superhero story, suggesting through the hybridity of its hyperconnected young hero (the mobile phone that was thrown at him from a building has become partly embedded in his brain), that books have become irreversibly transformed by other media and technologies. As for the novel *Nation* (2008) by Terry Pratchett, the highly popular British fantasist who died in 2015, it sets itself apart from the riotous satirical fantasy of his well-known Discworld series. An example of crossover literature, it mirrors the blurring of the age frontiers in the readership in the blurring of generic frontiers. The novel, which addresses readers ranging from teenagers to adults, describes what seems to be a South Sea island in a period sounding like the Victorian age we know. But as the author stresses in the "Author's Note" at the end of the book: "This might look like a book set in the Pacific Ocean. *Nothing could be further from the truth!!!!!* It is in fact set in a parallel universe, a phenomenon known only to advanced physicists and anyone who has ever watched any episode of any SF series, anywhere" (Pratchett 369). The book is characterized by its realistic, almost documentary accuracy in describing the ancestral traditions of the primitive society depicted; only there is no such thing as this society outside of the text. It sounds like a historical novel but it turns out to belong to uchronia—commonly known as alternative history, i.e. a pseudo-historical account diverging from actual history as a result of the altered outcome of an event in the past. And with its two main characters stranded on a desert island, it also taps into the adventure story, more particularly the subgenre of the robinsonade.

Conclusion

The end of the "ghettoization" of children's and YA literature is therefore not only a social phenomenon; it is also closely linked with the evolution in the representation of young characters within the books, which is now carried out in terms of a transition rather than a break and is recurrently enhanced by the generic hybridity of recent texts. Admittedly this is not completely new, as growing up has always been the main concern of children's books. It was already hinted at in Alice's repeated changes in size in Carroll's *Alice* books for instance or in Mowgli's being torn between the jungle and the human village. But this emphasis on the bond between childhood and adulthood despite the child's acknowledged specificity has become the new norm and is highlighted in recent publishing successes. At the turn of the 21st century, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, with its exonerating rewriting of the Biblical Fall, is representative of the current attempt of children's literature to lay the stress on the continuity between the child's and the adult's worlds. This endeavour is materialized in the books by the totemic animal creatures called *daemons* connected to every person in young Lyra's world, which provide a new representation of the passage from childhood to adulthood with an insistence on the link between the two states.

However, even if this new dimension describes growing up and its literary representations in a less antagonistic and more satisfactory way, the recent evolution of children's literature raises questions. If the age categories concerned by the adult/child relationship become ever less defined, ever more porous, both within the diegesis and from the point of view of the readership, doesn't it shake the very bases of the existence of a literature specifically addressed to young people? In the end, is children's literature bound to disappear and get absorbed in mainstream literature? Or rather, is YA literature, through its crossover, hybrid potential, going to take precedence over adult fiction?

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