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## **Do Not Read Beyond This Page: Postmodernism For Children**

**A stylistic examination of postmodern and metafictional  
strategies in children's middle grade fiction**

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## Abstract

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This thesis offers an extensive stylistic analysis of postmodern and metafictional devices in contemporary middle grade fiction (for readers aged approximately 8-12 years). Although terms like postmodernism and metafiction are often deemed culturally 'highbrow' or 'avant-garde', such strategies are rife in children's literature to the point at which they can now be considered mainstream. This is evidenced through the examination of three best-selling children's authors: recent UK Children's Laureate Cressida Cowell, 'celebrity author' Tom Fletcher, and experimental writer Pseudonymous Bosch. In addition to their commercial success with the target readership, all three of these authors deploy a plethora of sophisticated postmodern and metafictional strategies in their books, creating complex narrative structures that rival the most acclaimed canonical literature and push the limits of existing narratological terminology.

Taking the over-obtrusive, visibly inventing postmodern narrator as its analytical base, this thesis examines how metafiction lays bare the construction of narrative and therein furthers the identification of an explicit composition-world through which the text's contextual creation is playfully mediated. It is from this composition-world that the overt storyteller (or internal author) of the text engages in direct, spontaneous conversation with the real reader, metaleptically blurring reality and fiction, and dramatising child-readers as active participants in the reading process and meaning-making to increase readerly engagement, comprehension and enjoyment.

Through this analysis, I argue that children's literature ought to be considered not just within the traditional frame of pedagogy, but also for its academic and artistic value as literature in its own right. Crucially, this thesis refutes adult preconceptions that children's books are necessarily 'easy' or 'simple'. By focusing on two theoretical concepts that many adult readers themselves find difficult to navigate, I demonstrate that children's literature is capable of far more than most people give it credit for – as are child-readers themselves.

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# 1) Introduction

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## 1.1) Preliminary

In 2011, renowned novelist Martin Amis told the BBC that he would only write a children's book 'if [he] had a serious brain injury' because he 'would never write about someone that forced [him] to write at a lower register' than he, as an adult himself, was capable (quoted in Page, 2011: n.p.). Amis received fierce backlash for these comments, most notably from children's authors who understandably took great offence. Responses consistently pointed out that *good* children's writers do not, in fact, 'write down' to their audience, with children's author Lucy Coats arguing that '[c]hildren are astute observers of tone – they loathe adults who patronise them with a passion, adults who somehow assume they are not sentient beings because they are children' (in Page, 2011: n.p.).

She went on to explain her own writing process and emphasised that thinking consciously about language is not 'exclusive to highbrow literary fiction':

When I write, I think about language, the richness and complexity and the wonder of it, and I use it to hook the reader into my story, to ensnare them in my net of words, to take them so far that they forget that what they are seeing is only print on a page of a dead tree. I say the reader – and that means whoever is reading my book regardless of age.

(in Page, 2011: n.p.)

The debate triggered by Amis' original remarks ultimately centred on one underlying assumption: that children's books are easy. They are, after all, for children and child-readers, as inexperienced and underdeveloped as they may be compared to adults who read 'proper' fiction, the likes of which Amis himself writes, surely cannot be expected to cope with anything beyond the lowest levels of stylistic complexity. Children's authors must therefore mitigate their own

knowledge and linguistic capabilities in order to appropriately address their target readership.

This, of course, is nonsense.

Material typically included under the umbrella term of ‘children’s literature’ is perhaps more diverse than any other collection of texts in literary history, drawing on an unprecedented range of styles, genres and formats, and covering a huge array of content and plotlines: from gritty, realist fiction to magical, fantastical fairy tales, and anything and everything in between. To assume that each and every one of these books is ‘simple’ or in some way antithetical to ‘highbrow literary fiction’ does a great disservice to the entire field.

Similarly, given the obvious breadth and depth of children’s literature, one would likely expect the corresponding academic scholarship to be as equally varied. One would, however, be wrong. Despite ongoing developments, the academic study of children’s literature has for too long been neglected – even deliberately undervalued – because of unsubstantiated assumptions, much like those expressed by Amis, that children’s texts automatically lack stylistic quality and complexity. One of the most prolific scholars in the field of children’s literature, Matthew Grenby (2008), explains these setbacks particularly well:

Another important difference between children’s literature and the main body of literary studies is the condescension, even disdain, with which it has sometimes been greeted. Sustained study of children’s literature in universities began only in the 1960s [and] this first entry of children’s literature into the academy was often met with suspicion. Teaching, studying and researching children’s literature could be characterised as beneath the dignity of serious students and academics. It was regarded as being too easy or, perhaps worse, too much fun.

(199-200)



The idea that children's literature was 'too easy' for academics to study is a hugely important point that has, until relatively recently, impeded the growth of children's literature as an academic field in its own right. Furthermore, the historical disdain for the genre is one of the most consistent issues presented in academic criticism. For instance, Zohar Shavit (1986) – writing twenty years prior to Grenby – similarly comments:

Only a short time ago, children's literature was not even considered a legitimate field of research in the academic world. Scholars hardly regarded it as a proper subject for their work, and if they did, they were most often concerned solely with its pedagogic and educational value and not with its existence as a literary phenomenon.

(ix)

The prevalent opinion appears to have been that academics should refrain from looking at children's literature because it was too easy for an adult to find any intellectual value in; the only reason one would possibly consider the genre is regarding its place within a pedagogic frame of reference. However, while the role of children's fiction in education and developing literacies cannot be stressed enough (and is examined in a variety of works, such as Margaret Meek's excellent *Learning to Read* (1982)), it has so much more to offer than *just* educational value. As this thesis intends to demonstrate, one can even find a plethora of complex narrative techniques that would challenge the most complicated canonical literature for adults.

With that in mind, what better way to illustrate the stylistic and narrative sophistication of children's literature than by considering two of the most complicated, highbrow, challenging and experimental literary concepts: postmodernism and metafiction. These terms (outlined in Chapter 3) describe self-conscious and self-referential material that ostentatiously lays bare its own fictionality through 'the breaking of boundaries, the abandonment of linear chronology, the emphasis on the constructedness of texts, the intermingling and

parodying of genres' (Watson, 2004: 55-56) and other playful, fragmented or even just plain absurd techniques. As such, they rarely occur in children's literature scholarship and, until recently, one would likely be laughed at for suggesting that child-readers could understand let alone enjoy postmodern and metafictional strategies. Yet children's literature is rife with these devices, as this thesis will make clear.

## **1.2) Thesis aims and outline**

My primary research aim is to evidence the linguistic, narrative and structural complexities of children's literature through the stylistic examination of a selection of contemporary middle grade texts aimed at readers aged approximately 8-12. Drawing on wider children's literature scholarship, I hope to counter the traditional view of children's literature being inherently 'easy' and refute opinions such as those expressed by Amis that perpetually underestimate and diminish children's authors, children's texts and child-readers themselves. Crucially, by centring this study on the textual features of my chosen books, I shall illustrate both the academic and artistic value of children's literature and thus advocate for its continued consideration 'as a literary phenomenon' (Shavit, 1986: ix) rather than exclusively as a pedagogic tool.

Secondly, postmodernism and metafiction naturally 'invite a particularly playful mode of interaction on the part of the reader' (Lewis, 1994: 8) and I shall therefore emphasise the direct involvement of real-life child-readers throughout my analysis. Each of the texts examined in this thesis dramatises the real reader through purportedly real time, spontaneous conversation with a fictional narrator, in addition to constant metafictional references to the act of reading and the physicality of the book with which readers are engaging in the real world. This consistent address towards the reader from within the pages of the book not only encourages readerly engagement in the reading process through effective dramatisation as 'the

reader of the text', but also enhances their understanding of – and active participation in – meaning-making and narrative construction. As such, I shall argue in favour of postmodern and metafictional techniques being used to increase readerly engagement and interactivity in younger readers.

Much of the reasoning behind these two research aims is addressed in Chapter 2 in which I review the academic field of children's literature and identify where my project sits in relation to existing studies. I begin by highlighting that which makes children's literature unique – its required audience – and how the adult-controlled construct of childhood, symbiotically tied to children's reading material since its earliest publication, has affected the critical understanding of what child-readers can or ought to be exposed to in literature. Through this, I consider the ongoing development of language-focused research and advocate in favour of increased stylistic studies of children's literature.

Chapter 3 provides definitions for the central concepts discussed in this thesis: postmodernism and metafiction. Both can be difficult to pin down in critical discourse so it is necessary to outline some of the key characteristics that underpin my analysis, such as Patricia Waugh's (1984) typical features of postmodernism. This chapter also introduces some of the existing scholarship that considers more experimental fiction for children, including a number of studies dedicated to postmodern picturebooks (e.g. Sipe & Pantaleo, 2012; Stevenson, 1994). I argue that this critical awareness ought to be extended to middle grade fiction for slightly older readers, acknowledging that my chosen material implements more text-based transgressions rather than drawing attention to the visual deconstruction of the book through illustrations.

The next three chapters present a detailed examination of my chosen texts, with Chapter 4 concentrating on the postmodern narrator and how this role is overtly conflated with an authorial figure (often intended to be a textual version of the real-life author) who is seen visibly creating the novel in real time. To examine this narrative figure properly, Chapter 4 introduces a number of critical

frameworks that are used throughout the following analytical chapters. These include Gérard Genette's (1980) terms to identify narrators in relation to their narrative level (*extradiegetic vs intradiegetic*) and their participation within the story (*heterodiegetic vs homodiegetic*); Wayne Booth's (1991) concept of the implied author, supplemented with Gregory Currie's (2010) later distinction between internal and external authors; and Text World Theory (Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999) to delineate narrative levels and account for the omnipresence of the so-called 'composition-world'.

In many ways, Chapter 5 provides a parallel to Chapter 4, examining how the real reader is brought into the world of the text through conflation with the 'you'-narratee with whom the narrator appears to be in direct conversation at the time of the novel's creation. Following Paul Goetsch's (2004) concept of the fictive reader – that is, a reader-figure within the text who exists as the narrator's primary audience and addressee – I consider how real-life child-readers are made active participants in the reading process, meaning-making and construction of narrative.

Chapter 6 brings together many of the elements addressed in the previous two chapters and takes a closer look at *metalepsis* (Genette, 1980). A key tenet of postmodernism is the consistent and blatant blurring of narrative boundaries, and Chapter 6 examines this technique in more detail by showing how distinct ontological borders are crossed (or sometimes removed entirely) in my chosen texts. It is this element that epitomises the complexity of my primary material and, through this analysis, I demonstrate how postmodern and metafictional children's literature can actually push the limits of existing narratological terminology.

Chapter 7 concludes this project with a review of the previous analytical chapters in relation to my original research aims. In this chapter, I also consider possible developments in children's literature scholarship and avenues for future research which have arisen from my findings.

It is my hope that this thesis will thus further the academic study of children's literature, opening the door for increased stylistic analyses of such texts

that go beyond wholly pedagogic applications and therein demonstrating the artistic, aesthetic and academic value of my primary material. For too long, the preconceptions of adults have hindered the development of children's literature studies and have ultimately undervalued published material and child-readers alike. While there have been significant developments in the corresponding scholarship since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the academic consideration of postmodernism and metafiction in relation to children's literature is still woefully understudied and, when it is addressed, seems to focus almost entirely on picturebooks for the youngest of readers, as shall be evidenced in Chapter 3. While the study of postmodern picturebooks undoubtedly provides fascinating research possibilities, I believe it is important to acknowledge the normalisation of these same sophisticated techniques in material for slightly older children: middle grade readers aged 8-12 years. This is the primary focus of my own study and I will consider a selection of works by three best-selling children's authors: Cressida Cowell, Tom Fletcher and Pseudonymous Bosch.

### **1.3) Selected authors and texts**

While the commercial success of my chosen authors is a key element in indicating at least a degree of popularity amongst the target readership, all three authors also deploy a plethora of sophisticated postmodern and metafictional strategies in their books. These rival acclaimed postmodern texts from the literary canon, including – but by no means limited to – the use of parody, infinite regress, the collapsing of ontologically distinct narrative boundaries, critical discussions of the story within the story, deliberate subversion of expected conventions and publishing standards, blatantly self-reflexive and artificial devices, the active involvement of the real reader within the fictional world, and the presence of an overt, visibly creating narrator who writes the story in real time and, often, is established as a textual version of the real-life author.

Indeed, each of these ostentatiously postmodern and experimental techniques (outlined in more detail in Chapter 3) are commonly understood in the popular psyche to be ‘disorienting’, ‘highly fragmented’ and – if taken to the extreme – enjoyed only by ‘literary academics and obsessive over-analyzing types’ (Lin, 2020: n.p.). This is not particularly surprising given that such devices are designed to lay bare the construction of the narrative and force the reader to question what is truly real, both within and outside of the text, and thus are often considered absurd, experimental and naturally quite difficult to navigate. That they should be so prominently displayed in children’s literature is therefore of note.

As this thesis will demonstrate, postmodernism and metafiction are rife in contemporary children’s literature – referring to texts written in the contemporary period, from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2018) – to the point that both can now be considered mainstream (McCallum, 1996). This normalisation and increasing appropriation of traditionally experimental strategies has inspired much of my research and the three authors considered in this study provide useful evidence of this. While they are by no means rare examples in the wider field of contemporary children’s literature, the use of postmodern and metafictional devices in the works of these three authors perfectly mirrors well-known postmodernist texts for *adult* readers. As Hermansson (2019: 29) points out, many metafictional children’s texts focus on the child-reader as a central protagonist, featuring ‘reluctant, challenged, or emerging readers’ who learn something within the book and thus ‘[affirm] the reader by being an ideal reflection of them’. These are tales of young bookworms with whom real-life children are encouraged to identify through their own involvement in the reading process.

While my chosen texts do dramatise the child-reader and make them an active part of the narrative (often by casting them deliberately as ‘the reader of the text’, therein encouraging readers to keep one foot in the fiction and one in the real world, as it were), they are also *linguistically, stylistically* and *narratively* postmodern. This offers a better comparison with traditional, acclaimed

postmodern writing, as evidenced by the fact that each of my chosen texts exhibits every single device outlined by Waugh (1984) in her seminal study of metafiction (see Chapter 3). Thus, rather than selecting books that take the act of reading as a central topic, the texts examined in this thesis instead dramatise the act of reading *in the real world* through complex narrative strategies that blur the boundary between reality and fiction and force child-readers to navigate ‘disorienting’ and ‘highly fragmented’ structures. This, I would argue, is achieved competently by most children – despite child-readers being unlikely to align with Lin’s ‘literary academics and over-analyzing types’ above – and is reflected in the ongoing commercial success of writers who employ such strategies.

Indeed, while I have selected only three authors to examine in this thesis (predominantly given the logistical parameters of one single study), it is important to recognise that these examples are by no means rare in the field of contemporary, commercial children’s literature. David Walliams, for instance, readily deploys footnotes as a way of offering narratorial comments upon the story; experiments with typography and illustrations to convey changes in sound and place; and borrows from absurdist techniques in his frequent use of alphabetised yet nonsensical lists, such as when describing the greedy Myrtle’s numerous possessions in *Fing*:

Ant farm. Home to a million and one ants. Boomerang that doesn’t come back. Myrtle lost that on her first throw. Cowbell, which the girl put round her mother’s neck so she could locate her easily. Dog-grooming set. Even though she didn’t have a dog. Elf. Finger puppets of every king and queen of England from 1066 to the present day. Gravel collection. It was the biggest in Europe. [...] Xylophone case. Myrtle didn’t want an actual xylophone, just the case for one. Yeti. It hasn’t been sighted in the Himalayan mountains for years because Myrtle kept it locked in her cupboard. Zebra dung. It was the only thing she could think of that began with a ‘z’.

(Walliams, 2019: 24-29)

While not overly complex to navigate, such elements highlight the physical and linguistic construction of the text and link directly to features identified by Waugh (1984) as being typical of postmodern writing: an OVER-OBTRUSIVE NARRATOR, OSTENTATIOUS TYPOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT, INCANTATORY AND ABSURD LISTS, OVER-SYSTEMATISED STRUCTURAL DEVICES, and so on (see Chapter 3 for a full list of Waugh's features of postmodernism).

Similarly, Julia Golding introduces EXPLICIT PARODY OF PREVIOUS TEXTS by formatting parts of her *Diamond of Drury Lane* (2008) series as diary entries or theatre programmes; Richard Ayoade showcases SELF-REFLEXIVE IMAGES and a VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR when he makes a physical book the master of its own story in *The Book that No One Wanted to Read* (2022); Chris Wooding uses POPULAR GENRES by borrowing from the world of comic books and even instigates a TOTAL BREAKDOWN OF SPATIAL ORGANISATION when he shows the fictional antagonist of *Malice* (2009) climbing out of the text towards the real reader through the use of a raised image on the front cover.

Still, none of these authors would be considered particularly 'experimental', despite blatantly including characteristic postmodern and metafictional devices in their writing. Again, this perhaps indicates adults' preconceptions about child-readers, with commercial publishers and critics alike refraining from attaching terms like postmodernism and metafiction to children's literature not because such strategies are not present, but because adults *assume* they are not.

With this in mind, I have consciously selected three authors that effectively provide a scalar model of complexity. While they do all exhibit the same key postmodern strategies in relation to the roles of narrators and readers in particular, the manner in which this is achieved becomes increasingly sophisticated in direct correlation to the overt presence of the (supposed) real-life author within the text, as shall become apparent.



### **1.3.1) *Cressida Cowell***

My first author, Cressida Cowell MBE, is a popular British writer who recently served as the Waterstone's Children's Laureate (2019-2022), a prestigious literary position awarded for exceptional services to children's literature. She initially rose to fame with her *How to Train Your Dragon* series, first published in 2003 and later adapted into an award-winning film franchise by DreamWorks Animation. While I shall not be concentrating on Cowell's *Dragon* series, it is worth noting that the books credit the narration to an adult-version of the main protagonist, Hiccup, who explains that he 'will tell this true story from [his] childhood' (Cowell, 2017a: 15). Although the cover and copyright pages clearly attribute the text to Cowell herself, it is claimed that she is merely *translating* Hiccup's existing story.

This is a key detail in relation to Cowell's *The Wizards of Once* series, the focus of my own project, in which she likewise fulfils the role of translator/editor of a supposedly pre-existing text, and even cites her previous experience with Hiccup's autobiography as justification for her involvement in the *Wizards* series. These novels then follow two 13-year-old children – Xar, an unsuccessful Wizard with no magical powers, and Wish, an ambitious but hapless Warrior – who are part of rival clans in a magical version of Great Britain, but who must work together to defeat an evil witch who threatens their land. Unlike the *Dragon* series, Cowell's *Wizards* books are narrated by an unidentified, non-protagonist character within the text (albeit contextually filtered through the translating presence of Cowell herself) and readers are encouraged to search for clues and guess the narrator's identity as the story progresses across the series.

### **1.3.2) *Tom Fletcher***

The second author discussed in this thesis is Tom Fletcher, a so-called 'celebrity author' who is best known for being part of the British band McFly; he is also a renowned songwriter for other artists and a popular vlogger as well. In 2012, he

turned his hand to children's literature and released a picturebook called *The Dinosaur that Pooped Christmas* with his band-mate Dougie Poynter. It sold more than 72,000 copies and became one of the most popular debut children's books of the year. This commercial success continued when Fletcher began writing middle grade fiction, starting with *The Christmasaurus* in 2016 (later re-published as a 'musical edition' in 2017) and its sequel *The Christmasaurus and the Winter Witch* (2019), as well as a standalone novel called *The Creakers* (2018) – all of which shall be examined in this thesis. *The Creakers* follows Lucy Dungston, a child who wakes one morning to discover that all the adults in her town have been kidnapped by the titular monsters living under her bed in a mysterious world called the 'Woleb'. *The Christmasaurus* series centres on the dinosaur-obsessed William Trundle who befriends the world's last-surviving dinosaur and helps Santa save Christmas. While each of these books are predominantly narrated in the third-person and past tense, they are interspersed with chatty narratorial asides (in the first-person and simple present) in which the real-life Fletcher is supposedly writing the novel and talking to the reader about his creative process.

Although potentially the least established of the three authors featured in this thesis, Fletcher is by no means less commercially successful and *The Christmasaurus* was the best-selling middle grade debut of 2016. In fact, all three of his middle grade novels mentioned above (and those published more recently as well) have received numerous positive reviews from adults and children alike with an average rating of 4+ out of 5 on the popular book review site *Goodreads* (2023). Crucially, Fletcher serves as something of a test case for the normalisation of postmodern and metafictional devices in contemporary children's literature given that he is a newer, *celebrity* author and has likely picked up many of these techniques from reading children's books to his own family and conducting literary research to inform his writing practices, thus indicating 'the appropriation of experimental and metafictional narrative techniques into mainstream children's literature' (McCallum, 1996: 408), as shall be illustrated in Chapters 4-6.

### **1.3.3) Pseudonymous Bosch**

Within this study, Fletcher's skilful deployment of complex postmodern strategies is surpassed only by Pseudonymous Bosch (the pen-name of American author Raphael Simon). Bosch's *Secret Series* consists of five books published in the UK from 2008-2012. They follow two 11-year-olds, Cass and Max-Ernest, who join a mysterious society to help protect the secret of immortality from a group of evil alchemists. This central secret is apparently known by the author of the novels, whom readers initially encounter as an 'I'-narrator in the process of writing the first book in the series, *The Name of This Book is Secret*, where he explains that he cannot keep it to himself any longer: 'I can't keep a secret. Never could' (Bosch, 2008: 17).

He claims complete authenticity and insists that everything in the *Secret Series* actually happened and that, by reading the text, the audience will likewise be at risk from the evil alchemists. For this reason, Bosch gives himself and his (already fictional) characters overtly fake names in order to prevent readers from discovering anything about their 'real-life' counterparts. This inevitably forces the reader to acknowledge the inherent fictionality of the text they are reading and question the boundary between fiction and reality when the narrator so vociferously asserts the veracity of the events and people he describes.

In this way, Bosch's novels are frequently compared to Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* where the published author on the cover of the book is likewise an ostentatious pseudonym who eclipses the real-life author and makes themselves apparent as a visible storyteller within the text itself. Snicket is a far more recognisable name than Bosch – in part because of the multiple TV and film adaptations of his work (Hermansson, 2019) – but, given that his books exhibit many of the same metafictional techniques as Bosch's *Secret Series*, I have chosen not to analyse Snicket as a standalone author here, instead focusing on Bosch as a slightly more extreme case study. Still, there are useful comparisons to be made between Snicket and Bosch, especially given that both subsequently appear as characters in their respective story-worlds, thus blurring the boundaries between the published author in the real world and the level of fictional characters. In the

case of Snicket, this occurs only in a spin-off series, *All The Wrong Questions*, which follows a younger Lemony during his career at the mysterious Volunteer Fire Department; these stories exist within the same universe as *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, but the character-version of Snicket never interacts with the protagonists of those books. As Chapter 6 of this thesis reveals, however, Bosch takes this even further and completely collapses the barriers between his narrating present and the story he is telling.

Importantly, Bosch's series is one with which I am incredibly familiar. I vividly remember spotting the title *If You're Reading This, It's Too Late* (2009) while browsing a bookshop as a child myself. Why was it too late? Too late for what? No one else was around, so who was 'you'? Clearly this book was talking directly to *me*. In that moment I was hooked, and Bosch's books have easily become some of the most read on my bookshelf. Even as an adult, I rarely find texts that playfully blur ontologies and narrative levels in quite the same way, or that combine comedy and adventure with footnotes, appendices, parody and pop-quizzes.

While my personal history with the *Secret Series* is not entirely pertinent to this thesis, my childhood appreciation of these books has certainly informed my study of postmodernism and metafiction throughout my academic career. Furthermore, as Chapter 2 shall address, real-life children are rarely involved in the academic study of children's literature and critics often end up guessing how a hypothetical child might respond to the texts being analysed (Grenby, 2008; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). I hope to circumvent this issue not only by acknowledging my own experience as a child navigating Bosch's *Secret Series*, but also by concentrating on the linguistic evidence in my chosen texts to reveal the true prevalence of postmodernism and metafiction in mainstream contemporary children's literature. Through my analysis of these highly sophisticated stylistic and narrative techniques in the following chapters, I contend that children's books are more than worthy of literary study in terms of their academic and artistic value, and that child-readers themselves likely deserve more credit for reading, comprehending and enjoying such complex material.

## 2) Literature review

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### 2.1) What is children's literature?

At first glance, this seems like an obvious question, perhaps with an equally obvious answer. The term *children's literature* is self-explanatory, surely? It is literature for children. And yet by far the overwhelming majority of traditional children's literature scholarship attempts to offer some sort of definition. As Lesnik-Oberstein (1996) writes:

The definition of 'children's literature' lies at the heart of its endeavour: it is a category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationships with a particular reading audience: children. The definition of 'children's literature' therefore is underpinned by purpose: it wants to be something in particular, because this is supposed to connect it with that reading audience – 'children' – with which it declares itself to be overtly and purposefully concerned. But is a children's book a book written by children, or for children? And, crucially: what does it mean to write a book 'for' children? If it is a book written 'for' children, is it then still a children's book if it is (only) read by adults? What of 'adult' books read also by children – are they 'children's literature'?

(17)

This quotation exemplifies the potential ambiguity surrounding certain terms (*'for children'* being a particularly noteworthy example) and indicates why so many critics still dedicate time and effort to quantifiably deciding what *is* and what *is not* children's literature. Further questions might also include: which persons actually count as children when delineating potential readers? How should we categorise books that were originally written for children but which are no longer read by the same demographic today? Where do we class works of crossover fiction (Cart, 2016;

Falconer, 2010; Walsh, 2007) like the *Harry Potter* series which have famously been enjoyed by younger readers and adults alike?

Such questions have formed the basis of children's literature criticism since its inception and, frustratingly, appear no closer to having a set answer. Not only does the fixation on defining children's literature entirely by its audience create a marked difference from literature aimed at older readers (where texts are separated by style or genre, for instance), but it also raises questions about the inherent difficulties of defining 'childhood' and 'the child' as well.

Overlapping and conflicting cultural constrictions of childhood have existed since children's literature began; some persist, while others shift in response to changing values and conditions. Then there are the complications that arise out of the very polymorphous nature of its readership. The 'child' for whom 'children's literature' is intended can range from the infant being read to, to the teenager on the threshold of adulthood, not to mention those adults who delight in picturebooks, fantasy novels or fondly remembered classics. This 'crossover audience' is by no means a new phenomenon. It is just one of the reasons that the question of audience presents all sorts of knotty problems.

(Grenby & Immel, 2013: xiii)

Section 2.2 will consider the notion of childhood and its almost symbiotic relationship with children's literature in more detail, but the 'knotty problems' mentioned above have underlined (and potentially held back) corresponding scholarship for decades.

For the purposes of this stylistic examination of a select few children's texts from the subset of 'middle grade' or 'junior' fiction, I am happy to qualify the specific target audience addressed in my study as basically any child between 8-12 years of age (albeit with some flexibility to account for more precocious younger readers or less confident older readers). This is, however, based primarily on the

‘largely unproblematic, everyday meaning’ (Reynolds, 2011: 1) of children’s literature that exists outside academia.

From newspapers and other media to schools and in government documents, [the term ‘children’s literature’] is understood to refer to the materials written to be read by children and young people, published by children’s publishers, and stocked and shelved in the children’s and/or young adult (YA) sections of libraries and bookshops. Occasionally, questions are asked about whether something is suitable for a juvenile audience, a question usually provoked by concern about content – is it too sexually explicit? Too frightening? Too morally ambiguous? Sometimes questions of suitability reflect concerns about style – will grammatically incorrect or colloquial language or writing that includes swearing or abusive language or experimental writing counteract lessons taught in school or instil bad habits? [...] For the most part, however, what children’s literature is, is taken for granted.

(Reynolds, 2011: 1)

According to Reynolds, it is when the term ‘children’s literature’ enters academic circles that the complications seem to begin. For one, there is no easily identifiable body of children’s literature – no more than there is an easily grouped or quantifiable ‘adults’ literature’ – and, at a practical level, it is an ‘impossibly large and amorphous’ field of study, encompassing ‘everything from folk and fairy tales, myths and legends, ballads and nursery rhymes...to such embodiments of our transliterate age as e-books, fan fiction, and computer games’ (Reynolds, 2011: 2), not to mention an assortment of genres, formats, media, time periods and literary styles, too.

Given the obvious difficulties in focusing predominantly on a specific type of children’s literature, the variety and vastness of material included under this umbrella term has instead resulted in increased academic focus on the dominant *ideological* patterns, trends and tendencies in narratives for children and, crucially, ‘how these relate to images of children, childhood, and adolescence’ (Reynolds,

2011: 25). It is this element – the perception of children and childhood – that underlines much of the discussion surrounding what is *for* children, with Lesnik-Oberstein (1996) suggesting that the ‘fundamental sense to every critic who uses the term [children’s literature]’ is ‘books which are good for children, and most particularly good in terms of emotional and moral values’ (17).

This is a key tenet reiterated in much of Lesnik-Oberstein’s work (1994, 1998, 2004, 2011): that the sole purpose of children’s literature scholarship is about selecting the ‘best’ books for children. She believes this is the classical definition of the field, and that ‘this aim or goal – the choosing of good books for children – does not change from critic to critic, no matter how much they claim that they will be doing things differently, or applying new approaches or methodologies’ (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2004: 4). She continues to argue that, from an academic standpoint, newer studies potentially (and, to her mind, dangerously) suggest that all previous scholarly research somehow rests on choosing the ‘wrong’ books for children, ‘in the wrong way, or for the wrong reasons, [and that] the role of the new or recent theory...is to show how and why to make the right choices instead’ (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2004: 4-5).

This is perhaps an overly extreme view that runs the risk of negating newer frameworks or theoretical approaches that question or counteract previous studies of children’s texts. Children’s literature, as with any field of literature, has altered and developed to match new trends in society, culture and technology. Certainly, the notion of ‘childhood’ and ‘the child’ has changed dramatically since the earliest books were first published commercially for children (see section 2.2) and this is reflected consistently in narratives for younger readers. As such, it is only right that the corresponding scholarship has altered and developed alongside it.

Nevertheless, what makes a book ‘good’ for children connects directly to a long-standing and much debated issue regarding the *suitability* of certain texts for child-readers, a point raised in Reynolds’ (2011) earlier summary of children’s literature too. The question of suitability is most clearly evidenced in the way



general histories, encyclopaedias and compilations of children's literature have too often

included only 'suitable' books and simply ignored others. [...] Histories of children's literature written in this tradition are nothing else than highly manipulated recommendation lists for adults who are to serve as mediators for children. The attitude is reflected in titles like 'One Hundred Best Books for Children', 'Children's Books Too Good to Miss', and 'Best Children's Books of all Times'. The selection in these publications is always subjective and depends on the editor's pedagogical preferences.

(Nikolajeva, 1996: 3)

Landsberg (1988), Hearne & Kaye (1990), Saxby (1991) and Nieuwenhuizen (1992) are just a few of the examples published prior to the millennium that offered supposedly 'comprehensive' lists or 'common sense' guides to picking 20<sup>th</sup> century children's texts that the editors themselves had deemed appropriate for the target readership. Meanwhile, a cursory search online reveals that this is an ongoing trend with articles such as '100 best children's books' (BookTrust, 2021), '100 best-ever children's books, as chosen by our readers' (Penguin, 2022), '100 best children's books of all time' (Time, 2015) and '50 books all kids should read before they're 12' (CommonSenseMedia, 2019) similarly perpetuating a hierarchy of 'good' material for children.

Such lists are naturally subjective – even if they have been compiled by 'a team of experts' (BookTrust, 2021) or are presented as 'cultural touchstones' (CommonSenseMedia, 2019) – and reflect a wider ideology about what is or is not deemed culturally appropriate for children (see section 2.2). They are also almost always compiled by adults who potentially run the risk of viewing children's literature and their own childhood reading activities with rose-tinted nostalgia. This introduces its own problems because, as Tucker (1976) argues, it contributes to the consistent undervaluing of children's literature from an artistic, aesthetic and academic standpoint. As he explains:

Perhaps my chief objection...is the impression too often conveyed of a cosy general view of children's literature. Only something excessively tame could be taken for such an easy ride, and children's literature in fact abounds in contradictions, ambiguities and arguments, making it a fascinating but necessarily complex field for study. Approaches that rely chiefly upon adult nostalgia and educational do-goodism belie the material at our disposal.

(Tucker, 1976: 17)

He instead recommends viewing children's books 'as literature within its own right' (Tucker, 1976: 18), a statement with which I wholeheartedly agree. While well-intentioned, the kind of research criticised by Tucker has ultimately perpetuated the study of children's literature purely in relation to the value ascribed to it by adults (whether that's parents, teachers, publishers or academics) and has thus overlooked such material as a literary phenomenon in and of itself (see Shavit, 1986).

This is addressed further by Nikolajeva (1996) who introduces a 'semiotically inspired model' (10) in her examination of children's literature in order to 'place the object of study on an equal footing with mainstream literature and to point out the complexity of the modern children's book and the exciting questions this complexity raises' (10-11). As a stylistician, my own intentions are similar and I have selected the texts and authors that will be examined in this thesis deliberately for their stylistic complexities in addition to their commercial success. The majority of my analysis will therefore focus on the linguistic and narrative devices being used, the prevalent and playful postmodern techniques deployed to engage child-readers in the reading process, and the sophisticated reading strategies required to navigate such material, to name but a few key elements explored in this thesis. While the target readership remains central to an academic understanding of how postmodern children's books function from a linguistic and narratological perspective, I intend to examine these texts as complex literary artefacts worthy of academic and artistic value in and of themselves, and not just because they are also

aimed at children. The fact that they *are* intended for younger readers makes these texts all the more fascinating, but they are nonetheless worthy of stylistic examination beyond their target audience alone.

As such, I find myself quibbling Lesnik-Oberstein's dismissal of newer scholarship that, in her words, tries to 'question or change everything about [existing] criticism' while maintaining the same 'final goal of children's literature criticism itself – knowing how to choose the right book for the child' (2004: 5). I do not believe embracing new approaches or critiquing earlier perspectives automatically negates an ongoing aim to promote texts that individual critics contend might be good options for a variety of younger readers. As a field, children's literature scholarship illustrates why some texts resonate with child-readers and others do not. It shows how authors and texts have adapted to new styles of reading as technology and ideologies develop. It examines what, how and why children read and suggests methods to maintain this for future generations. Regardless of the methodological or theoretical approach taken, regardless of what line of argument is put forward, regardless of the style of text chosen for analysis, it is an inescapable truth that the majority of children's literature scholarship ultimately demonstrates the best (and perhaps worst) elements of children's literature. Why then should anyone critique newer studies – often employing newer frameworks, methodologies or concepts to newer primary material as well – for retaining that goal?

Some of this newer criticism will be addressed in section 2.3 with particular consideration given to how linguistic – and, more specifically, stylistic – frameworks can elucidate certain textual elements while also accounting for readerly engagement and appreciation among the target audience. Not only is this often overlooked in traditional literary criticism, but it is the language, structure and narrative style that highlight the sophistication and complexities of my chosen material. It is therefore imperative that these elements are prioritised over wider statements relating to ideology as they best evidence the academic and artistic value of children's literature.

Indeed, for too long, children's literature has been dismissed because of preconceived notions that the writing style (in addition to the content featured) must be 'easy' (Grenby, 2008). After all, how else would a child be able to navigate and comprehend it? McDowell (1973) captures this perfectly when he emphasises the seemingly pedestrian, archetypal nature of children's literature:

Children's books are generally shorter; they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection; child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism which much adult fiction ignores; children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of a distinctive order, probability is often discarded; and one could go on endlessly talking of magic, and fantasy, and simplicity, and adventure.

(51)

There are some truths in McDowell's outline such as the preference for child protagonists and the inclusion of fantasy elements (Bottigheimer, 1996; Coats, 2010; Zipes, 2012). However many of his claims, especially those relating to narrative structure and content, are based entirely on generalities and are positioned in a clear deficit compared to literature for adult readers: children's books are shorter *than books for adults*; they favour dialogue and activity whereas 'grown-up' books are full of character introspection; plots develop in a schematically familiar manner while books for more experienced readers twist and turn and take the audience by surprise; and, of course, books for adults never feature magic, fantasy or adventure.

My sarcasm is heavy-handed, but McDowell's claims epitomise the notions that have ultimately prevented children's literature scholarship from developing in the rich way the primary material deserves. His inclusion of the word 'simplicity' hits particularly hard. Just because a text is aimed at younger readers in no way means that it will be simple. Far from it, in fact. True, children's literature tends to be plot-driven and faster paced (albeit while still building in moments for

consolidation so as to not leave child-readers falling behind) and schematic narratives that draw on familiar fictional conventions may be easier to process superficially, but that does not make them *simple*.

The texts I will be examining in this thesis all feature highly sophisticated postmodern and metafictional devices that rival even the most canonical adult fiction. Far from following plot conventions in a distinctive order, they deliberately subvert readers' expectations and playfully lead characters and stories in different directions that undermine the genre and lay bare the construction of the narrative. Characters are forced to question their decisions through introspective evaluation and, with constant metafictional reference to the reader in the real world, children are likewise encouraged to evaluate characters' behaviour too. Additionally, each of the texts analysed in this project average around 400 pages in length; the font may be slightly larger than in most books for adult readers, but I would not call that short by any means!

To assume that children's books are 'easy' because of an arbitrary list of (overly generalised) characteristics is not only flawed logic based on unsubstantiated preconceptions, it also does a disservice to the talented people writing, publishing and subsequently reading such texts. For it is not only children's literature that has been underestimated, but child-readers themselves.

This chapter will therefore lay the foundations for the rest of this study. Beginning with an overview of the history of children's literature and how it has continuously reflected – and even originated – the notion of childhood, I shall demonstrate how the role of adults in both the construction and the subsequent analysis of children's literature has impeded its growth as an academic field. I will then situate my own study in relation to existing children's literature scholarship and advocate for the increased awareness of stylistic frameworks in the analysis of such material.

## **2.2) Children, childhood and the problem with adults**

Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, children were not considered all that different from adults (Ariès, 1962). They were ‘an integral part of adult society, sharing adult dress, work, and leisure’ (Shavit, 1986: 6) and it was thus assumed that children had no separate or unique desires, wants or requirements from their older counterparts.

Consequently, there was no need for an established educational system, nor for any books specifically aimed at child-readers. That is not to say that differences did not exist between adults and children; more that the economic, political and social situation was not conducive to viewing children (and childhood) as something special or separate. After all, why should children and young adults waste time reading (and learning to read in the first place) when they could be an active part of the workforce and provide cheap labour? However, this began to change in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

For the first time, children were described as having special distinguishing characteristics, such as innocence, sweetness, and other angelic qualities. [...] These qualities led to the child gradually becoming a source of amusement and relaxation for adults, thus negating the former view of children as merely small adults. In this way, the unified world of adults and children underwent polarization. Several elements, such as toys and dress, previously shared by both adults and children, now became the child’s monopoly, although usually through a process of reduction and simplification. Soon after, they also became elements with a distinguishing function, pointing to the new border between adults and children.

(Shavit, 1986: 6)

The demarcation between adulthood and childhood continued to grow, reaching its peak during the Romantic period when the ‘fascination with childhood and a desire to recapture an innocent apprehension of the world’ (Thacker & Webb, 2002: 13) came to fruition. This emphasised ‘the unsullied freshness of childhood’ and introduced an ‘idealised relationship between adult author and child reader, formed

out of the Romantic aesthetic, which [served] as a model for subsequent writing for children in English' (Thacker & Webb, 2002: 13).

Thus childhood became a notionally (and sentimentally) idyllic period that needed to be preserved from the darker, mundane, humdrum side of daily adult life. Children were innocents who should be protected, educated and spiritually reformed – and it was the responsibility of adults to do so. This was achieved 'through education and through books issued primarily as pedagogic vehicles' (Shavit, 1986: 7). In this way, the very idea of childhood created both the need and demand for children's books.

It is at this ideological switch that most traditional studies of children's literature begin, highlighting the moment at which children's literature became a distinct and recognisable part of print culture 'when Puritan authors realised how effective it could be in furthering their campaign to reform the personal piety of all individuals, adults and children alike' (Grenby, 2008: 4). Early children's literature was thus 'inextricably bound up with cultural constructs of childhood' (Immel, 2013: 19) and the ways in which adults wanted children to behave. How would reading help children develop as school pupils, members of society and generally as human beings, for example? How could the texts they were reading act as a vessel for adult-approved 'subject matter, ideology, and didactic and educational values' (Nikolajeva, 1996: 4)?

As such, questions of what constitutes 'the child' and 'childhood' have dominated children's literature scholarship for decades and the idea of a 'good' children's book being based purely on 'emotional and moral values' (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1996: 17) continues to this day. It should also be acknowledged that many of these values still rest on the preponderance of white, Western children's literature and, similarly, the perpetuation of traditional gender roles.

Hunt's seminal *Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (1996) offers one of the most comprehensive overviews of children's literature publishing, history and innovation; in many ways, much of this thesis is indebted to the essays presented in

his collection. Yet it overwhelmingly favours Anglo-American authors with chapters on 'Children's Book Publishing in Britain' and 'Children's Book Publishing in the USA' being mirrored by equally detailed 'Historical Overview[s]' of both countries. Even the section on 'The World of Children's Literature' features 15 chapters dedicated to individual Western-European countries before summarising the entirety of 'Eastern Europe', 'Africa', 'The Arab World' and 'The Far East' (to name but a few examples). Of course, Hunt's encyclopaedia was compiled in the United Kingdom in the mid-1990s and so is very much a product of its time and circumstance, and that is reflected in its prioritisation of white, Western children's literature.

Writing more recently, Bradford (2010) argues that this dominance is still felt in children's literature scholarship and the corresponding primary material itself:

Many of the lists of 'multicultural children's literature' which feature on websites and in pedagogical material should be regarded with scepticism. Narratives which incorporate characters of various ethnicities do not necessarily engage with cultural difference, and it is important to consider not merely how many characters come from diverse ethnic backgrounds but how such characters and cultures are represented. Children's books commonly trace the identity formation of protagonists and the development of such qualities as empathy and good judgement. Characters from minority cultures are often incorporated into such narrative trajectories. Sometimes children from mainstream culture who encounter cultural difference are shown to benefit from enhanced understanding of others; sometimes the psychological or material progress of children from minority cultures is defined in terms of their access to mainstream culture. In both cases minority cultures are defined and valued according to a frame of reference in which white, middle-class culture is normative.

(49)



There has also long been an overt ‘othering’ of non-Western culture in children’s literature. Bradford herself offers Roald Dahl’s Oompa-Loompas as a post-colonial allegory for ‘civilized and savage’: ‘Willy Wonka is knowing, resourceful and powerful, the Oompa-Loompas are childlike and dependent, relying on Willy Wonka’s benevolence when they are transported from their homeland to work for cacao beans in his chocolate factory’ (2010: 39). Meanwhile Stephens & McCallum (1998) provide a detailed critique of ‘contemporary uses of orientalism...based on some kind of interruption of a fantastic “oriental” Other into a Western society’ (247).

Multiculturalism – and its inherent ties to post-colonialism – has thus become one of the favourite lenses of children’s literature critics, especially regarding the ways in which child-readers themselves are constructed in relation to wider societal roles and ideologies (Cai, 2002; Keefer, 1993; Parekh, 2006). The same can be said for the consideration of gender in children’s literature.

The availability of education for all, albeit separated in relation to gender and class, and the construction of a separate market for children’s fiction, meant that much writing for a young audience of the late nineteenth century is split along gender lines. The dominant adventure story for boys and domestic fiction for girls is well documented...and, in some senses remains a convention of the children’s publishing industry today.

(Thacker & Webb, 2002: 53)

Comparing the boundary between children and adults, Simons (2013) likewise comments on the traditional separation of ‘girlhood’ and ‘boyhood’:

Eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century children’s books are full of strong, active boy characters, and much more submissive, domestic and introspective girls. But equally prevalent, even if sometimes less immediately obvious, has been a recurrent expression of the flimsiness and artificiality of

the division between boys and girls, and of the desire of many protagonists to contravene the gender identities enjoined on them.

(143)

Many culturally popular protagonists from children's literature attempt – with varying degrees of success – to defy 'simple gender categorisation imposed on them as members of the Anglo-American middle classes' (Simons, 2013: 143). George from Blyton's *Famous Five* stories instantly comes to mind, while Flanagan (2010) offers Andy Fickman's *She's the Man* and Disney's *Mulan* as filmic examples of female cross-dressing. Interestingly, when considering how characters defy gender roles, critics primarily focus on female-presenting characters breaking the traditional 'girlhood' mould (Casper, 2016; Jennings, 2016; Shen, 2018; Suico, 2016) and not the other way round.

A recent example commonly cited in children's literature scholarship is Hermione from *Harry Potter*. Hermione is what people like to call a 'strong female character', a heroine who is 'feisty, daring, clever, creative, and insightful' (Heine et al., 1999: 427) or, as Lynch et al. (2016) put it more cynically in the title of their article, 'sexy, strong, and secondary'. Indeed, while Hermione may at times be presented as superior to her male counterparts, particularly in terms of her intelligence and empathy – though both of these are traditionally viewed as feminine characteristics (Willinsky & Hunniford, 1993) – recent research has demonstrated that she is consistently positioned as linguistically inferior. Hunt (2015) used corpus linguistics to explore references to body parts and material actions in *Harry Potter* and revealed that female characters are presented as passive and ineffectual, with actions being performed on or towards them rather than linguistically joining the action themselves. Similarly, Eberhardt (2017) compared the reporting clauses of direct speech acts from Hermione and Ron, Harry's two main sidekicks, and demonstrated the 'asymmetrical linguistic representation of women and men' (228) with Hermione 'squealing', 'screaming' and 'shrieking' while Ron 'bellows' or 'roars'.

When one remembers that Rowling herself decided to publish *Harry Potter* using only her initials because she '[feared] that potential audiences, boys especially, would not read the books if the author was known to be a woman' (Eberhardt, 2017: 243), it becomes all the more pressing that she should perpetuate this blatant gender divide, even when accepting praise for writing such a beloved 'strong female character'. That it is linguistic research that so effectively reveals this discrepancy again lends weight to my own approach: stylistically examining the texts in this study and, in doing so, grounding any subsequent theoretical conclusions and analyses in concrete textual evidence that may or may not counter popular viewpoints or presumptions – such as that illustrated in relation to Hermione above.

Crucially, the existing focus on ideology in children's literature scholarship goes hand-in-hand with the supposedly didactic nature of such material, with texts constructing an ideal version of the child-reader in the hope that real-life readers would adopt the same role or viewpoint. As Sarland (1996) explains in deliberately over-simplified terms: 'If you wrote a book with positive characterisations of, and roles for, girls, ethnic minorities and the working class, then readers' attitudes would be changed and all would be well with the world' (50). This built on work by Stephens (1992) who used narratological frameworks – in particular point of view, focalisation, and speech and thought presentation – to show how children's texts 'imply certain ideological assumptions and formulations, and construct implied readers who must be expected to share them' (Sarland, 1996: 50). Thus, while children are undoubtedly the intended audience of such texts, one cannot escape the presence of adults in deciding precisely what 'ideological assumptions' should be conveyed and what kind of child-readers should be shaped from this.

Of course, the parameters of what adults think children ought to be reading have changed since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the underlying premise is preserved even now: children's literature exists to entertain and engage child-readers, but it should simultaneously offer something of educational value 'in an agreeable way at a level the child can grasp' (Immel, 2013: 28). For instance, Shavit (1986: 8-31) traces

differing tones, narrative styles, plot points and assumed social norms in a variety of 'Little Red Riding Hood' retellings from Charles Perrault's 1697 version to a modern pop-up book written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Nodelman, 1978). Although the title is shared, the contents of these texts are vastly different and reflect what is deemed appropriate for child audiences at the time of each retelling. For instance, Perrault emphasises the prettiness, femininity and naivety of the titular character to conform to aristocratic ideals of the time and demonstrate that 'nice girls ought not to listen to all sorts of people. If they do, it is not surprising that the wolf will get them and eat them up' (Bettelheim, 1991: 168). The Brothers Grimm instead introduced a huntsman who, 'in his protective and rescuing function' (Bettelheim, 1991: 178), represents a patriarchal figure deemed necessary to protect 'Little Red Cap' from the dangerous wolf. By contrast, the 20<sup>th</sup> century material – aimed more explicitly at younger readers – omits any reference to violence, sickness or other 'unsuitable information' (Shavit, 1986: 30). Thus, the way childhood is perceived by society not only determines the way characters are presented or how a plot unfolds, but also the manner in which it is deemed acceptable to present it. As Shavit explains:

What has changed are the specific ideas prevalent in each period about education and childhood. However, the idea that books for children have to be suitable from the pedagogical point of view and should contribute to the child's development has been, and still is, a dominant force in the production of children's books.

(1986: 26-27)

Ultimately this maintains the distinction often made between 'real' literature and children's literature (Thacker & Webb, 2002). As the previous section addressed, children's literature is traditionally defined specifically in relation to its target audience. In fact, it is the only category of literature delineated in this way. As Grenby (2008) comments:

Canadian literature, for instance, does not consist of all, or only, books read by Canadians. And crime fiction, to take another example, is not defined as those novels read by criminals. But children's literature is not children's literature because it is written *by* children, nor because it is *about* children, but only because of who it was ostensibly written *for*.

(199; original italics)

Consequently, children's literature is inextricably and even symbiotically tied to its intended readership and the adult construction of childhood. Furthermore, the role of adults themselves in the creation of children's literature is paramount as discussions of children's fiction have

always been characterised by arguments about its purpose. These purposes, or in some cases, these denials of purpose, stem from the particular characteristics of its intended readership, and are invariably a product of the views held within the adult population about children and young people themselves and their place in society. Since there is an imbalance of power between the children and young people who read books, and the adults who write, publish and review the books, or who are otherwise engaged in commentary upon, or dissemination of the books, either as parents, or teachers, or librarians, or booksellers, or academics, there is here immediately a question of politics, a politics first and foremost of age differential.

(Sarland, 1996: 41)

Adults are the ones deciding what differentiates children from grown-ups. Adults control what children ought to know or be taught. Adults are responsible for writing, commissioning, publishing and even buying children's books. Adults are therefore the ones who define 'childhood' – not children themselves. Even 'the child' to whom children's books are targeted can likewise be considered an adult construct. This is examined in Jacqueline Rose's seminal, albeit controversial, work *The Case of Peter Pan* (1994; originally published 1984).

Although this was Rose's only contribution to the field of children's literature, it revolutionised the discipline and remains one of the most discussed works of scholarship nearly four decades since its original publication (see Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994; Reynolds, 2007, 2011; Rudd, 2010). One of its central arguments concerns 'the identification and interrogation of the impulse to set boundaries around what children's literature "should" do and be' (Reynolds, 2007: 3). Rose argues that these boundaries are entirely reliant on the needs and desires of adults – rather than the children they are designed for – and, more specifically, reflect the refusal of adults to disturb their own views of childhood at the levels of language, content and form. Considering J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, she asks not 'what children want, or need, from literature, [but rather] what it is that adults, through literature, want or demand of the child' (Rose, 1994: 137). For Rose, the child represented in children's books is not only an adult construction, but actually a representation of what adults would like the child to be.

She suggests that these texts are deliberately designed to work as 'something of a soliciting, a chase, or even a seduction' (Rose, 1994: 2) to encourage child-readers' alignment with this adult ideal. The over-arching history of children's literature lends some weight to this viewpoint, especially regarding how the creation of such reading material is tied directly to adult perceptions of childhood and, therefore, what might be expected of children who exist within that culture. Rose's own choice to use *Peter Pan* at the centre of her study is not for its status as a text for children – something which, by her own admission, could be debated – but rather for 'what *Peter Pan* demonstrates about a fantasy of childhood' (1994: 138).

While I concur with this particular facet of her thesis, Rose goes on to argue that the concept of the ideal child, forced upon child-readers at a young age, ultimately persists into adulthood and thus creates a cycle that stifles literary innovation. Like McDowell, Rose connects children's texts with simplicity and the introduction of 'a different language for children' (1994: 140) and claims that children's writers 'have consciously rejected literary modernism (and presumably she would have included postmodernism if she had written the book a few years

later) as part of a strategy to maintain the status quo and resist cultural change' (Reynolds, 2007: 7).

As the prevalence of sophisticated postmodern and metafictional devices in contemporary children's literature (and my own thesis) demonstrates, this is simply not the case. Not only are such experimental styles, techniques and strategies rife in children's books, they are also hugely successful with the intended readership. Furthermore, it seems surprising (if not somewhat flawed) that Rose should suggest that the rejection of (post)modernism is a defining characteristic of children's literature when a great deal of popular adult fiction similarly rejects modernist and postmodernist strategies, too. Again, categorising children's literature in a deficit position compared to adult fiction fundamentally undervalues the material produced and the young readers engaging with it. My own study therefore aims to counter this point and highlights the normalisation of stylistically sophisticated devices in contemporary middle grade fiction.

Furthermore, the stylistic approach taken in this thesis not only platforms the linguistic elements of my chosen texts, it also allows me to explore how meaning is interpreted by and conveyed to readers more specifically (see section 2.3). This is critical in relation to children's literature as for too long it has been assumed that child-readers must possess vastly different comprehension and reading skills to adults (Giovanelli, 2018; Hunt, 2005; Rose, 1994; Wall, 1991). Consequently, children's texts have become associated with 'simplicity' (to return to McDowell's comment) in order to match child-readers' supposedly underdeveloped capabilities. This is in addition to satisfying adult-dictated content based on what children *should* be reading, as opposed to what children *want* to read (Thacker & Webb, 2002).

In fact, this very discrepancy reflects one of the biggest problems within the field of children's literature: the unfortunate tendency for adult critics to forget that child-readers matter. Grenby explains it particularly well, stating that:

[T]he intended audience is seldom actively involved in studying [children's books] academically. If we attempt to view books through children's eyes, or try to analyse texts on their behalf, we must remain aware that this is at best a kind of ventriloquism. Perhaps, as some critics suggest, we should acknowledge that children's books never really become the cultural property of children at all: they are written by adults, to suit adult purposes, and for kinds of children that adults construct to be the perfect readers of their books. If this is the case, there is no inconsistency whatsoever in adult critics discussing children's books, on their own terms, and without the least reference to any real children.

(2008: 199)

Grenby's comment about 'ventriloquism' underlines the necessity in getting adults to see beyond their own perspective. Perry Nodelman, for instance, offers a particularly pertinent anecdote in this regard:

He asked a group of adults beginning to study children's literature to consider whether or not they'd share a certain poem with children. The poem was Edward Lear's 'The Owl and the Pussy-Cat'.

[...]

After some discussion, Perry's students decided they wouldn't share 'The Owl and the Pussy-Cat' with children. They concluded that young children wouldn't be likely to know obscure words like 'runcible' and 'bong-tree' and that the children's frustration at not knowing these words would not only make them dislike the poem but also possibly lead to a general dislike of poetry.

Perry was surprised by that response. Not only does he like the poem himself, but he also knows it's considered to be a classic of children's literature and often recommended for sharing with children. So he asked the



students if they shared his pleasure. Did they enjoy the poem themselves?  
They said they did. Why, then, did they assume children wouldn't?

(Nodelman & Reimer, 2003: 14-15)

It transpires that these students had made a cardinal error when it comes to studying children's literature. Because they had been thinking about the poem as a text exclusively for children, they neglected to consider their own responses and instead tried to guess based on what some hypothetical child – one that equally had no bearing on their own younger selves – might think. As Nodelman & Reimer go on to say:

Many adults base their judgements of children's literature upon such guesses. But making accurate guesses is difficult, maybe even impossible. Guessing forces adults to make generalizations about children – how they read, how they think, what they enjoy or don't, and how they absorb information. [...] [S]uch generalizations can be dangerously misleading. If nothing else, they misrepresent the tastes and abilities of many individual children.

(2003: 15-16)

Unfortunately, this lack of awareness of the child-reader is a significant problem within traditional children's literature scholarship, and many critics have tried to circumvent it in various ways. For some, like Rudd (2000), it is the decision to conduct empirical studies that invite the target readership into the academic sphere; for others, like Lesnik-Oberstein (2004), it is acknowledging their intentions to find a good book for the *real* child-reader (albeit regardless of how accurate their suggestions may be).

It is, however, Peter Hunt's offering that I should like to address as a conclusion to this section. As the first ever children's literature specialist to be appointed as Professor of English at any British university, Hunt is one of the most prolific names in the field of children's literature. He rose to prominence in the

1980s with a number of essays in which he challenged the relevance of traditional scholarship, commenting that ‘the four current kinds of reviewing and evaluation of children’s books (“children *might* like”, “children *should* like”, “children *do* like” and “children *will* like”) are all equally suspect’ (Hunt, 1984a: 44; original italics). In an attempt to move away from this tradition, he instead introduced his own *childist* criticism (Hunt, 1984a, 1984b) to parallel the likes of Feminist or Marxist criticism ‘in the way it seeks to consider and foreground the views and practices of a particular readership, in this case children’ (Rudd, 2010: 156). For Hunt, seeing through child-readers’ eyes meant putting aside adult preconceptions so as to avoid – as much as possible – speaking on behalf of children without also adequately considering their capabilities and enjoyment.

As admirable as this goal may be, it is difficult to achieve (and evidence) fully, and there have been few practical examples in which critics have effectively undertaken the process of reading *as* a child rather than *for* one (Hunt’s (1984b) ‘Childist Criticism in Action’ is a good attempt, however). But Hunt has always been aware of this limitation and addresses it forthrightly himself:

Childist criticism confronts an unacknowledged impossibility by manipulating probabilities. The impossibility is that the adult can ever really know what a book means to a child: the major probability is that a child’s reading differs substantially from an adult’s. To resolve the problem implied by this, we have to ask questions about three related areas: culture, reading, and the book.

First, what is the difference between adult culture and child culture? How far are we imposing ideas and norms of behaviour on children...and how far does their reading represent a reaction to this imposition?

Second, what are the probabilities of the reading process itself? What is the child likely to perceive? This is not just a question of the child’s skill in interpretation: it is a matter of what the very act of reading means. When we read a book ourselves, therefore, we will have to learn to read with some

alternative reading strategies in mind, if we are to make an intelligent guess at what the primary audience for the book is getting out of it.

And third, what are the features of the text which show the attitudes of the writer, and which may trigger acts of perception in the reader – and, perhaps, reaction?

None of this is particularly easy[.]

(Hunt, 1984b: 180-81)

This final line is something of an understatement. There are many complications to navigate when analysing children's literature, of which the fact that most (if not all) critics in the field are no longer members of the target audience is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Furthermore, while I appreciate Hunt's attempt to move adult preconceptions aside and examine children's texts through the eyes of the target readership with his childist criticism, even that falls short when one considers that it relies on the existence of 'a singular thing as a distinctively *child* perspective which can be objectively caught and rendered in language' (Rudd, 2010: 156). By Hunt's own admission: 'Childist criticism is speculative' (1984a: 58) and only comes close to working in practice when supported with empirical evidence and the conscious decision to continually question itself.

Still, it is perhaps a useful starting point for my own study, especially when introduced alongside linguistic frameworks that prioritise the textual evidence on display. After all, Hunt has traditionally worked within the field of literature and literary theory; I am grounding my research in stylistics. As shall be explored in the following section, stylistics can undoubtedly benefit this area of scholarship as it conveniently mitigates many of the problems addressed above.

### **2.3) Developing criticism and stylistics**

Having established what children's literature is and who precisely it is written for (and why), the next major question considers how this material fits into a wider field of literary criticism. As discussed in the previous chapter, children's literature was initially met with astonishing disdain within the academy and it has taken a great deal of perseverance to begin breaking that down. Indeed, while the scholarly field has progressed in leaps and bounds over recent decades, there remain some significant gaps. One of these is the fact that the vast majority of research continues to lack linguistic focus, instead taking a predominantly literary approach even to this day.

The latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the gradual emergence of more language-based analyses with Shavit (1986) being one of the first to situate children's literature within the frame of poetics, as opposed to the traditional pedagogic reference point that had been prioritised before then. Other key examples include Hollindale (1988) and Stephens (1992) who used aspects of narratology to consider ideological constructions in children's books; Wall (1991) focused specifically on narrators' voices; Nikolajeva (1996) introduced semiotics to identify prominent cultural codes in children's books; and Stephens & McCallum (1998) considered the structural significance of children's literature in their study of metanarratives and context (though their use of 'metanarrative' refers to the retelling and framing of stories, as opposed to the narratological definition outlined in Chapter 4).

However, not only are such language-focused studies still in the minority, many of the examples outlined above stem towards the over-arching scholarly dominant expressed earlier in this chapter: that of didacticism and the ideological shaping of the perfect child-reader. By contrast, my own study seeks to consider children's literature from a different angle, examining how real-life child-readers are affected by the text (as opposed to shaped by it) and how this subsequently draws children further into the reading process through active participation in and

engagement with a narrative, and thus potentially facilitates greater enthusiasm for reading itself.

With this in mind, stylistics offers a much more appropriate method of analysis for my chosen texts. Not only does it ‘explore creativity in language use’ (Simpson, 2014: 3), thus enriching and elucidating the theoretical conclusions and interpretations drawn from such analyses, it also accounts for a text’s affective power over the reader by considering how and why meaning is created (in addition to *what* meaning is created). As my intention is to highlight the sophistication of my chosen texts from a linguistic and narratological perspective, stylistics provides an ideal toolkit through which to evaluate both the aesthetic value of textual construction and its subsequent effect on the reader.

Through this study, I also hope to further the use of stylistics in children’s literature scholarship which, according to Burke & Coats (2022) in the introduction to their special issue of *Language & Literature* (a key journal in the field of stylistics), has thus far been rare. To counter this, their collection of articles illustrates how stylistic methodologies can enhance textual readings, offering ‘a whole arsenal of theories and frameworks that can be deployed to tease out implicit meanings’ (Burke & Coats, 2022: 4). As Giovanelli (2018) explains:

Work in stylistics starts from the assumption that the best way to analyse texts is to focus carefully on linguistic patterns, the relationships between those patterns and certain interpretative effects that they may yield. Since stylistics is rooted in the careful exploration of language choices within various social, cognitive and literary contexts, analyses typically not only suggest interpretations, but also *how* these interpretations might emerge.

(183)

Nevertheless, Giovanelli likewise observes that ‘[r]esearch on children’s literature is largely absent in contemporary mainstream stylistics’ (2018: 183), offering Walsh (2007) and Jeffries (2009) as examples of stylistic approaches to specific children’s texts, in addition to more cognitive-based research from the likes of Knowles &

Malmkjær (1992), Nikolajeva (2014) and Trites (2014). All of these borrow from the fields of stylistics, poetics, narratology and cognitive literary studies to investigate how textual elements and devices impact and affect readers' responses and interpretations.

Paying attention to aspects of style can thus help to understand children's literature as a field, as well as interpret individual titles. As stylistics is an applied linguistic practice, stylisticians are interested in the production and the various interpretations and evaluations of texts. Moreover, they are sensitive to the social contexts in which language is used, together with its relationship to culture and ideology.

(Giovanelli, 2018: 184)

Given that stylistics can be seen as both a discipline within the field of applied linguistics *and* a research methodology for textual analysis in its own right, it seems the perfect apparatus for the study of children's literature. As outlined previously in this chapter, one of the major difficulties with traditional scholarship has been the manner in which adult critics either push themselves aside in favour of examining material through the eyes of some hypothetical child or end up disregarding real-life child-readers altogether by focusing on preconceived assumptions to do with 'biological age, cognitive ability and affective maturity' (Burke & Coats, 2022: 6). Stylistics circumvents this by prioritising close-reading and in-depth analysis of textual features – and the linguistic patterns and interpretative effects they may yield – as opposed to casting potentially unsubstantiated judgements on the target audience.

Furthermore, stylistics naturally lends itself to empirical study – more so than traditional literary theory at any least – by acknowledging and examining the tangible effect(s) of texts on readers. Short (1996) emphasised the inherently reader-centred nature of stylistics, while Peplow & Carter (2014) evaluated the 'growing body of research within stylistics that is centrally interested in considering how readers find meaning in literary texts and testing whether the assumptions and

frameworks of stylistic analysis are supported by evidence from real readers' (440). That said, the acknowledgement of real readers in literary analysis has not always been accepted, with some traditional critics viewing empirical research with apprehension or even controversy. This was explored comprehensively by Miall & Kuiken (1998) in their critique of some of the theoretical arguments put forward in Jonathan Culler's (1981) *The Pursuit of Signs*:

[W]hat is of interest, [Culler] argues, are the conventions that determine reading, not the experience of real readers; what these conventions might be is, of course, decided a priori by Culler and his colleagues. This refusal to check theoretical presuppositions against the reading practices of actual readers calls into question the recent, almost universal dismissal of formalism. Yet *the claims of formalism...have not been falsified by any empirical investigation of whether formalist dynamics underlie the literary reading of ordinary readers*. In fact, Culler's dismissal of actual readers as worthy of study is founded on a serious misconception[.]

(Miall & Kuiken, 1998: 329; original italics)

In direct contrast to Culler's view, Miall & Kuiken explain the benefits of empirical research in elucidating textual elements (much like stylistic methodologies) and thus conclude that empiricism 'is not only more constructive, but more plausible' (1998: 340) than traditional literary analysis alone. Indeed, Miall has become one of the definitive writers on – and champions for – empirical studies of literature, explaining that the introduction of experimental elements to literary analysis can 'enable us to call into question and show when and in what ways literariness as a distinctive experience seems to be occurring for readers' (Miall, 2006: 292).

While outside both the theoretical and practical parameters of this thesis, Miall's statement resonates with my own research and it is my intention to use the analysis outlined in the following chapters as a springboard for future empirical work with the target readership in order to test, with real child-readers, how postmodern and metafictional devices affect readerly engagement, interactivity,

enjoyment and comprehension. Nevertheless, even without empirical research involving human participants at this stage, stylistic approaches still account for a text's affective power over a reader, considering facets such as readerly immersion, critical and emotional response, mind-modelling and narrative experience (Giovanelli, 2023), while also prioritising textual evidence and interpretation. As such, I hope to avoid some of the criticisms previously levied at similarly-intended analyses of specific children's texts that have *not* employed such methods.

As a prime example, I should like to consider Rudd's (2000) extensive study of Enid Blyton. He begins by asking why 'there [has] been so little serious attention given to Blyton, the all-time bestselling children's author' (Rudd, 2000: 1), prefacing his analysis with his own childhood love of Blyton's books and the disappointment he felt when he grew out of her stories aged 11. More to the point, he expresses his initial confusion when he 'became aware that her work was frowned upon' (Rudd, 2000: 2) and that there is an ambivalence and dismissive attitude conferred upon her books by adults. Yet Blyton remains one of the most prevalent and consistently best-selling children's authors to this day and 'the frequent recourse to Blyton's name, the use of her characters as cultural reference points, all demonstrate her significance' (Rudd, 2000: 4).

Rudd addresses all of this in his book and combines analysis of a select few novels by Blyton with empirical research involving both school-aged and adult readers. In fact, at a surface level, I identify many similarities between my own project and Rudd's (which he likewise initially conducted for his PhD thesis in 1997). Even our motivations have much crossover. As Rudd comments:

My methodological approach to this work has developed out of a more general concern with the way children's literature has been treated in the past. Many traditional approaches seem to me to be seriously inadequate, and for a number of reasons. Firstly, many simply lack any methodological grounding, being prone to both whimsy and subjective judgement [...].  
Second, even where more systematic investigations are undertaken, they are



frequently too narrow, seeking to explore the topic through the lens of teacher training, librarianship, or as a byway of literary studies – all resulting in very partial analyses. Third, even if a wider perspective is adopted, and the analysis is systematic, studies which consider only the text still seem inadequate. As various commentators have indicated, this is one of the main weaknesses of cultural/media studies: that it rests on too narrow an empirical base[.]

(Rudd, 2000: 6)

I agree with much of this, especially the desire to respond to and counteract the historical view of children's literature by putting the text itself at the centre of one's research and therein exploring the topic through a different lens: that of child-readers rather than pedagogy. Rudd goes on to outline a four-pronged approach to his study, combining 'textual analysis, questionnaires, interviews and other activities' (2000: 18). With Blyton having written over 700 books and some 4,000 short stories, it was logistically impossible for Rudd to consider all of her writing in his analysis; instead he 'sought to read as many as [he] could and to develop a general feel for her style and her concerns' (2000: 19).

However, Rudd's lack of linguistic grounding is glaring and it opens the door for a barrage of critiques that potentially detract from the merit of his research. Lesnik-Oberstein (2004), for instance, denounces Rudd's claim that his study

is significantly different and better because he, unlike many previous critics, includes an 'empirical basis' – that is, he has interviewed children concerning their views on reading Enid Blyton – and, secondly, but even more importantly, because he rests his approach on his use of an idea of 'discourse' which also applies, according to him, to the child and to the empirical work that he has carried out. In other words, Rudd seems to me to be arguing that it is not the inclusion of empirical work itself which constitutes his 'new approach' to children's literature criticism in

general...but the *way* that he has garnered and used this empirical basis in terms of his understanding of discursive threads.

(13)

Lesnik-Oberstein is rather damning, but Rudd does – to some extent – claim to reinvent the critical wheel in the outline of his study. He makes big, bold claims about the value of Blyton’s work and does not quite follow through with the delivery, making some leaps in his evaluations without the tangible evidence to back it up. His questionnaires also presuppose that the respondents are already avid readers and it is not until the final few questions that he asks for further information about individuals’ reading habits: ‘What were your other favourite authors/books as a child?’ and ‘What adult authors/books do you like reading?’ (Rudd, 2000: 207). Furthermore, many of his claims rest too much on his personal respect for Blyton and, too often, his analysis appears to draw on what he alone understands about her writing in direct comparison to previous scholarship: ‘approaches to Blyton, whether for or against, are remarkably untheorized. They are generally just asserted [and] are often based on glaring misreadings, sometimes not even drawing on Blyton’s own, original texts’ (Rudd, 2000: 192).

This is not necessarily a detriment in and of itself, but Rudd’s lack of linguistic and stylistic awareness results in many of these claims being made without context or, importantly, textual evidence to support his line of argument. Had he been able to verify his own interpretations over other critics’ ‘glaring misreadings’, perhaps it would be harder to pick flaws in his overall study. After all, it is worthy research and I do believe Rudd meant well in attempting – much like I am – to identify, explain and promote the study of books that had previously been overlooked within the academy.

The use of stylistic frameworks hopefully circumvents these issues in my own project. Rather than grounding my argument in traditional literary theory as the vast majority of existing criticism does (Rudd’s included), the focus on language and textual features will allow me to highlight and address genuine linguistic and

narratological issues that, in reality, have little to do with these texts being for children. Indeed, while this thesis focuses on children's literature – and certainly makes no attempts to hide that fact – a stylistic approach provides the opportunity to analyse such texts as just that: texts in and of their own right, no longer completely reliant on their intended target readership. This deviates from much of the existing scholarship in which 'stylistic and narratological analyses of...children's texts have rarely been seen as ends in themselves' (Burke & Coats, 2022: 6) and instead are 'considered subordinate to, in support of, or undermining an explicit ideological perspective' (Burke & Coats, 2022: 6-7).

My chosen texts certainly are for children and that will prove critical in my analysis, but they are also so much more than that. They are sophisticated, playful, intelligent works that challenge and engage child-readers in equal measures. Far from assuming that children's books must be easy or simple because they are intended for younger readers, this thesis will evidence the complexities that mainstream children's literature currently offers in abundance. Stylistics puts these linguistic complexities front and centre, conveniently separating them from the intended target audience for analytical purposes, but also offering a solid foundation from which to make wider claims about how they 'can play a greater role in the education, emotional, cognitive and social development of young children' (Burke & Coats, 2022: 9).

## **2.4) Summary**

Children's reading material has been inextricably tied to the (adult-influenced) notion of childhood since its inception and, as such, scholarship has for too long focused only on its pedagogic, moral and didactic value. Consequently, children's literature and child-readers have been consistently underestimated and undervalued, with too few studies pertaining to the linguistic, stylistic and narratological complexities that are so apparent in mainstream children's fiction

and yet remain underrepresented in the corresponding scholarship. Even when scholars have taken language-focused approaches to children's literature, these studies often perpetuate the same ideological questions as traditional literary scholarship and have not adequately considered children's texts for their aesthetic value or for their affective power over child-readers.

This thesis aims to fill this gap, introducing stylistic frameworks that will prioritise the language, style and structure of my chosen texts rather than overtly connecting to wider (and already over-saturated) discussions about ideological notions of children and childhood. Crucially, my focus on postmodernism and metafiction – outlined in Chapter 3 – will demonstrate the sophisticated nature of contemporary children's literature. The purpose of this is twofold: on the one hand, I shall analyse how postmodern and metafictional devices are deployed to increase readerly engagement and enjoyment by dramatising the child-reader and bringing them into the world of the text, often through purported conversation with the fictional narrator; secondly, I hope to prove that children's literature is more than worthy of academic study as literature in its own right and that, contrary to traditional beliefs, it can be just as sophisticated as literature for adults (and even more so in some cases).

Importantly, stylistic methodologies more effectively accommodate the examination of linguistic features within these texts to elucidate interpretation and meaning, while also illustrating the prevalence of complex narrative strategies in contemporary children's literature. I do not believe this has been adequately addressed by traditional scholarship, either because (like Rudd) literary critics do not have the tools to engage with language study properly or because of prejudiced opinions relating to the supposed 'ease' and 'simplicity' of children's books. Perhaps many critics have not even considered the possibility that children are perfectly capable of dealing with – and even enjoying – complex postmodern and metafictional strategies the likes of which will be analysed in subsequent chapters.

It is my intention to rectify these assumptions, providing linguistic evidence for the prevalence of such complicated techniques within children's literature and offering some much needed stylistic analyses of these texts, therein furthering the field of children's literature scholarship and contributing to this developing area of stylistic criticism too.

# 3) Postmodernism & metafiction

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## 3.1) Definitions

Before I begin the analysis of my chosen texts, it is first necessary to outline the two concepts named in this chapter's title. The first, *postmodernism*, is notoriously difficult to define and remains steeped in confusion and elusiveness when applied in critical discourse. As a term, it is often used relatively generally 'to describe the changes, tendencies, and developments that occurred in philosophy, literature, art, architecture, and music during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century' (Pantaleo, 2014: 325).

Regarding literature more specifically, critics have created countless lists to identify typical characteristics of literary postmodern style (e.g. Coles & Hall, 2001; Hassan, 1997; Lewis, 2001). Watson (2004), for instance, writes that postmodern texts include:

multiple viewpoints, intertextuality, indeterminacy, breaking of genre boundaries, eclecticism, collage...a deliberate revealing of their constructedness (metafictive techniques) and a delight in games (in postmodernism criticism 'ludism' and 'ludic'). Postmodern discourses make great use of parody, pastiche, and surrealism, and there is a pervasive use of metafiction.

(55)

This inherent playfulness, eclecticism and – most importantly – breaking of boundaries is also emphasised by Brian McHale, one of the definitive writers on postmodern fiction. He argues that postmodernism is prominently *ontological*. This is in direct contrast to the prevailing *epistemological* themes of modernist fiction which foreground questions such as 'What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty' (McHale, 1987: 9). While modernism prioritises the written representation of consciousness, perspective and 'models of knowledge and action' (Stephens, 2010: 211), postmodernist fiction shifts

‘problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being*’ (McHale, 1987: 10; original italics). It asks:

What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?

(McHale, 1987: 10)

These questions frequently undermine the purported reality of the text itself, highlighting the logical narrative boundaries between the world(s) created within and, subsequently, crossing or blurring those boundaries beyond easy distinction. This stretches to the external boundary too (that between fiction and reality), making ‘[f]iction’s epidermis...a semipermeable membrane’ (McHale, 1987: 34) and forcing readers to ‘explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text’ (Waugh, 1984: 2). Indeed, Ward (2003) explains that ‘[t]he postmodernist novel is concerned with being fiction, and with being about fiction. It asks, can reality be separated from the stories we tell about it’ (33).

Considering this particular aspect of postmodernism, it is unsurprising that *metafiction* so commonly occurs alongside it in critical discussion. As defined in Patricia Waugh’s (1984) seminal text *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, the term relates to fiction which ‘self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality’ (2). That is, ‘fiction that is self-conscious, that takes fiction itself as its topic’ (Bird, 2010: 208). By foregrounding the fictionality of its characters and events, critiquing its own method of construction, and reminding the reader of their active role in the reading process, metafiction highlights the ontological gap between reality and fiction and thus ‘challenges the expectations of the relationship between author/artist and reader/viewer’ (Thacker & Webb, 2002: 148).

This naturally leads to much crossover between metafiction and the wider postmodern style, especially regarding ‘narrative fragmentation and discontinuity, disorder and chaos, code mixing and absurdity’ (McCallum, 1996: 400). Much like postmodernism, the academic definition of metafiction developed during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the term itself being attributed to William Gass (1970). Yet Waugh acknowledges that ‘although the *term* “metafiction” might be new, the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel itself’ (1984: 5; original italics), especially as ‘metafictional devices can be seen in texts as old as Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605/15) and Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67)’ (Bird, 2010: 208). Clearly then metafiction is not a new phenomenon, but rather a new name for identifying and describing those self-reflexive techniques used in fictional writing which draw attention to the very act of writing fiction. As Waugh comments:

[Metafiction] is worth studying not only because of its contemporary emergence but also because of the insights it offers into both the representational nature of all fiction and the literary history of the novel as a genre. By studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity.

(1984: 5)

This goes some way to explaining why metafiction ‘is arguably the quintessential expression of postmodernism’ (Macrae, 2020: 5-6). The two fit together neatly because the inherent self-reflexivity of metafiction underlines McHale’s ‘what kinds of world are there’ and ‘how are they constituted’ questions, therein opening the door to the playful exploration and subversion of ontological boundaries. This is reflected in the following list, curated by Waugh to detail some of the most typical features of postmodern fiction, all of which metafictionally foreground the text as an artificial construct:

- **THE OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR:** when the storyteller makes themselves apparent and highlights the real-time construction of



their own narrative (John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*; Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants*).

- OSTENTATIOUS TYPOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT: playing with graphological features, such as enlarging, distorting or otherwise manipulating the print on the page (Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing*).
- EXPLICIT DRAMATISATION OF THE READER: when the reader is addressed like a character (Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*).
- CHINESE-BOX STRUCTURES: embedded stories, such as when a character tells a story within the wider narrative (Scheherazade in *Arabian Nights*).
- INCANTATORY AND ABSURD LISTS: over-extended or nonsensical lists undermine the illusion of reality (Donald Bartheleme's *Snow White*).
- OVER-SYSTEMATISED OR OVERTLY ARBITRARILY ARRANGED STRUCTURAL DEVICES: arbitrary or non-literary conventions highlight the text's artifice (Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*).
- TOTAL BREAKDOWN OF TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL ORGANISATION OF NARRATIVE: the breakdown of authorial control in favour of an apparently random or illogical structure (B.S. Johnson's *A Few Selected Sentences*).
- INFINITE REGRESS: narratives that are structured cyclically (Julio Cortázar's *Continuity of Parks*) or that have effectively been 'stacked' beyond a certain depth of embedding (see McHale, 1987: 114-115).
- DE-HUMANISATION OF CHARACTER, PARODIC DOUBLES, OBTRUSIVE PROPER NAMES: ostentatiously making characters more fictional than they already are (Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*).
- SELF-REFLEXIVE IMAGES: devices that call attention to themselves (the acrostic in Nabokov's *The Vane Sisters*).

- CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS OF THE STORY WITHIN THE STORY: the intrusion of a different discourse into the world of the story to offer commentary on the embedded narrative it has interrupted (John Barth's *Sabbatical*).
- CONTINUOUS UNDERMINING OF SPECIFIC FICTIONAL CONVENTIONS: the deliberate and self-reflexive decision to subvert the standard or expected practices of the text (John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*).
- USE OF POPULAR GENRES: the appropriation and inclusion of language, motifs and tropes typically associated with a different genre (science fiction in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*).
- EXPLICIT PARODY OF PREVIOUS TEXTS, WHETHER LITERARY OR NON-LITERARY: parody draws attention to that which has been parodied and emphasises a break in the usual discourse (Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*; Alan Burns' *Babel*).

(adapted from Waugh 1984: 21-22; also Lewis, 1994: 24-26)

This list is neither exhaustive nor definitive and should not be canonised as the only devices typically present in postmodern or metafictional writing (see Pantaleo, 2004). However, these features emphasise the metafictionality of a text and, while they are unlikely to be deployed all at once, the pervasive presence of any will foreground the construction and artifice of the narrative. As such, I shall use these common characteristics identified by Waugh to shape my own analysis, drawing specific attention to their presence in my chosen texts when appropriate. Although I will primarily focus on the OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR (Chapter 4) and EXPLICIT DRAMATISATION OF THE READER (Chapter 5), it should be noted that every single one of Waugh's features is displayed at some point in my chosen texts.

It is therefore noteworthy that, while Waugh does provide example texts for each of the features she identifies (as evidenced above), none of these are intended for children. Instead, they are all acclaimed works of postmodernist fiction from the

mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that are more likely to be categorised as ‘difficult’, ‘challenging’ or ‘experimental’ (Gavins, 2013) and aimed exclusively at adult readers. Yet, as the following sections will demonstrate, these devices are also commonplace in children’s literature.

### **3.2) Postmodernism for children**

Bearing in mind the inherently challenging nature of postmodernism and metafiction outlined above, it is unsurprising that these terms rarely occur in relation to children’s literature. As Lewis (1994) acknowledges, they instead ‘belong to a rarefied world of theory and the cultural avant-garde that has little to do with the practical business of teaching’ (15). Here Lewis raises an important point: that of the traditional literary value of children’s books stemming from their role in pedagogy and learning to read, as opposed to being literature in their own right (Shavit, 1986). For adults who are more aware of complex literary theories like metafiction and postmodernism, it may indeed seem unlikely that a child-reader would be able to handle such fragmentary, intrusive and sophisticated strategies. After all, most – if not all – of Waugh’s characteristic metafictional devices ‘assume certain levels of literary and interpretive competence’ (McCallum, 1996: 398). Presumably children, as relatively inexperienced readers who have not yet learnt all the skills required to recognise and appreciate these features, cannot be expected to cope with such complex literary strategies.

This viewpoint – as unsubstantiated in reality as it may be – has certainly left its mark on children’s literature scholarship. In fact, it was not until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that postmodernism and metafiction began to be considered in relation to children’s literature in any significant way (Moss, 1985). One of the earliest critics to address metafiction in such material was Geoff Moss (1990) who began his study of experimental children’s texts by asking:

‘Do metafictional texts have any place in children’s literature?’ – This is a little like asking: ‘should children be exposed to postmodernism...?’ To which the answer from children’s literature circles might be either, ‘what on earth are you talking about?’ or more likely, ‘Not bloody likely!’

(50)

This quotation exemplifies the fundamental belief that children are not able to cope with complex postmodern techniques like metafiction, likely due to prevailing attitudes that children’s literature must be ‘easy’ or ‘simple’ to attract child-readers (see Chapter 2). Even Moss – who examines the presence of these elements in a selection of children’s books in order to prove that children *can* cope with them – also comments on the ‘paucity of such texts’ (1990: 50). However, I would argue that this ‘paucity’ applies rather to the corresponding scholarship as opposed to the texts themselves. From my own experience, children’s literature is rife with the kind of strategies Moss is considering. This is especially so in contemporary fiction published since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2018) in which such devices have almost become the norm due to their prominence in mainstream children’s books (Cross, 2004; McCallum, 1996).

Indeed, some children – my younger self included – find such innovative or experimental texts absolutely fascinating, even exhilarating, and handle these complex literary devices well enough. Even if children *were* to struggle with such techniques – for which there is little proof (Pantaleo, 2010) – is that still a reason to deprive them of these texts altogether? As Hunt (1991: 101) observes, ‘it may be correct to assume that child-readers will not bring to the text a complete or sophisticated system of codes, but is this any reason to deny them access to texts with a potential of rich codes?’ Moreover, metafictional texts can ‘foster an awareness of how a story works’ (Mackey, 1990: 181) and, by highlighting the act of meaning-making, ‘metafictions can implicitly teach literary and cultural codes and conventions, as well as specific interpretive strategies, and hence empower readers to read more competently’ (McCallum, 1996: 398).

While there has been a definite lack in the academic criticism (and perhaps even awareness) of more experimental postmodern or metafictional texts for children, the literary field itself is full of examples:

John Burningham, Raymond Briggs, David McCauley, Allan and Janet Ahlberg, Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, Philip Pullman, Paul Zindel, Robert Cormier and Aidan Chambers all incorporate postmodern strategies in their work to challenge expected reader/author relationships.

(Thacker & Webb, 2002: 143)

A more recent list could also include the likes of Lemony Snicket, Julia Golding, Geraldine McCaughrean, Chris Wooding, David Walliams and Terry Pratchett, among many others. Notably, the plethora of such authors, in addition to the increasing 'appropriation of experimental and metafictional narrative techniques into mainstream children's literature' (McCallum, 1996: 408), demonstrates that children must be able to deal with these strategies in some way, else why have they proven so popular? This does not appear to be a new development either, with linguistic evidence for such techniques stretching to even the most 'classic' children's books. Thacker & Webb (2002), for instance, discuss the use of 'parody and allusion in Lewis Carroll's Alice Books [and] the metafictional strategies of [George] MacDonald, E. Nesbit and Mary Norton' as proof that 'the playfulness and sense of performance inherent in children's literature as a form has always been available' (142).

This 'playfulness and sense of performance', in addition to the ludic quality mentioned in Watson's (2004) quotation at the start of this chapter, shall become apparent in this study, especially in relation to making child-readers an active part of the narrative. Gavins (2013) examines the characteristically playful nature of postmodern style and how this leads to a sense of absurdism which can often make a reader feel ostracised or 'pushed out' of a text. However, I contend that those same ludic qualities are more often deployed in children's literature to *encourage* readerly

engagement with the text, even elevating the child-reader to a position of power in co-constructing the narrative and having a direct hand in meaning-making.

This is never more apparent than in children's texts with a characteristically postmodern narrator, especially one who seemingly attempts to interact with the child-reader directly or who visibly creates the text as it progresses. Numerous critics have examined the prominent role of the narrator in children's fiction and have highlighted how the adoption of oral narratives mirrors the archetypal traditions of fairy tales and folk stories (Arizpe et al., 2010; Gamble, 2019; Thacker & Webb, 2002; Zipes, 2012). However, far fewer have considered how this orality deliberately creates an almost dialogic interaction in postmodern or metafictional children's texts.

Barbara Wall (1991) and Aidan Chambers (1985) are of particular interest in this regard, for both of their arguments could be strengthened had they addressed postmodernism. Writing on the narrative voice of Roald Dahl's *Danny: The Champion of the World*, Chambers observes:

What [Dahl] aims to achieve – and does – is a tone of voice which is clear, uncluttered, unobtrusive, not very demanding linguistically, and which sets up a sense of intimate, yet adult-controlled, relationship between his second self and his implied child reader. It is a voice often heard in children's books of the kind deliberately written for them: it is the voice of speech rather than of interior monologue or no-holds-barred private confession. It is, in fact, the tone of a friendly adult storyteller who knows how to entertain children while at the same time keeping them in their place.

(1985: 39-40)

Wall similarly comments that:

Many child readers respond favourably to the sense of security given to them by the familiar voice of the explaining, rather patronising, narrator, as the tone in such stories has much in common with the tone of a particular kind

of oral storyteller, one who holds attention not so much by the quality of the story as by constantly demanding active audience response.

(1991: 18)

There is some truth here. The presence of a ‘friendly adult storyteller’ delivering an overtly oral narrative mimics both the archetypal narratives with which children are already likely to be familiar and ‘read aloud’ events in which real-life adult storytellers foster a communal audience and scaffold children’s literary development (Feitelson, et al., 1986; Jackson, 2020; Leland et al., 2023; Lesesne et al., 2018; Sipe, 2008). As such, oral narratives conveniently bridge the gap between books for younger readers, which are typically read *by* an adult *to* a child, and middle grade fiction (the kind explored in this thesis) where children are beginning to read alone. After all, children may still need a ‘helping hand’ to guide them through the narrative process when they cannot rely as much on real-life adult support. For instance, Meek (1982) claims this is particularly key when child-readers first encounter first-person narratives as they sometimes struggle to grasp precisely who is talking; oral narratives make clear the act of communication between the (typically adult) ‘I’-narrator who is telling a story directly to the child-reader (addressed as ‘you’), therein mitigating any possible confusion in identifying or attributing voices.

However, neither Wall nor Chambers acknowledge how this style of narration connects so obviously to the postmodern and metafictional strategies outlined previously in this chapter and instead seem to emphasise that this kind of overt, oral storyteller exists exclusively to accommodate inexperienced or developing child-readers. Wall explains that authors ‘talk down’ to children by adjusting ‘language, concepts and tone to the understanding of the child without loss of meaning’ (1991: 18), therein perpetuating McDowell’s (1973) notional ‘simplicity’ referenced in Chapter 2. While it is true that children’s authors perhaps show an increased awareness of their target readership and may adapt their writing style accordingly (Giovanelli, 2023; Nikolajeva, 2014; Wolf, 2007), I believe that Wall

does her own research, the wider field of children's literature *and* child-readers a disservice in not acknowledging that blatantly oral narratives might not exist only to accommodate younger readers. In fact, to suggest such a thing would be to fundamentally misunderstand the postmodern narrator and their visible role in the (contextual) construction of the narrative.

If a similarly ostentatious, oral narrator were to appear in a text aimed at adults, then most lay readers would assume the author was trying to do something clever. It would speak to the text's artifice and construction, but also to a wider understanding of what constitutes 'highbrow', 'absurdist' or 'avant-garde' literature (Gavins, 2013) – all terms that are commonly associated with postmodernism rather than children's books. That these kinds of narrators are so common in texts aimed at children therefore deserves more recognition and critical awareness than assuming it is *just* to assist children through the reading process. Furthermore, the OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR (which such overtly storytelling-figures often are) is not the only one of Waugh's features prominently utilised in contemporary children's texts and thus ought not to be considered in isolation, devoid of any subsequent analysis of other common postmodern and metafictional strategies on display.

That neither Wall nor Chambers address the mere possibility of postmodern techniques in relation to their study of children's narrators needlessly perpetuates the notion that children's literature is deliberately simplified to accommodate inexperienced readers. It is also all the more surprising given that Chambers himself writes metafiction for Young Adult audiences, and so to overlook such a blatant comparison feels like a missed opportunity that perhaps indicates the presuppositions that many have regarding what younger readers are able to cope with. There appears to be a gap in children's literature scholarship which has resulted in more experimental material being neglected from study – despite the techniques employed in those texts now being normalised enough to consider mainstream (McCallum, 1996) – and my own thesis intends to address this in relation to contemporary middle grade fiction. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that



so far the dominant material most often studied in relation to postmodernism and metafiction in children's literature is actually for even younger readers: picturebooks.

### **3.3) Postmodern picturebooks**

It is a relatively safe bet that when the topic of children's literature arises in conversation, one of the first thoughts most people have is of picturebooks; that is, 'short books that tell stories or convey information with relatively few words but with pictures on every page' (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003: 274). This makes perfect sense. Although the (commercial) category of children's literature covers everything from alphabet-books to Young Adult fiction, picturebooks are easily one of the most common and recognisable forms of children's literature, and are also almost exclusively reserved for child-readers alone.

Whereas there are both children's novels and adult novels, children's poems and adult poems, there are relatively few fictional texts intended for adults that communicate their tales by means of both words and pictures. The ones that do exist are either comic books or what are sometimes called graphic novels. Unlike children's picturebooks, both usually have many words in both captions and speech balloons and more than one picture on each page. It's worth considering why people tend to reserve the picturebook form of storytelling for children and why it has become so predominant in children's literature.

(Nodelman & Reimer, 2003: 274)

This final sentence raises an interesting point: why are picturebooks so dominant *exclusively* in children's literature? Perhaps it is because children like pictures – but then, so do people of all ages, as evidenced by the prevalent use of pictures in print advertising, comic books and a litany of other materials intended (usually) for older

audiences. Alternatively, maybe developing child-readers need pictures to support their understanding of a text when they cannot yet interpret all the words on the page; in this way, 'pictures are rather like stabilisers on a bicycle – once the child learns to read they can be taken away' (Taylor, 2018: 33). However, this relies on the false assumption that pictures are automatically understandable and do not require their own semiotic and schematic knowledge to navigate successfully (Arizpe, 2017; Potysch & Wilde, 2021).

Perhaps then the dominance of picturebooks connects more to the issues raised in the previous chapter: the preconceived notions of what younger readers want or require based on adults' preconceptions and publishing conventions. Kiefer (2012) observes that the content of picturebooks has always 'reflected societal norms and its physical form was the result of the printing technology available to produce and sell it' (9). Nodelman & Reimer are slightly more cynical when they state that:

People do believe that children like and need pictures, and so publishers can make a profit by providing books to fulfil that perceived need. But they can't fulfil the need with books containing wordy speech balloons and a number of different pictures on each page, for the roots of comic books in cheap and sensational superhero stories still lead many people to believe they are bad for children. As a result, the most sellable picture stories for children are in the one-picture-per-page picturebook format.

(2003: 276)

Thus the roots of publishing and selling picturebooks are much the same as the rest of children's literature; it is *adults* who determine what does or does not get printed, sold and ultimately read to (or by) children. Plus, the target readership for picturebooks are even less likely to be involved in the selecting and purchasing of reading material than the slightly older intended audience of middle grade fiction. However, there remains an underlying assumption that picturebooks are 'easy' – or, at least, *easier* – to read and that is why they are reserved for children only. They

exist to accommodate younger, inexperienced readers and introduce them to the reading experience in a safe and accessible manner. For that reason they could not possibly display anything nearly as complicated as postmodernism and metafiction.

Once again, however, that assumption is far from the truth.

Given the lack of consideration for postmodern and metafictional devices in traditional children's literature scholarship more broadly, it may seem all the more surprising that the most developed area of research in this regard actually focuses on picturebooks. If one believes postmodernism is too difficult for older, middle grade readers, why then should there be any need to address its presence in material for children who are first learning to read? Yet various critics (such as Lewis (2001), Nikolajeva (2012) and Nikola-Lisa (1994), to name but a few) have identified how '[t]he tendency toward parody, playfulness and openness in many recent picturebooks constitutes a metafictional potential' (McCallum, 1996: 400).

Considering the qualities and characteristics of postmodernism and metafiction discussed earlier in this chapter, picturebooks do seem to offer the perfect platform to deploy these techniques and experiment with printed representations on the page. As Watson (2004) comments, picturebooks 'provide the most accessible examples of postmodern eclecticism: the breaking of boundaries, the abandonment of linear chronology, the emphasis on the constructedness of texts, the intermingling and parodying of genres' (55-56). Similarly, Sipe and McGuire (in Sipe & Pantaleo, 2012: 3) identify six characteristics of postmodern picturebooks:

- Blurring the distinctions between popular and 'high' culture, the categories of traditional literary genres, and the boundaries among author, narrator and reader.
- Subversion of literary traditions and conventions and undermining the traditional distinction between the story and the outside 'real' world.

- Intertextuality (present in all texts) is made explicit and manifold, often taking the form of pastiche, a wry, layered blend of texts from many sources.
- Multiplicity of meanings, so that there are multiple pathways through the narrative, a high degree of ambiguity, and non-resolution or open-ended endings.
- Playfulness, in which readers are invited to treat the text as a semiotic playground.
- Self-referentiality, which refuses to allow readers to have a vicarious lived-through experience, offering instead a metafictional stance by drawing attention to the text *as a text* rather than as a secondary world (see Benton, 2002).

There are obvious crossovers between the characteristics identified here and those listed earlier by Waugh (1984). In particular, playfulness, self-referentiality, open-ended endings, intertextuality and the subversion of literary conventions will all become apparent in the following analytical chapters of this thesis. However, it is the blurring of distinct boundaries between the author, narrator and reader that shall prove most recurrent throughout my analysis as it is this element that epitomises McHale's question of postmodern ontologies. The blurring (and ultimate conflation) of these usually separate narrative layers not only forces child-readers to question the external boundary between fiction and reality, it also requires highly sophisticated reading strategies to process and navigate successfully. Thus it is this element – addressed throughout the following chapters but more closely examined in Chapter 6 – that truly highlights the complexities of contemporary children's literature.

That these same postmodern techniques are so prevalent in picturebooks (intended for even younger readers than the middle grade material examined in this thesis) is fascinating. One of the most commonly cited examples in this regard is David Wiesner's *The Three Pigs* (2012; originally published 2001) in which the titular characters are saved from their conventional fate when the wolf literally blows

them out of their own story instead. The pigs capitalise on this ontological trick, hiding in the margins or behind pages while the wolf searches for his prey; they also explore the world(s) outside and around their original text, folding up the pages to create paper aeroplanes (at which point the pages of the physical book turn blank to indicate the written material has been used elsewhere), and even accidentally interrupt other traditional tales such as ‘Hey Diddle Diddle’ and ‘The Prince and the Dragon’ (at which point the illustration style alters to match the new story-world, showing how the pigs are now part of a different narrative).

To understand and follow the story successfully, the reader must be aware that it is a construct, ‘that it is *made* and may thus be changed’ (Mackey, 2012: 113; original italics). The pigs’ original world is abandoned altogether and they waltz through other fictional worlds, consistently eroding the logical narrative boundaries between them; this is only possible if readers suspend their disbelief and accept the fictionality – even implausibility – of the text they are reading. Similarly, to comprehend the ever-changing illustrations, child-readers must recognise ‘that pictures have distinctive styles, that they are not simply transparent and faithful renditions of the world outside the book’ (Mackey, 2012: 113). Readers must also connect the visual depictions of these characters to the text on the page which, despite the clear subversion of conventional events, recites the original story – even when the protagonists have disappeared from the plot entirely. The printed text is then disassembled by the characters at the end of the story and rebuilt (in a slightly wonky style) to read ‘And they all lived happily ever aft’, with one of the pigs reaching to put the remaining ‘e’ and ‘r’ in place (Wiesner, 2012: 38).

This narrative disruption and deviation is typical of postmodern style and far from simple to follow. Yet *The Three Pigs* is lauded as an excellent reading choice for young children and appears to conform to all the standard publishing conventions at first glance. The story itself begins conventionally too, both verbally and visually, and when the traditional narrative is initially interrupted (when the first pig is blown off the page) it does not subvert or distract from the overall reading experience. As the story progresses, however, the postmodern and metafictional

devices deployed get increasingly elaborate and ultimately deconstruct the entire book in front of the reader's eyes.

While *The Three Pigs* is clearly a sophisticated and complex example of postmodernism for children, it is by no means rare. Jon Scieszka & Lane Smith's *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992) likewise displays all of the qualities outlined above and is considered to be one of the quintessential postmodern picturebooks (Stevenson, 1994). Parodying nine traditional fairy tales, *Stinky Cheese Man* makes its own construction explicit by

foregrounding and interrogating both artistic and publishing conventions.

For instance, the contents page is not conventionally where it should be, and the narrative begins before the title page. Moreover, the boundaries between author, narrator and reader are effectively breached, thus disrupting the expectations of readers and challenging their notions of a unified, coherent text.

(Bird, 2010: 208)

Again, a text like this is far from easy to read and children are confronted with something that is not only clearly artificial in nature, but that actively questions its own existence as they read it. One might expect this to be off-putting for readers, especially given the incoherence of a narrative that does not stick to conventional placement on the page. However, not only are children able to navigate this illogical order without much difficulty, but they also seem to enjoy doing so. Chukovsky (1965) argues that children's humour is grounded in the inversion of what is already known to them and so postmodern texts like *Stinky Cheese Man* that ostentatiously subvert standard literary conventions are inherently funny to child-readers. More than that, however: such books *teach* conventions by subverting them.

Children who have never uttered the word 'endpapers' know that one does not usually encounter them seven pages before the end of the book, and now they know what those pages are called. Children may be moved to ask, with the Red Hen on the back cover, 'Who is this ISBN guy anyway?' And the title

page poses a logical conundrum reminiscent of Alice's White Knight telling Alice what the name of the poem is called; the page is called 'Title Page', but the book apparently is not. The Table of Contents crashes with such force that it not only hurls the page number for one story several pages backward, but by knocking 'The Boy Who Cried Cow Patty' off the page apparently knocks it out of the book as well.

(Stevenson, 1994: 33-34)

These are just a few of the 'bibliometricks' (Sutton, 1992: 34) employed in *Stinky Cheese Man* but they all draw attention to the construction not just of this text, but *all* texts. It becomes a 'book about bookmaking' (Stevenson, 1994: 34) and implicitly teaches child-readers what to expect from such texts while ostentatiously inverting those very conventions. Metafictional picturebooks therefore encourage their readers to question the fictionality of what they are reading while teaching them how to do so. In this way, they 'demand a more writerly engagement from the reader, opening up meaning as opposed to shutting it down' (Bird, 2010: 209), as narratives are instead presented as a constructed game in which the child-reader is a co-collaborator or player.

Still, the status of these books as picturebooks alters the manner in which they display postmodern and metafictional devices. In *The Three Pigs* and *Stinky Cheese Man*, it is primarily the visual presentation that is subverted, with text and images being pushed out of their conventional spot on the page or disappearing entirely to show that a key piece of information has been removed by the characters. In many ways, the materiality of the book itself is deconstructed as much as the narrative printed within. By comparison, the middle grade texts examined in this thesis – and aimed at older readers aged approximately 8-12 – must take a slightly different approach. Although illustrations are used in the works of Cowell (self-illustrated) and Fletcher (by artist Shane Devries), these are seen as separate from the main narrative and tend not to be disrupted. Instead, it is the text – that is, the printed words and the way the story is told – that reflects the blurring of narrative

boundaries, the artifice of the novel and the many other metafictional characteristics outlined in this chapter. There is still OSTENTATIOUS TYPOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT (Waugh, 1984), but it is used more to reflect onomatopoeias or tone of voice, or even to visually parody other media.

For instance, the second book in Bosch's *Secret Series* begins with a 'Binding Contract' (2009: 5) that children must sign before reading the novel; the prologue is then printed in white font on a black page to convey the darkness of the museum in which the story begins, with multiple opening lines crossed out as the narrator debates how to start (2009: 8-11); this is abruptly cut off when the narrator himself gets too scared to continue and screams in fright, typographically indicated through a different font, capitalisation and a rather jaunty angle of print (2009: 12). The overall effect is not dissimilar to that seen in *The Three Pigs* and *Stinky Cheese Man* but the manner of its representation is increasingly text-based. Rather than calling explicit attention to the physical construction of the novel, it is instead the manner of narration within it that is highlighted; questions of fictionality are thus mediated through the text and made more abstract as they require sophisticated reading strategies to navigate successfully rather than being immediately, visually present as in the picturebooks mentioned above. This does still force readers to acknowledge the text's overall artifice, but is perhaps more subtle than having the story disappear entirely or the characters change shape depending on what fictional world they are currently inhabiting.

As this thesis will demonstrate, the metafictional and postmodern qualities identified by Waugh, Sipe, McGuire and Pantaleo are still present in more text-based material, but they are less visually eclectic in accordance with their printed form. Interestingly, the same can be said of the debut book by celebrity author Andy Lee. Best known as part of the Australian radio duo Hamish & Andy, Lee published a picturebook titled *Do Not Open This Book* (2016) as a gift for his nephew's first birthday. He never intended to release it publicly, but the publisher enjoyed the story and premise so much that Lee was convinced to make the book commercially available.



As the title suggests, the story rests on persuading the reader that they should not be reading this book (a popular theme given the prevalence of Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and one that is key to Bosch's *Secret Series* too). Upon opening the cover, the reader is greeted by a peculiar blue monster who appears genuinely perturbed that someone is encroaching upon his story. The monster politely explains, 'Oh! You opened the book. I assume that was an accident? No problem, accidents happen. I'm not even angry. Just please don't turn the page' (Lee, 2016: 2-3). Although the text is not connected to the monster through speech bubbles or any explicit dialogue markers, the overtly oral quality of the narration coupled with the illustrations on the page (showing the monster holding his hand up in the universal 'stop' sign and looking out of the book directly at the reader) suggests that the narration can be attached to the same character. This is confirmed as the narrative progresses and the monster grows increasingly angry as readers keep ignoring his warnings and requests; not only does the monster physically become exasperated – even enraged – in the illustrations, but the font is made bigger, often capitalised and printed at unorthodox angles to graphologically signify the character's anger as he speaks to (or rather shouts at) the reader.

Unlike the previous picturebooks discussed here which concentrate on using visual formats to display postmodern strategies – playing around with the physical space on the page, undermining publishing conventions and focusing on the constructedness of the book itself – *Please Don't Open This Book* instead prioritises the dialogue between the monster in the text and the child-reader in the real world; 'I' and 'you' are used to refer to these interlocutors respectively and metafictional references to 'this book' and 'this page' place the reader deictically close to the monster, as if they are engaging in real time conversation in a shared space. The constant reference to 'you' also positions the real reader as an active participant in the narrative and reminds them of their role in the reading process as they turn the page and progress through the text. This becomes part of the game with readers deliberately disregarding the monster's instructions and, in doing so, directly contributing to the character's increased anger: he turns red, he pulls out his hair,

he walks off to give readers the silent treatment (represented by the monster turning away from the viewer and, over a series of pages, gradually getting smaller to show that he has distanced himself from the audience).

Readers become actively involved in the progression of the narrative in Lee's text as they are deliberately cast in the role of 'reader' (and are continually addressed as such) and it is their very act of reading that (contextually) causes the story to proceed as it does. Logically, the monster looks angry because of how he was drawn on the page well before the book's publication and not because the reader is antagonising him. However, it is a fundamental part of the story that it is the audience's reading process that disturbs him and thus, while less blatant in its visual construction than *The Three Pigs* or *Stinky Cheese Man*, Lee's book still satisfies the same metafictional and postmodern devices outlined above.

Of particular note in this regard is the fact that Andy Lee is not a children's author. He is a professional radio presenter, a comedian, and an uncle who wanted to write a playful story for his young nephew. Yet the text he created exhibits numerous postmodern and metafictional strategies and I do not believe that to be an accident. Lee would likely have familiarised himself with existing popular fiction prior to writing this book – either through reading to his nephew or by conducting his own research – and thus learnt the current norms of children's literature. Terms like postmodernism and metafiction would have been far from his mind when he began writing a story that playfully addresses and involves the reader and makes a game out of turning the page. That he should so successfully and confidently deploy strategies that are indicative of these complex literary frameworks signifies the ongoing 'appropriation of experimental and metafictional narrative techniques into mainstream children's literature' (McCallum, 1996: 408) to the point at which these techniques are now so commonplace in contemporary children's books that they can be considered the norm, perhaps even 'conventionalised and formulaic' (McCallum, 1996: 408).

### 3.4) Summary

Given the prevalence of postmodern strategies in picturebooks for the youngest of child-readers, it once again strikes me as surprising (if not slightly frustrating) that the same consideration is not often given to texts for older children, where the same devices are equally common (albeit perhaps with a more sophisticated focus on the textual elements and dialogue between narrator and reader, with less explicit revelling in the physical constructedness of the book). Although still a comparatively small field in the grand scheme of literary studies, the scholarship dedicated to postmodern picturebooks is incredibly insightful and ever-growing, with key chapters even being included in the recent *Routledge Companion to Picturebooks* which focus on metafiction (Silva-Díaz, 2021) and postmodernism (Allan, 2021). Usefully, these studies continue to highlight how the youngest of readers are given the opportunity to be actively involved with the reading process and the act of meaning-making. Postmodern and metafictional devices invite the reader to view the process of narrative creation, ‘to find out how the illusion works and to play around, hand in hand with the author, with the rules that make fiction possible’ (Lewis, 1994: 41).

Returning to a comment from Lewis used earlier in this chapter, the reason terms such as postmodernism and metafiction so rarely occur in relation to children’s literature is because they seem ‘to belong to a rarefied world of theory and the cultural avant-garde that has little to do with the *practical business of teaching*’ (1994: 15; emphasis added). And yet, what are postmodern and metafictional strategies doing in such texts if not teaching? They underline the conventions of fiction – even when subverting what readers would normally expect to see – and therein establish the key components. Waugh was correct when she asserted that ‘[b]y studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity’ (1984: 5) and that is no less true for child-readers or picturebooks. Metafictional texts thus provide reading lessons ‘for readers about the construction of narratives by authors, and about their roles as readers’ (Pantaleo, 2005: 30-31; also Meek, 1988).

Nor are these techniques exclusive to the world of literary fiction. McCallum (1996) comments on the appropriation of postmodern and metafictional devices into mainstream (children's) literature, but the same trend can be seen in other cultural fields: Kukkonen & Klimek's (2011) collection of essays consider further print media like fan-fiction and graphic novels alongside theatre, TV, animation and pop music; Ryan (2006) studies computer games and web-based, interactive fiction; Hermansson (2019) examines how children's metafictional texts are adapted successfully (or not) for film. In the classroom, 'acting out' and drama practices allow pupils to 'play *from* the story – to take over the decision making of the central characters' (Greeter & Roser, 2018: 74; see also Adomat, 2009; Crumpler, 2007; Edminston, 2013), and it is common for museums to encourage children to dress up and enact historical events as if they were embodying real-life people. Moreover, we cannot forget the staple Christmas tradition that actively encourages audience participation, repeatedly breaks the fourth wall, and deliberately pokes fun at its own conventions: pantomime.

Each of these examples satisfy the characteristics outlined in this chapter: boundaries are blurred between fiction and reality; authors, narrators, characters and audiences are bundled together on the same ontological plane; intertextuality is made explicit and deliberately parodies other sources; self-referentiality draws the viewer's attention to the artifice and construction of the piece; and playfulness underlines it all in abundance. Sophisticated postmodern and metafictional devices are commonplace in mainstream culture and entertainment and have thus seeped into the popular psyche without a lot of people realising. Lay readers are happy to attribute adjectives like 'highbrow' or 'experimental' to acclaimed postmodern texts by Fowles and Vonnegut (both of which shall serve as comparisons to my chosen middle grade material in subsequent chapters) and yet relish in the inherent fun and chaotic self-referentiality of pantomimes and the like without deeming it the same.

Children – and adults – are thus exposed to metafiction and postmodernism constantly, even if they are not necessarily aware of it. This is made clear in

empirical studies by critics such as Pantaleo (2007, 2010, 2011) and Taylor (2018) which demonstrate how children build upon their schematic knowledge of media consumed in their everyday lives and replicate it in the classroom, especially in independent creative writing. That children should likewise be deploying the kinds of devices traditionally associated with sophisticated, highbrow literary concepts like postmodernism and metafiction indicates not only their own understanding and enjoyment of such strategies, but also how prevalent they are in popular culture. For the same reason, celebrity authors like Andy Lee and Tom Fletcher (one of my three chosen authors) also adopt metafictional and postmodern techniques in their own writing as this is now the norm within contemporary children's literature. The commercial success of their texts, alongside more established children's authors, again highlights the popularity, prevalence and normalisation of postmodernism for children.

As such, it seems that the historical lack of scholarship on this topic – while definitely improving in recent years – cannot be explained by an equal lack in primary material. From picturebooks for young readers to middle grade fiction for older children (and beyond), postmodernism and metafiction are rife in children's literature and have been for a very long time. That this has not been more widely studied suggests that, once again, adult critics have dismissed such material by underestimating what child-readers are capable of comprehending and enjoying.

The following chapters in this thesis will therefore examine some of the sophisticated devices outlined above in relation to contemporary middle grade fiction from three authors: Cressida Cowell, Pseudonymous Bosch and Tom Fletcher. Chapter 4 concentrates on Waugh's *OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR* and the role this figure plays in laying bare the construction of narrative. Chapter 5 considers the *DRAMATISATION OF THE READER* and how children are made active participants in meaning-making through purported dialogue with the fictional narrator. Chapter 6 then analyses the consistent blurring of boundaries between these figures in more detail, highlighting how children's literature actually pushes the limits of traditional terminology in accounting for its complexities.

# 4) The narrator, the author & I

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## 4.1) Introduction

Narrators have always been a crucial part of narrative study. They are, after all, the ones *telling* the story. Sometimes the narrator exists within the world of the story they are talking about, perhaps as a character outlining their own experience. At other times they remain entirely separate from the events they describe, recounting the story like an external spectator. Sometimes it is part of their narrative that they have been told a story and are now passing it on in place of somebody else. Sometimes they are more of an all-knowing being with authorial or god-like powers and access to the innermost thoughts and feelings of the characters they are telling us about.

Traditionally narratives – especially narrative fiction (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005) – are categorised by *person*. These are familiar terms to many of us: ‘*third-person* versus *first-person* narration; within third-person narration, *omniscient* versus *limited* narration; and, within omniscient narration, *intrusive* versus *impersonal/objective* narration’ (Toolan, 2001: 68; original italics). Such binary classifications define the relationship between the narrator and the story being narrated; put simply, first-person narratives feature an ‘I’-narrator who themselves is a character involved in the situations and events they are recounting, while a third-person narrator tells a story that (seemingly) happened to someone/thing else, hence the use of third-person pronouns.

However, in order to take a closer look at the role of the *postmodern* narrator, it is necessary to expand this terminology. As Booth (1991) argues in especially blunt words, narrative distinctions of nothing but person are ‘overworked’ as ‘[t]o say that a story is told in the first- or third-person will tell us nothing of importance unless we become more precise and describe how the particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects’ (150). Genette (1980: 243) agrees, deeming these terms

‘inadequate’. After all, what happens when the ‘I’-narrator of a text turns out to be even more of a fiction than one was first led to believe? What if the he/she/they-narrator of a typical third-person narrative ultimately reveals that they were their own main character all along? Who counts as the true narrator if there are multiple stories or anecdotes told by characters at the story-level within the main narrative arc? Suddenly, first- and third-person categories don’t quite suffice. This chapter will therefore begin with a series of definitions and frameworks that feature prominently throughout the rest of this thesis.

Interestingly, the narrators in the novels of Bosch, Cowell and Fletcher share a number of commonalities: they are all introduced as an ‘I’-narrator in an opening prologue (despite the main story-worlds of each respective text being narrated in the third-person); the narrator is seen in the process of telling or writing the very same story with which readers in the real world are now engaging; the narrator speaks directly to the reader through the prevalent use of second-person pronouns (see Chapter 5); and, to varying degrees depending on the text, the narrator appears as a fictionalised version of the real-life author, too. Each of these characteristics ties in some way to Waugh’s (1984) list of postmodern features which was outlined in Chapter 3. The fact that all three authors discussed here so readily display such sophisticated strategies when creating their respective narrators first illustrates the prevalence of postmodern techniques and metafiction in children’s literature. Furthermore, that a relatively new ‘celebrity author’ like Tom Fletcher should be using the same kind of techniques as an ostentatiously experimental author like Pseudonymous Bosch surely lends weight to the argument that ‘the appropriation of experimental and metafictional narrative techniques into mainstream children’s literature [has blurred] the distinctions between experimental and non-experimental, between the mainstream and the marginal’ (McCallum, 1996: 408).

This chapter will therefore examine the role of the narrator with a particular focus on the postmodern narrative strategies displayed in my chosen texts, considering the ways in which these devices are further used to engage child-readers and therein highlighting the stylistic sophistication with which child-

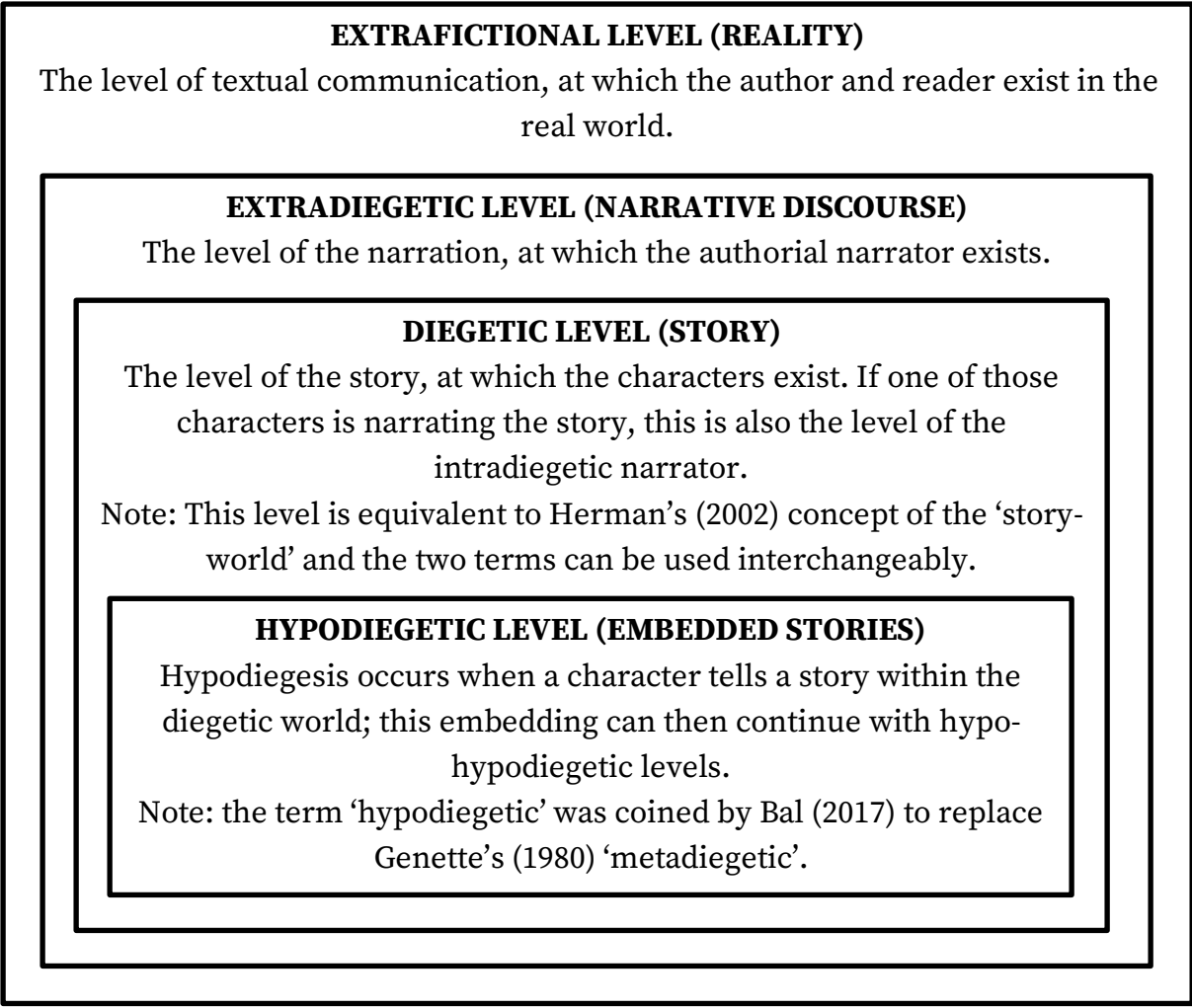
readers can cope (despite adults' preconceptions). With this in mind, Chapter 5 – 'The narratee, the reader and *you*' – acts as a parallel, examining the use of such narrative techniques from the opposite side of the page, as it were. For this reason, the terminology and frameworks introduced here will also be key for the subsequent analytical chapters.

## **4.2) Identifying narrators: levels, perception & participation**

In every narrative, whether literary or not, there is the level of the world in the story *being told* and the level at which that story *is actually told*. In a novel, this is the difference between the *diegesis*, 'the (fictional) world in which the situations and events occur' (Prince, 2003: 20), and the level of narration or 'narrative discourse' (Fludernik, 2009: 21) through which the narrator tells the audience the story. These are not mutually exclusive, however, and narrating figures may appear at either level or both simultaneously. For instance, a character may narrate their own story within the diegesis or the narration may come from a (potentially) more authorial, omniscient figure who stands apart from the fictional world and events. Thus a narrator can be categorised by: '[t]he narrative level to which [he] belongs, the extent of his participation in the story, the degree of perceptibility of his role, and finally his reliability' (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005: 95).

Concentrating first on narrative levels, Genette (1980) distinguished between *narration* (the narrative act of the narrator) and *histoire* (the story the narrator tells in their narrative). If a narrating figure exists only within the former, they are considered *extradiegetic*. If the narrator is instead a character within the main story-world, they are *intradiegetic*. These narrative levels are typically framed as an 'ontological hierarchy' (Richardson, 1994: 319) that places the reader at the highest position, as seen in Figure 4.1.





**Figure 4.1:** *Levels of narrative (adapted from Macrae, 2020: 103; see also Genette, 1980).*

Importantly, Figure 4.1 addresses the need for an ‘authorial narrator’ at the extradiegetic level. This is because, for Genette, an intradiegetic narrator is automatically ‘second degree’ (1980: 228; see also Rimmon-Kenan, 2005: 95) as a narrative told by a diegetic character will already be embedded in an overarching ‘narrating instance [which is] extradiegetic by definition’ (Genette, 1980: 229).

That being said, the presence of the authorial narrator at the extradiegetic level may not be felt by the reader at all, especially if there is simultaneously a more obvious intradiegetic narrator relating events at the story-level. For instance, a traditional first-person narrative in which a character tells their own story is

naturally intradiegetic, but Genette still places this within a hierarchically superior extradiegetic level, as seen in Figure 4.1, that may or may not be apparent to the reader. Some narratives also have a more prominent narrator figure at either the extradiegetic or intradiegetic levels and ‘the narrative discourse simulates the situation of a storyteller telling the story to his/her listeners’ (Fludernik, 2009: 21). Alternatively, sometimes the level of narration is not so obvious and can thus give the impression that there is no narrator at all.

With this in mind, one can consider the visibility of the narrator; or, rather, whether the narrator is *overt* or *covert* (Chatman, 1978). The latter is linguistically inconspicuous: ‘s/he does not present him/herself (one could almost say: itself) as the articulator of the story or does so almost imperceptibly’ (Fludernik, 2009: 22). By contrast, an overt narrator is one who is clearly seen telling the story and who frequently makes their own thoughts and views felt throughout their narrative (although they are not necessarily a first-person narrator either). Often the term ‘dramatised narrator’ (see Booth, 1991) is used to describe this kind of overt narration, although Stanzel (1984) also introduced the concept of a ‘personal(ised) narrator’ who is an embodied ‘I’-figure who ‘takes an active part in the story, sits at his/her desk, contemplates the apple trees in blossom and has a spouse or child, a personal history and a gender which are clearly indicated’ (Fludernik, 2009: 21).

This dramatised or personalised ‘I’-narrator is a particularly sophisticated form of overt narrator and one that is key to this thesis. After all, as much as an overt narrator may make their presence in the narrative apparent, they are not necessarily a traditional first-person narrator, that term being reserved for when the protagonist narrates their own story (although one can also differentiate between the *narrating* self and the *experiencing* self in first-person narratives). Instead, the kind of ‘I’-narrator described by Stanzel exists on the periphery of the main story, often viewing the events of the protagonist’s life from afar and offering their own evaluative commentary from a higher level of narrative discourse (Stanzel, 1984; also Cohn, 1981). Again, this highlights the over-simplification of terms such as first- and third-person narrators alone.

To navigate these issues, Genette further distinguishes between narrators not only at different narrative levels, but also regarding their participation in the narrated story. He coined the term *homodiegetic* to refer to a narrative in which the narrator is (one of) the protagonists at the story-level; this kind of narrator will usually refer to themselves in the first-person. If that narrator is also the *main* protagonist and is telling their own story, Genette calls this *autodiegetic* instead. However, when the narrator is unequivocally not a protagonist – such as in what might typically be considered third-person narratives – then they are *heterodiegetic*; in this case, the world of the narrator is completely separate from that of the characters in the story.

This creates a paradigm in which a narrator can be defined both by their narrative level and by their participation within the story:

1. *Extradiegetic-heterodiegetic*: Homer, a narrator in the first degree who tells a story he is absent from;
2. *Extradiegetic-homodiegetic*: Gil Blas, a narrator in the first degree who tells his own story;
3. *Intradiegetic-heterodiegetic*: Scheherazade, a narrator in the second degree who tells stories she is on the whole absent from;
4. *Intradiegetic-homodiegetic*: Ulysses in Books IX-XII, a narrator in the second degree who tells his own story.

(Genette, 1980: 248)

While Genette's typology of narrators has been used by narratologists for decades, my chosen texts slightly problematise these terms. In Cowell's *The Wizards of Once* series, the 'I'-narrator in the prologue is revealed to be a character from the story (though one that is not met by the protagonists until the third book in the series) and functions as an omniscient storyteller. This would constitute a traditional intradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator, but how does one then account for the additional level of narrative discourse when Cowell introduces herself as a fictional translator of an existing story? Similarly, in the works of both Fletcher and Bosch,

the 'I'-narrator is meant to be interpreted as a version of the real-life author who is currently in the process of writing the book as the audience reads it and thus enters the text as a highly personalised, visibly creating authorial figure who, while separate from the main fiction, does prioritise his own situation and experiences in the narrating present.

In all three cases, the prominent 'I'-narrators are distinct from the fictional protagonists in each of their narrated stories and so are heterodiegetic in terms of participation (albeit with one slight exception addressed in Chapter 6, section 6.4). They are, however, all overtly personalised figures who appear blatantly and prevalently in the first-person and refer to themselves consistently as 'I' as they detail their visible creation of the novel in real time (as if it is being written concurrently as the reader reads it, despite this being a logical impossibility). This perhaps stems more towards homodiegetic classification given the prominence of the narrative discourse over the narrated world. Similarly, these narrators exist at a higher narrative level (following the structure outlined in Figure 4.1) than that of the characters and events they are describing so could theoretically be considered extradiegetic; in Cowell's case, this would refer to her own input as translator/editor rather than the explicit character-narrator who is telling the story. However, each of these narrators are ultimately part of the overarching fiction within the pages of the novel and so might be better viewed as intradiegetic narrators who frame an embedded hypodiegetic level instead.

This problematises the categorisation of such narratorial figures, especially when these overt, personalised, visibly creating narrators are so common in postmodern and metafictional writing. While one could perhaps delineate between *hyper-* and *hypodiegetic* levels within a singular overarching diegesis, this feels clunky and does not go far enough to acknowledge the prominent narrative level in which (at least contextually) the story is supposedly being created and told in real time. Given the narrative structure of my chosen texts (outlined in Figure 4.5), this distinction is all the more important. After all, it is from this overt level of narration that each of these narrators makes their presence known throughout the novel,

consistently intruding upon their own narrated story and blurring the boundaries between the main story and their respective narrative processes.

Using Bosch as an example, the opening narrative instance comes in the form of a prologue in which readers meet a version of Bosch in the process of writing the very book they now hold in their hands. His overt presence and consistent use of first-person pronouns could initially be interpreted as an intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator, to return to Genette's paradigm, but the narrative soon deviates to the main story-world where he is not overtly present and might in fact appear more like an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator instead. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the level at which Bosch exists in his narrating present and the level at which the story he is writing unfolds, especially given the constant blurring of narrative boundaries and interruptions from the overt 'I'-narrator version of Bosch into and upon the main narrated story-world which results in the reader never being able to escape the narrator's presence or the reminder of his separate, hierarchically superior level of narration in which the narrated story is embedded.

As such, I propose using 'extradiegetic' and 'diegetic' to superficially delineate these two prominent narrative levels. I am aware that ultimately the whole text is part of an overall diegesis, but will be using 'diegetic level' to describe the main narrated fiction in which the characters and events are described; it therefore can and will be used interchangeably with Herman's (2002) *story-world*. Meanwhile, 'extradiegetic', while still a clear part of the overall fiction, shall be used to refer to the level at which the narration contextually occurs (i.e. the present tense narrative discourse of the 'I'-narrator). To this I will also add the concept of 'composition-worlds' (section 4.3.3) to recognise that it is the level at which the story is (fictionally) being created but is still ultimately part of the overall artificial diegesis within the novel.

Naturally, this sophisticated narrative structure – and the subsequent crossing and blurring of the boundaries between these levels – is a core part of

postmodern fiction, which deliberately lays bare the construction and artifice of a text. The following section will therefore consider the postmodern narrator specifically and, again using Bosch as example, highlights some of the difficulties in ascribing traditional narratological terms to this style of writing.

### **4.3) Postmodern narrators**

Having established some of the key characteristics of the narrator and how they relate to a novel's diegetic level or story-world, I shall now address what is by far one of the most prevalent elements of postmodernism and metafiction displayed in contemporary children's texts: the OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR (Waugh, 1984). Not only are these kinds of narrators overt and frequently blur the lines between narrative levels, they are also able to control the narrative process itself and so tend to play around with the construction of the text at a linguistic level.

Given that the narrator's role is, traditionally, purely one of *telling*, it perhaps seems odd that a fictional voice might have a direct hand in the way the story is shaped on the page. The true construction of the novel is controlled only by the real-life author of the piece; that is, the person who sits at home, at a library or in their office and physically writes the text on a laptop, notepad or typewriter – whatever takes their fancy. They are the ones who decide what chapter headings get used, where the text breaks occur, how to navigate the story, and so on. However the real author is not accessible once a reader opens the book. Audiences might get a sense of the person who wrote it – of whom they might be and what they might think – but seldom does the author also act as the storyteller within the pages of their creation. Instead, it is the voice of the narrator that the reader hears. As addressed in the previous section, that narrator may be overt and may take great pleasure in making themselves known as the storyteller of the piece, perhaps by signposting their own (fictional) role in the construction and telling of the story.

However, even if the narrator claims ownership of that very constructedness, it fundamentally stems from the real-life author in the real world.

The distinction between author and narrator is crucial, especially in relation to the texts examined in this thesis. We can differentiate between narrative-*making* and narrative-*telling* (Currie, 2010), the former being the role of the author and the latter being the purpose of the narrator in the text. The roles of narrative-maker and narrative-teller tend not to overlap and, in cases where such an intersection does occur, it is usually on the part of an entirely fictional figure who is standing in place of the real-life narrative-maker in the real world. After all, to conflate the narrative-maker and narrative-teller would also mean conflating the real world and the fiction.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the blurring of the narrative-maker and narrative-teller roles is commonplace in postmodern writing. It is also a technique that can be seen time and time again in contemporary children's literature, in which the teller of the story exists within the pages of the book not as a character but as a fictional version of the author. Pseudonymous Bosch, for instance, clearly does not exist (the real author's name is Raphael Simon) and yet it is his name published on the cover of the book. Within the novel, a version of Bosch is introduced in the process of writing the very story the audience is reading; readers then seemingly witness, in real time, the linguistic creation of the book they now hold in their hands.

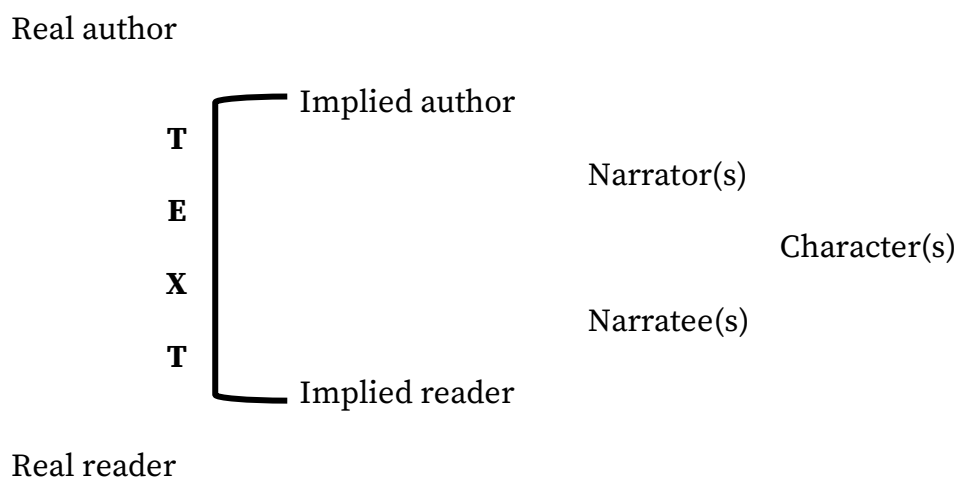
Of course, Bosch is not the real author of the book but neither is he a traditional narrator. Although he narrates as an 'I'-figure in the first-person and present tense, this is contained within the text's (contextually extradiegetic) level of narration. By comparison, the diegetic story-world where Bosch's characters exist and go on adventures is instead narrated in the third-person and past tense. When readers initially meet Bosch, they understand that he is completely distinct from the diegetic characters and that his narration is coming from a narrative level that is hierarchically above and temporally distant from the story-world. He is an adult

writer telling the story of two 11-year-old protagonists, both of whom he takes the time to introduce as clearly separate people from himself, so he is unlikely to be an auto- or homodiegetic narrator (at least, that readers know of at that point; this will be readdressed in Chapter 6). Yet the reader meets Bosch as a highly personalised character; they learn about his likes and dislikes, his fears, his motivations for writing the novel, the name of his pet rabbit, and so on. Thus, as outlined above, it feels inaccurate or overly simplistic to deem him wholly heterodiegetic as a narrator when there is an almost parallel storyline running alongside – or superior to – the diegetic story-world through which Bosch details his own life and writing process.

Instead, we must find another way of pinning down this kind of postmodern narrator: one who exists within an overt level of narrative discourse but who blurs the boundaries between his own world and that of the diegetic characters too much to fit neatly into Genette’s existing paradigm. For this reason, I shall now outline a few key concepts that will be used throughout this analysis.

#### 4.3.1) *Implied vs. internal authors*

First is Booth’s (1991; originally published 1961) concept of the implied author, which delineates the teller and receptor roles at different narrative levels:



**Figure 4.2:** Booth’s teller and receptor roles (from Stockwell, 2002: 42).



On the far left of Figure 4.2, outside the world of the text, are the REAL AUTHOR and REAL READER: the person who physically wrote the text and the person subsequently reading it, respectively.

By contrast, the IMPLIED AUTHOR was coined by Booth ‘as a means for discussing and analysing the ideological and moral stances of a narrative text without having to refer directly to a biological author’ (Bal, 2017: 61). It refers to ‘the *mental picture* of the author that a reader constructs on the basis of the text in its entirety’ (Toolan, 2001: 65; emphasis added); this mental representation is often supported by the real reader’s extrafictional awareness of the real author based on, for instance, interviews, commentary or further knowledge of the author’s work. With this in mind, it is natural for the reader to imagine the implied author as a real person, but it is important to acknowledge that the implied author is a purely mental construct on the part of the reader and may, in reality, have little bearing on the real-life person who actually wrote the text. Instead, the implied author is an underlying consciousness that governs the text with which the reader is engaged and whose representation is inferred from what is read. Given that ‘he, or better, *it* has no voice’ (Chatman, 1978: 148; see also Rimmon-Kenan, 2005; Wall, 1991) and is constructed purely by the reader, it would be remiss to confuse the implied author with the text’s narrator, just as it would be to conflate them (or *it*) with the real author.

However, Booth himself describes the implied author ‘as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his fingernails’ (1991: 151), thereby hinting at some level of control within the text. Given the overtness of the narrators in my primary material – specifically, their respective roles as storytellers in the ongoing process of telling or writing the stories with which readers are engaging – I might be tempted to agree with Booth and attribute the voice of these clearly dramatised narrators to the implied author. After all, the narrative voice of the person(a) who is fictionally creating the text within the context of the story itself is unequivocally not the real author, but they are contextually a *version* of *an* author and should be addressed as such.

Nonetheless, I concur with contemporary narratologists that the implied author is ‘a construct inferred and assembled by the reader from all the components of the text’ and thus cannot be considered equivalent to the author’s ‘second self’ (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005: 88). It is, however, necessary to acknowledge the presence and voice of a dramatised narrator who is also (fictionally) the author of the novel and so, to avoid confusion on the matter, I shall instead introduce Currie’s (2010) scheme of *internal* and *external* author/narrators. As he explains:

What about those narrators *in* stories, like Dr Watson of the Sherlock Holmes stories? [...] Watson is, fictionally, a narrator. It is also part of the story that Watson is the author of the stories he tells; it is no part of these stories that he found them somewhere or that they were dictated to him by Holmes. This sort of narrator, where there is one, is, according to the story, the author[.]

(Currie, 2010: 66)

We might think of Watson as a fictional author *within* the story in which he exists, even if he is neither the implied or real author of the text itself. Using Currie’s terminology, Watson is thus the internal author, while Conan Doyle is the external one. Bosch conducts a similar role in the *Secret Series*, visibly appearing as a narrator in the process of writing the same novel that the reader now holds in their hand. In this way, he can be seen as the internal author.

However, Bosch goes a step further than Watson by simultaneously appearing as the external author, too, as he is the published name on the cover of the book. Although he is definitely not the real author (that would be Raphael Simon), Bosch emerges as a *fictional* real author by taking on – at least from a publishing and marketing viewpoint – the role of the external author. Likewise, there is no reference at all to the real-life Simon within the pages of any of the novels published under Bosch’s name (not even on the copyright or ‘about the author’ pages). In fact, it was not until well into the publication of the *Secret Series* that Simon began giving interviews as himself – as opposed to wearing some form of disguise to perpetuate the mysterious image of Bosch – and it was only in 2021

that Simon published his first book under his own name. With this in mind, it seems logical to accept that the image of the implied author constructed by the real reader is, in fact, also inspired by Bosch and not by Simon.

In this way, it is possible to consider Bosch as the external author (that is, a fake version of the real author), implied author, internal author, and narrator of the text all in one; I have not deemed him a character at this point as he does not initially appear in the diegetic story which the internal author is writing. This is represented in Figure 4.3.

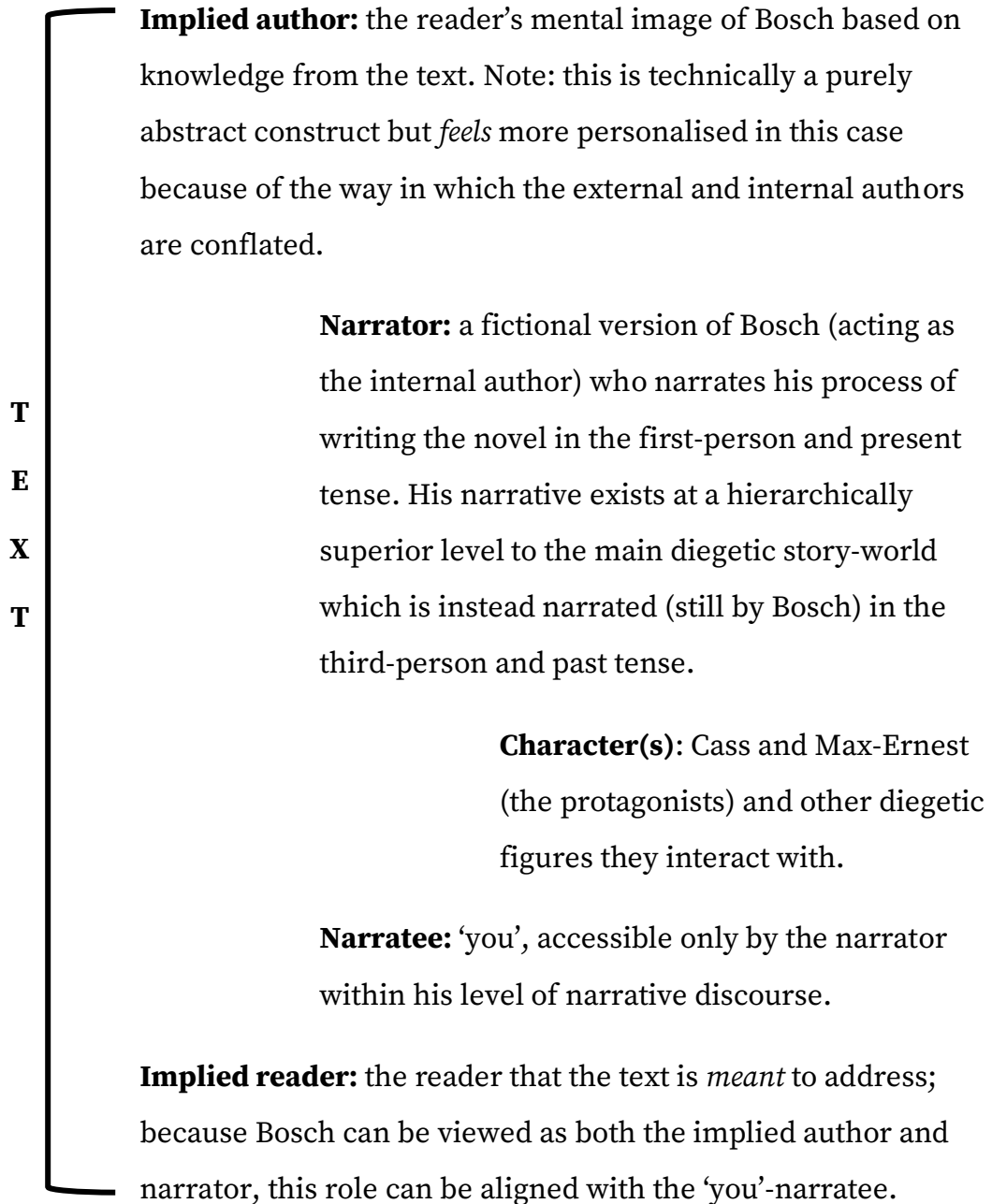
As the entities in Booth's model become increasingly fictional the further into the text they occur, the conflation of these teller roles results in the sophisticated blurring of narrative levels, therein drawing attention to 'the borderline between reality and fiction or [suggesting] that there may be no reality apart from [the novel's] narration' (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005: 95). This is all the more apparent when one acknowledges that Bosch is not the real author of these books, despite any claims he makes to the contrary within his narrative process. For this reason, I shall henceforth defer to Currie's terms to distinguish between the version of the authorial persona who has written the physical text readers are holding (external/(fictionally, in the case of Bosch) real/implied author) and the version of the same figure who is in the process of writing the story within the book (internal author/narrator).

Like the implied author, the IMPLIED READER in Booth's diagram is another 'reader-based construct [of the] archetypal reader that real readers assume the text has or had in mind as its audience' (Toolan, 2001: 68). As the real author cannot communicate with the real reader directly, they conjure an implied reader to whom they direct their work and who 'shares with the author not just background knowledge but also a set of presuppositions, sympathies and standards' (Leech & Short, 2007: 208). When the real reader engages with a text, they are often forced to accept a set of ideals or values on which successful navigation of the narrative relies; the implied reader is thus 'a role a text implies *and* invites a reader to take on'

and so the real reader ‘must, in some way and to some degree, *become* the implied reader’ (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003: 17; original italics).

Again using the *Secret Series* as example, the role of the reader is just as important as the various teller roles embodied by Bosch and will be explored further in Chapter 5. The internal author frequently appears to address the reader directly, primarily through extensive use of the second-person. Along with ongoing metafictional references to the act of reading, this aligns the real reader with the narratee, ‘you’, addressed in the text. Although Rimmon-Keenan (2005) stresses that the implied reader ‘is distinct from both real reader and narratee’ (88), the prevalent address toward and clear awareness of a *reading persona* inevitably conflates the receptor roles in my chosen texts, just as the teller roles are conflated too. As Figure 4.3 illustrates, Bosch – or a version of him – fulfils the role of external author, internal author, implied author and narrator all at once. Similarly, ‘you’ can be taken to refer first and foremost to the internal author’s narratee, but also the implied reader that ‘the text had in mind as its audience’ (Toolan, 2001: 68) and real reader, who willingly steps into the narrative discourse and aligns themselves with the other receptor roles. The extent to which the reader successfully does this is dependent on the reader themselves, but it is certainly encouraged through the literary devices deployed in the text.

**Real author:** Raphael Simon (writing under the pseudonym of Bosch).



**Real reader:** the reader in the real world who aligns themselves with the implied reader and narratee in order to navigate the narrative in the way intended by the internal author/narrator who is seemingly writing the book.

**Figure 4.3:** Booth’s teller and receptor roles as portrayed in Bosch’s Secret Series.

### 4.3.2) *Metalepsis, metanarration & authenticity*

With the conflation of Booth's teller and receptor roles, it becomes all the more important to distinguish between figures at different narrative levels in order to identify when the boundaries between them have been crossed. This blurring of ontological levels within a fictional narrative is called *metalepsis* (Genette, 1980; McHale, 1987: 121-130) and refers to 'any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse' with the aim of producing an effect that is 'comical or fantastic' (Genette, 1980: 234-235). Importantly, *metalepsis* 'dramatizes the problematization of the boundary between fiction and reality endemic to the postmodern condition' because such transgressions disrupt the 'narrative hierarchy' to 'reinforce or to undermine the ontological status of fictional subjects or selves' (Malina, 2002: 2). This is particularly apparent in cases of what Genette calls *author metalepsis*:

[T]hat deliberate transgression of the threshold of embedding...when an author (or his reader) introduces himself into the fictive action of the narrative or when a character in that fiction intrudes into the extradiegetic existence of the author or reader[.]

(Genette, 1988: 88; see also Lambrou, 2021)

This kind of transgression will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 6 – in addition to further distinctions, such as ontological and rhetorical *metalepses* (Ryan, 2004) – but it is necessary to briefly introduce the concept here given the frequent narratorial asides to the reader in each of my chosen texts. As this chapter will demonstrate, this occurs most often from within the internal author's level of narration when they address the reader directly and simulate real time, spontaneous conversation between the narrator in the text and the real reader outside the fiction, with discussions often pertaining to their respective acts of writing and reading the novel. This, therefore, also links to the concept of *metanarration*.

Although often treated as identical in meaning to metafiction, metanarration actually refers to ‘comments made by the narrator about the story, whether about making it up, formulating it in words or the ways of telling it’ (Fludernik, 2009: 156). While metafiction concentrates on the fictionality of a narrative overall, metanarrative comments evaluate or draw attention to the act or process of that narration instead. As such, metanarrative comments often are metafictional in nature because they ‘draw attention to the figure of the narrator and to her/his role in mediating events, thus disrupting the apparently unmediated portrayal of the fictional world’ (Fludernik, 2009: 61). Crucially, however, and somewhat paradoxically, metanarration can also be used to *reinforce* the illusion of reality by making the reader feel that

s/he is in direct communion with the narrator. This results in a build-up of trust between reader and narrator, a feeling of closeness and reliability, which – in contrast to the stereotypical view of an intrusive narrator – helps to put across a convincing picture of the fictional world. Metanarrative comments enhance the credibility of the narrator: her/his difficulties in teasing out the truth of what happened or the search for the right words to use are taken by the reader as proof of authenticity.

(Fludernik, 2009: 61)

However, to say that metanarrative comments or an overt awareness of the storytelling process automatically equates to being able to trust the narrator fully would be far from accurate, even if the reader is encouraged to feel like they can. There are countless narrators who exist at the discourse level of narration, highlighting the act of storytelling and deliberately signposting their creative process, who cannot be trusted or seen as wholly reliable narratorial figures. A classic example is Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*. The narrative style is famously disjointed, leaping from one idea to the next as Holden navigates his experiences in an almost confessional tone. Through metaleptic address he speaks

directly to 'you' and is clearly aware of his role as narrator, as demonstrated below in the opening lines of the first and last chapters, respectively:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages [sic] apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them.

(Salinger, 2010: 1)

That's all I'm going to tell about. I could probably tell you what I did after I went home, and how I got sick and all, and what school I'm supposed to go to next fall, after I get out of here, but I don't feel like it. I really don't. That stuff doesn't interest me too much right now.

(Salinger, 2010: 230)

These extracts are typical of Holden's narrative. The opening of the novel illustrates his knowledge of fictional conventions and what the reader is expecting to learn, but he veers away from those very expectations because of his own boredom and disinterest. The same applies in the final chapter when, again, he neglects to narrate the actual story because he doesn't feel like going into it.

It would be remiss to call Holden a reliable narrator, especially when he announces that he is not going to share certain information with the reader. If anything, his metanarrative comments signal an *unreliable* narrator (Booth, 1991; Fludernik, 2009) who is perhaps trying to make sense of the story himself. 'Holden is often unable to speak directly for himself and must use the other characters (and the means by which they communicate with Holden) as a way of imparting information to the reader' (Kinane, 2017: 119), so it follows that he would also talk around the story with his narration as he attempts to process the events. Still, his



apparent openness as he lays bare his disinclination to narrate certain parts of the story does simulate Fludernik's 'direct communion' between the narrator and reader.

By no means does this actually increase Holden's reliability or credibility as a narrator overall, but it perhaps makes readers *feel* like they can put their faith in him and thus brings the audience closer to his narrative situation, especially when paired with metaleptic address. Readers understand that he is genuinely struggling to simultaneously narrate and comprehend the story as it progresses and, as a result, there is an increase in the level of sympathy readers feel towards Holden which, I would argue, also enhances the contextual trust they invest in him. While one can acknowledge that the story is fictional and that Holden is a wholly unreliable narrator, his own 'difficulties in teasing out the truth' as he tries to tell the story do help to convince readers of the *alleged* authenticity of his narrative.

Of course, this does not make the reader think that the book as a whole is true and we must remember that 'the diegesis and extradiegesis are equally fictional in contrast to the reality of the world in which the book is read' (Macrae, 2020: 20). However, if the reader is encouraged to put their faith in the narrator as an overt figure with whom they are engaging in a metaleptic communication, it follows that they might also view 'the teller as "more" real than the story-world characters, or at least more proximal and intimate with the reader' (Macrae, 2020: 20). Such narrators effectively create a narratorial persona who engages in a (fictional and ultimately one-sided) conversation with the reader outside the text and distance themselves from the main story-world in doing so. The overt level of narrative discourse, in which the story is contextually being written or created, is thus interpreted as being closer to the reader both temporally (this narrative recap happening after the events of the novel, but prior to the publication and purchase of the novel) and spatially (with frequent proximal deictic references indicating a shared communication space between 'I', the narrator, and 'you', the reader). Thus it potentially feels 'more real', even though it is just as fictional as the rest of the story.

This does not equate to reliability, however, and even if the reader is encouraged to suspend their disbelief and trust what the narrator is saying, as in *The Catcher in the Rye*, that authenticity does not encompass the novel as a whole and the reader remains aware of the fictionality of the overall text. Nevertheless, the question of authenticity can be examined further in relation to postmodern and metafictional texts, especially when the internal author is supposedly the same figure as the external author.

Tom Fletcher, for instance, ostentatiously inserts himself by name into his own narration at the extradiegetic level, thereby encouraging readers to trust the storytelling process and take what he is saying almost as fact because they know that Fletcher is a real figure in the real world, even if the events of the story he's telling involve Father Christmas adopting a dinosaur or monsters creeping out from underneath a child's bed. Bosch, on the other hand, is less fantastical with his diegetic storylines, but nevertheless still purports that the events are true and readers may be putting themselves in danger by reading about what happened. Cowell meanwhile claims that, again in the reader's real world, her stories were written centuries ago and later discovered at the back of a cave; she herself, within the context of the story, has been hired to translate these pages and thus, like with Fletcher, the reader is encouraged to trust what they read because of the obvious connection to a real-life author figure.

It is clear, therefore, that each of these authors is trying to convince the reader that the level of narration in their respective works, if not also the diegetic story-world, is true, factual and potentially even connected to the real world in some way. Indeed, Cowell's claim to historical veracity in particular is very similar to that seen in 19<sup>th</sup> century realist fiction where having the teller find an existing story buried somewhere – in an attic or treasure chest, for instance – was a popular device that grounded the fiction in a wider historical context. Adding in the fact that each narrator frequently addresses the real reader directly, as if they exist together on the same ontological level and can genuinely engage in a shared language event, the authenticity of the narrator becomes indisputably tied to the reader. Readers

obviously know that they themselves are real, and so the metaleptic communication on display helps to cement the validity and credibility of the narrator, too. When that same narrator then goes on to claim that the clearly fictional story-world is also true, the reader is expected to put their faith in the narrator and believe what they say, despite knowing that this ultimately questions 'the relationship between fiction and reality' (Waugh, 1984: 2).

Metaleptic communication from the level of narration within the text to the reader in the real world is a key strategy used to achieve this effect in my chosen texts as it consistently blurs the external narrative boundary that separates reality and fiction and thus '[explores] the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text' (Waugh, 1984: 2). The prevalent use of metalepsis in my chosen texts, which are of course intended for child-readers, highlights the sophistication with which younger audiences are often encouraged – and able – to engage. This will be explored further in Chapter 6.

### **4.3.3) *Text World Theory***

As previously addressed in this chapter, the narrators and narrative levels within my chosen texts problematise traditional terminology. Can the overt level of narrative discourse be considered truly extradiegetic when it is technically part of an overarching diegesis, just as fictional as the main story-world and populated by a highly personalised narrating persona? Should that narrator be considered heterodiegetic as they do not participate in the main fiction or homodiegetic as they are recounting (to an extent) their own experiences alongside the main story? I would thus like to introduce an alternative framework that conveniently demarcates Genette's narrative levels and the boundaries between them.

Conceived by Paul Werth (1999) and greatly developed by Joanna Gavins (2007), Text World Theory offers a multi-levelled framework that considers how readers construct a text using not only the linguistic cues provided by the author, but also their own background knowledge, therein showing 'how real-world

contexts influence the production of discourse and how that discourse is perceived and conceptualised in everyday situations' (Gavins, 2014: 7). Crucially for my own study, Text World Theory conveniently separates every discourse event into a series of distinct conceptual levels.

The first of these, the *discourse-world*, deals with the immediate situation which surrounds human beings as they communicate with one another. The conscious presence of at least one speaker or writer and one or more listeners or readers is essential for a discourse-world to exist. This is because the discourse-world contains not only those sentient beings participating in the discourse and the objects and entities which surround them, but all the personal and cultural knowledge those participants bring with them to the language situation.

(Gavins, 2007: 9-10)

As the participants involved in the discourse-world communicate with each other, 'they construct mental representations of the discourse in their minds, in which the language being produced can be conceptualised and understood' (Gavins, 2007: 10). Together, these participants mutually combine linguistic cues in the discourse-world with their existing preconceptions and 'create a *text-world* on the basis of perceived common ground knowledge they seem to share' (Stockwell, 2012: 7). It is worth noting, however, that the main – or *matrix* (Stockwell, 2020) – text-world that is most consistently in operation throughout a text may not be the first text-world to which readers are introduced, especially as 'it is common in a literary work to skip over a level rapidly as part of the set-up' (Stockwell, 2020: 163). This both creates – and subsequently accounts for – fractal and layered text-worlds which hold the same basic structure as the primary text-world, but signify a change in focus.

For example, a *world-switch* can occur when 'our focus of attention is switched along the spatial or temporal parameters of the matrix text-world' (Stockwell, 2020: 163). World-switches are usually triggered by deictic changes that indicate a shift in time – such as in a flashback or flashforward – or through direct

speech, the latter of which ‘is linguistically expressed also by spatio-temporal deictic markers that are different from the preceding co-text, so the material inside the direct speech creates a text-world in its own right’ (Stockwell, 2020: 163). Alternatively, when there is an ontological rather than deictic shift in focus, this triggers a move to a *modal-world*. As Stockwell (2020: 163) explains, ‘[t]his typically involves attitudinal alternations due to the desire, belief, or purpose of enactors’ and modal-worlds can thus be categorised as *boulomaic* (pertaining to expressions of wishes or desires), *deontic* (to express duty, obligation, or moral and ethical imperatives) and *epistemic* (to convey hypotheticality, conditionality and focalisation).

In earlier versions of the Text World Theory framework, these attitudinal, attentional or ontological shifts to a new world were called *sub-worlds* (Werth, 1999; see also Gavins, 2007, 2013; Stockwell, 2002). However, the prefix ‘sub’ could be misleading as ‘it suggests that newly created worlds (which are often numerous and extensive in discourse) are always and necessarily subordinate in some way to the first text-world’ (Gavins, 2007: 52). In Text World Theory, world-switches and modal-worlds signify a change in focus, but nevertheless evoke ‘a whole new richly textured world’ (Stockwell, 2020: 164) that remains attached to the matrix text-world in some way. A distinction must therefore be drawn between Text World Theory and Genette’s traditional diegetic levels as the latter are often conceptualised as Chinese boxes or Russian dolls, as in Figure 4.1, which suggests a hierarchical embedding of narrative layers (Hanebeck, 2021).

While it is important to stress that the structural hierarchy implied by Genette’s levels does not equate to thematic or spatial prevalence within the text – that is to say that the extradiegetic level is no more important, real or valuable than the diegetic story-level it encircles, nor does it necessarily account for more time or space within the reading experience – it is nevertheless positioned one ontological step closer to the world of the real reader. As such, it can trick audiences into believing that the narrator’s level of narrative discourse is, to return to Macrae’s comment in the previous section, ““more” real than the story-world...or at least

more proximal to and intimate with the reader' (2020: 20). This is especially apparent when the narrator is made increasingly overt and presented 'as the author her/himself, a person more than a mere textual construct, [which blurs] the boundary between the extradiegesis and reality' (Macrae, 2020: 20) – something which occurs prevalently in the children's novels examined in this thesis.

In each of my chosen texts, the first text-world readers encounter at the very start of the novel is always narrated by an internal author who is visibly in the process of telling – or even *creating* – the story they are now reading. The reader, in turn, is addressed by this internal author directly, creating a dialogue between 'I' (the narrator) and 'you' (the narratee and/or reader). In this way, this initial text-world, although entirely fictional, quickly blends the narrator's narrating present with the reader's *reading* present and thus implies a spatial, temporal and ontological proximity between the fictional teller and the real reader. Given that the discourse-world is 'a pragmatic space, representative of the immediate temporal and spatial situation surrounding a given discourse' (Norledge, 2022: 3), one might argue that this metaleptic interaction between the narrator and reader is, at the very least, a *version* of a discourse-world – with the prototypical situation of reading usually accounting for the author and reader as discourse-world participants (see Stockwell, 2002). However, given that this blurring of narrative boundaries is triggered by a fictional narrating figure who ostensibly exists only within the novel's primary text-world, an alternative term might make this distinction clearer.

In her analysis of the similarly structured *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Gavins (2013: 115) refers to the novel's primary text-world as a 'composition text-world' featuring a 'textual-enactor' who is telling the story. Before addressing these terms further, it is worth noting that *Slaughterhouse-Five* makes a particularly interesting comparison within this thesis, especially as I doubt anyone would usually group Vonnegut's famous text with any material from the realm of children's literature. After all, as Gavins (2013: 112) points out, '*Slaughterhouse-Five* is another prominent text in online readers' lists of absurd fiction'. Why, then, would anyone expect a children's

book to come close to matching the complexities – and, indeed, absurdities – of something like *Slaughterhouse-Five*?

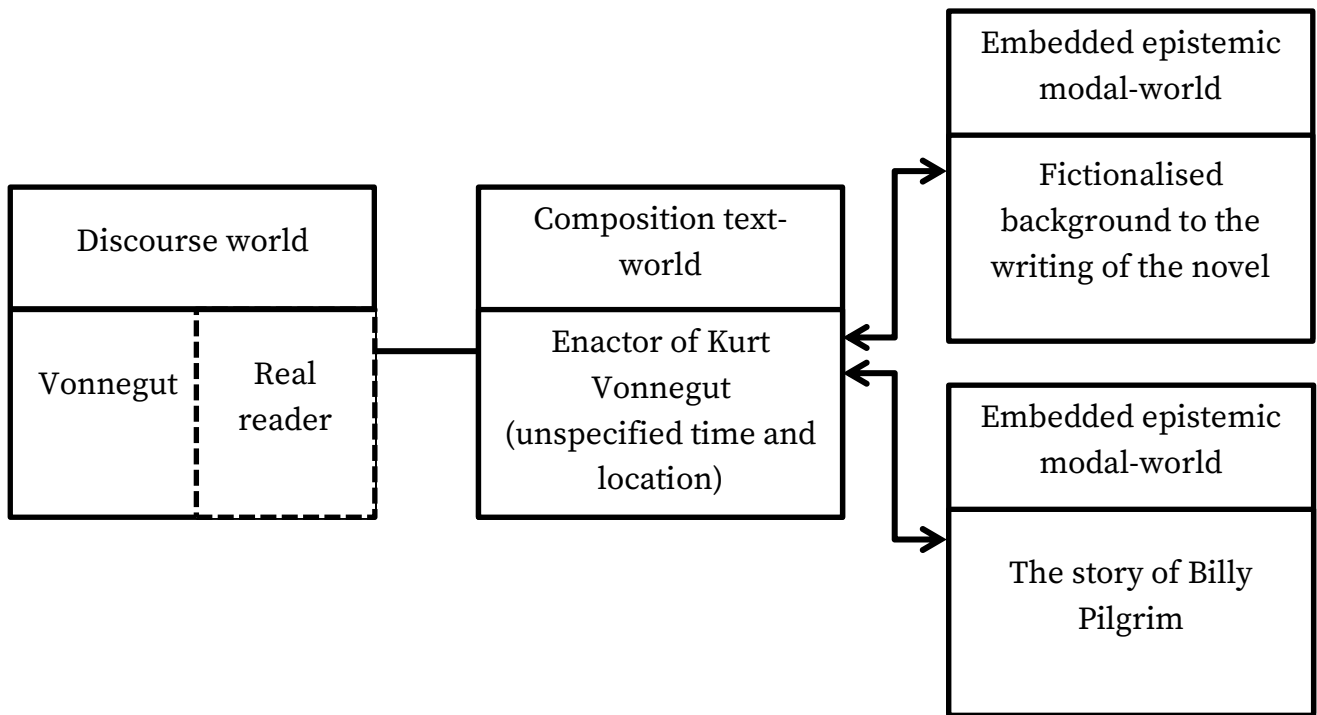
Nevertheless, even a cursory glance at the texts used in this thesis reveals a remarkably similar structure to Vonnegut's novel. So much of *Slaughterhouse-Five* rests on the deliberate confusion of ontological boundaries within the text, blurring what the reader is expected to view as fiction and fact, and ostentatiously conflates the role of the external author with the narrator of the fiction.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* begins with an apparently autobiographical account of the text's origins, headed as the first chapter of the novel but sitting outside the central narrative. In this chapter Vonnegut describes his meeting with an old friend, Bernard O'Hare, from his own time serving in the US army during World War II and recounts the promise he made to O'Hare's wife that he would write an unglamourised account of the two friends' experiences in 1940s Germany.

(Gavins, 2013: 114)

The text-world structure that arises from this opening is represented in Figure 4.4. On the far left of the diagram is the discourse-world outside the text: that is, its real-world composition by the real-life Vonnegut and the real reader subsequently reading it.

Of course, the real reader and Vonnegut occupy entirely different spatial and temporal locations and never actually come into direct contact. Instead, the reader meets a 'textual enactor' version of Vonnegut in the process of writing the novel within what Gavins calls the 'composition text-world'. Coined by Emmott (1997) as part of her Conceptual Frame Theory, enactors are 'different versions of the same person or character which exist at different conceptual levels of a discourse' (Gavins, 2007: 41). Readers subsequently 'endow them with the same abilities, emotions and reactions as we would expect from the human beings we encounter in the real world' (Gavins, 2007: 64). In this way, an enactor who shares their name and personality with the author outside the text, especially when also functioning as the



**Figure 4.4:** Text-world structure demonstrating the composition level in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Gavins, 2013: 115).

contextual creator of the book within the primary text-world, can be considered equivalent to Currie’s internal author. Currie’s terminology is nevertheless favoured throughout this analysis for ease of delineation, but it should be acknowledged that the role of the internal author does not rely on there being alternate versions of the same person or character at other levels of the discourse, as in the case of Conan Doyle’s Dr Watson.

The role of this internal author/narratorial figure is made clear at the start of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when ‘Vonnegut conflates the implied author with the narrator of the fiction by claiming that the novel is based on his own real-world experiences in the opening lines of the first chapter of the text’ (Gavins, 2013: 114). Consider the opening lines of the novel:

All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really *was* shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn’t his. Another guy I knew really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I’ve changed all the names.

(Vonnegut, 2000: 1)



These lines create a text-world containing a (fictionalised) version of Vonnegut at the time of his writing the novel. Readers do not know where or when it is located, only that it logically must be ‘some time between the visit to Dresden in 1967 and the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969’ (Gavins, 2013: 115). It is from this primary text-world that the rest of the novel stems, with Vonnegut proceeding to narrate a number of other text-worlds, including his (fictional) inspiration for the novel and the main story-world in which the character of Billy Pilgrim exists (as seen to the right of Figure 4.4).

Because this primary text-world details the act of – and reasons for – Vonnegut writing the novel, it is contextually the place at which the novel is composed, hence Gavins’ aptly titled ‘composition text-world’. This narrative structure mirrors my chosen texts perfectly and, as such, I will henceforth describe the (contextually extradiegetic) level of the internal author’s narrative discourse as the composition-world (offering symmetry to Herman’s (2002) story-world). Like my own texts, *Slaughterhouse-Five* also features a fictional version of the real-life author in the process of creating the story as it is read and thus the composition-world attempts to mimic the real world by conflating the external and internal authors into one overt narrating figure, who subsequently engages in seemingly direct conversation with the real reader. Still, it is crucial to remember that:

[D]espite the presence of enactors with real-world counterparts, the various text-worlds contained within the opening chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* are nevertheless still fictionalised, a fact which Vonnegut playfully reminds us of throughout the first pages of the book. For example, the opening lines of the novel above make a direct claim to the text’s authenticity while simultaneously undermining it: ‘All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true.’

(Gavins, 2013: 115)

By attempting to qualify which bits of his narrative are true, Vonnegut immediately reduces the purported authenticity of the text to just ‘the war parts’, although this is

further mitigated to *'pretty much true'*. The fact that the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* details the textual enactor's motivations for writing the novel and his process of composition also emphasises the inherent artificiality of the text overall.

Vonnegut's playfulness and meta-awareness of the novel's construction continues even outside the narrator's composition-world. 'Even when Billy Pilgrim's story finally begins in the second chapter, Vonnegut continues to remind the reader of the fictional status of the unfolding account' (Gavins, 2013: 116) and the narrator frequently intrudes upon his own storytelling with evaluative comments or interjections that ultimately distance the reader from the character of Billy. In many ways, the overarching presence of the textual enactor establishes the composition-world as the most consistent text-world throughout the novel. Whenever the narrator interrupts the story from this level,

there is a shift from the simple past tense of the main narration into a present continuous tense [referring specifically to the repeated use of the phrase 'So it goes'] which is aligned with the text-world in which the narrator/IMPLIED author is situated. Each time the narrator makes this external evaluative commentary, a switch occurs from the text-world of Billy Pilgrim to that of the enactor of Kurt Vonnegut, telling Billy's story. [...] In this way, Vonnegut makes his presence as real author, IMPLIED author and narrator felt throughout the text, drawing attention to the fictionality of his creation at regular intervals.

(Gavins: 2013: 118)

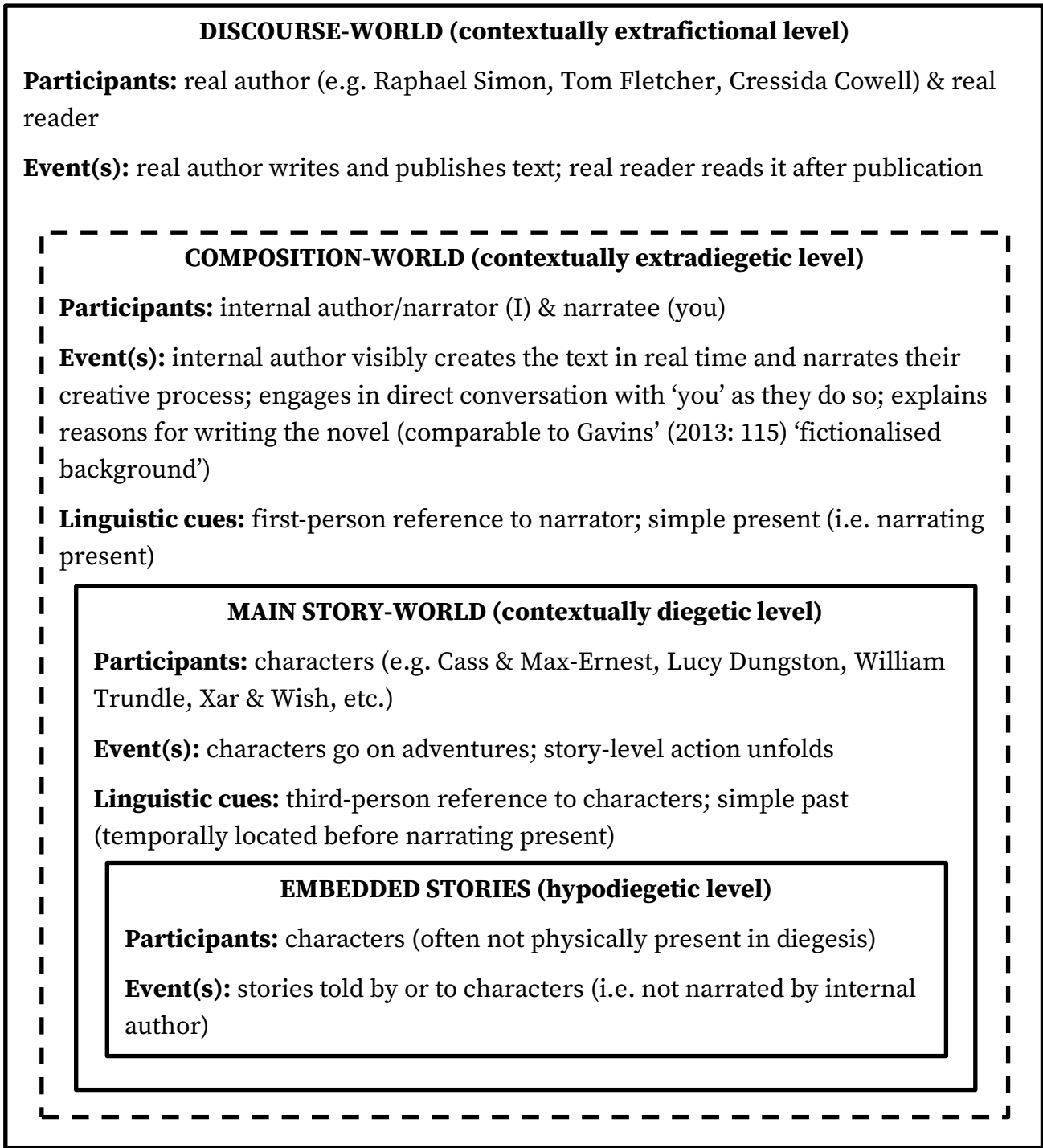
That all sounds rather complicated and clever and *literary*, does it not? No wonder so many readers and critics judge *Slaughterhouse-Five* to be absurd, avant-garde or difficult. It is perhaps even less surprising that very few would consider children's literature likewise.

However, all of the texts examined in this thesis follow a very similar structure to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. They all, for instance, establish an overarching

composition-world at the start of the novel, in which the narrator is seen in the present tense telling the story to some kind of readerly audience. As will become apparent, authors like Fletcher and Bosch take this a step further than Cowell by introducing explicit textual enactor versions of themselves (who are named as such) and playfully taking credit for the real time creation of the story as it unfolds; this, like Vonnegut, conflates the external author, internal author and narrator, and allows the figure embodying these teller roles to pass judgement on their own narrating process throughout the story. Cowell, on the other hand, does appear within the *Wizards* series, but in a much less obvious manner as she is apparently translating a pre-existing text; she is also unequivocally not the established narrator or internal author of the stories being told.

As with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the composition-world is the most consistent world/level throughout these novels, with the narrative constantly swapping back and forth between the main story-world and the extradiegetic level of narration. This is demonstrated in Figure 4.5, which illustrates the various narrative levels of my chosen texts. Like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, there is a dominant composition-world featuring an internal author or textual enactor who explains their reasons for writing the novel and offers commentary on their ongoing narrative; an embedded world which contains the main fiction (the diegetic level of characters); and constant metaleptic blurring of the narrative boundaries between these.

At a superficial level, this should go some way to illustrating that children's literature is by no means as simple as one might imagine purely in terms of its structure. However, as this analysis shall demonstrate, the complexities of such texts are much deeper and wide-ranging. For the purposes of this chapter, I intend to focus on the point of the novel when the real reader first comes into contact with the internal author/narrator in this composition-world. As with *Slaughterhouse-Five* this occurs at the very beginning of the novel; or, as in all of my primary texts, the prologue.



**Figure 4.5:** Narrative structure established in the prologues of novels by Bosch, Fletcher and Cowell; dashed line (- - -) illustrates external boundary of text.

#### 4.4) Prologues

Gavins' application of Text World Theory in relation to an acclaimed postmodern novel like *Slaughterhouse-Five* exposes a number of parallels between Vonnegut's novel and the selection of children's texts examined in this thesis. The introduction – and subsequent emphasis – of a composition-world which features a textual enactor or, following Currie's terminology, an internal author is by far the most prevalent of these similarities. After all, it is this composition-world which frames the rest of the diegetic story and from which the OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR (Waugh, 1984) intrudes upon their own narrated story and speaks directly to the reader outside the text.

In my chosen novels, this omnipresent composition-world is first introduced in the form of a prologue. As defined by *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2019), a prologue is simply 'a preface or introduction to a literary work. In a dramatic work, the term describes a speech, often in verse, addressed to the audience by one or more of the actors at the opening of a play'. Often prologues are used to explain events prior to the beginning of the story, providing some necessary background information that will prove useful for those engaging in the narrative. They typically exist outside the central narrative – much like the composition-worlds discussed above – and, in drama especially, they are frequently addressed to the audience.

Although *Slaughterhouse-Five* launches straight in with 'Chapter 1', the texts I am considering here instead establish their equivalent text-world structures in an opening prologue. This is where readers meet the figure who will be telling them the story – whether that be a seemingly more conventional character-narrator, as in Cowell, or a textual enactor/internal author, as with Bosch and Fletcher – and where each narrator, in turn, begins to address the reader directly.

Perhaps this is where the target readership of these texts becomes more obvious. Although the overall structure is just as complex as something like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it is important to remember that the target audience of these children's books are inevitably going to be less experienced readers. This in no way

detracts from what they can handle – or what they deserve to be exposed to within literature – but sometimes it is necessary for authors to give child-readers a helping hand, so to speak. The composition-world exists outside the central narrative and so, by deliberately introducing the extradiegetic level of narration within a prologue, this helps to accentuate the distinct narrative boundaries between the composition-world and diegetic story-world. Of course, those boundaries will later be broken and blurred by the texts' respective overt narrators, but it is important that they are established properly first so that child-readers can more easily distinguish between them and thus identify those blurs when they happen.

This is when the physical aspects of a published book – especially those peritextual features that relate to how elements are positioned on the page (Genette & Maclean, 1991) – prove particularly useful in demarcating narrative boundaries. For instance, chapter titles are textually referential and offer 'explicit "signposting"' (Stockwell, 2002: 46) within the pages of a novel. As Macrae (2020: 50) similarly comments: 'A chapter title fundamentally means "*This* chapter is titled" (i.e. "the segment of text which immediately follows this heading is titled")' and so helps orient the reader in relation to the words on the page. By establishing the composition-world within the prologue and not within 'Chapter 1', children's authors are able to begin their complex structural construction safely outside the main story-world, thus avoiding any confusion on the part of their younger readers.

It is testament to children's abilities that readers can then accept, learn and understand that any subsequent switches from the diegetic level to the composition-world tend not to be signposted as explicitly. Bosch, for instance, begins numbering his chapters consecutively regardless of whether they are at the diegetic or extradiegetic level after the initial prologue – although, for the most part, he does keep the two narrative levels distinct, as shall be shown later (section 4.5.2). Fletcher is even less binary in his display, often just changing font (in addition to a variety of linguistic cues) to show that it is the voice of the internal author coming through from the composition-world; again, though, this is because he has already

done the metaphorical heavy-lifting in the prologue at the start of the book in order to make readers aware of the levels of his narration.

In this regard, Cowell is potentially the outlier simply because she does not have an explicit version of herself acting as textual enactor in the dominant composition-world. Although it is later revealed that she is supposedly translating these stories into English – and so would automatically have some say on the narrative voice established as it is being filtered through her – for the most part readers are led to believe that her *Wizards* stories are being narrated by an entirely separate figure. Although this narrator's voice does intrude upon the main story-world, predominantly indicated through the use of the first-person pronoun and an obvious change in tense (and font), they are mainly relegated to the prologue and epilogue of each book. This is because Cowell's *Wizards* books borrow more from the tradition of oral fairy tales and folk stories. For this reason, although the prologue still carefully establishes some form of composition-world, it exists more for metanarrative purposes.

## **4.5) Analysis**

### **4.5.1) Cressida Cowell**

I shall now illustrate the above frameworks in practice, starting with what appears to be the most ordinary – that is to say the least extreme – narratorial role created by the three authors examined in this thesis: Cressida Cowell. The following extract begins the prologue in *The Wizards of Once*:

#### **(4.i)**

Once there was Magic.

It was a long, long time ago, in a British Isles so old it did not know it was the British Isles yet, and the Magic lived in the dark forests.

Perhaps you feel that you know what a dark forest looks like.

Well, I can tell you right now that you don't.

(Cowell, 2017b: 11)

From the very beginning, readers are placed firmly in the world of *storytelling*. The phrase 'Once there was...' is an instantly recognisable marker of fiction that triggers the reader's schematic knowledge of fairy tales and stories, perhaps also indicating that this book is likely to feature some of the well-known generic elements too: an adventure, magic, a happily-ever-after ending, and so on. (The extent to which *The Wizards of Once* actually does feature these stock fairy tale characteristics is another question entirely; the point here is that the opening line primes the reader to *expect* a traditional fairy tale.) This is solidified in the following sentence, 'It was a long, long time ago', which likewise elicits the reader's schematic knowledge of traditional tales.

The first two sentences, therefore, establish the storytelling process, but from a purely external perspective. It appears to be told in the simple past by an unidentified, possibly omniscient narrator without any reference to the reader at all. However, this all changes by the third sentence: 'Perhaps you feel that you know what a dark forest looks like'. The tone becomes much more conversational, moving into the simple present and introducing the second-person pronoun. This is a prime example of Herman's (1994, 1997, 2002) doubly deictic 'you' which simultaneously indexes an audience within the narrative – an intradiegetic narratee – and 'an entity – that is, a reader – actual or at least actualisable in our world and *eo ipso* more or less virtual in the world of the narrative' (1994: 380). As he explained when coining the term:

[O]n some occasions *you* functions as a cue for superimposing two or more deictic roles, one internal to the discourse situation represented in and/or through the diegesis and the other(s) external to that discourse situation. [...] Arguably, a discourse model that accommodates doubly deictic *you* will (on occasion) assign *both* virtuality *and* actuality to the entity or entities indexed



by narrative *you*. Or, to put the point another way, double deixis is a name for the ontological interference pattern produced by two or more interacting spatiotemporal frames – none of which can be called primary or basic relative to the other(s) – set more or less prominently into play when we read fictions written in the second person.

(Herman, 1994: 381)

Chapter 5 considers the use of the second-person as a way of implicating the reader in more detail, but this double deixis produces an ‘ontological hesitation’ (Herman, 1994: 392) that encodes both fictionalised or horizontal address to a story-world participant *and* apostrophic or vertical address to the extrafictional audience reading the text. Often, as Phelan (1994) explains, ‘[w]hen the second-person address to a narratee-protagonist both overlaps with and differentiates itself from an address to actual readers, those readers will simultaneously occupy the positions of addressee and observer’ (351). Not only does this invite the real reader to step into the discourse, fulfilling the narratee role inherently opened up by the presence of ‘you’ (McHale, 1987), but it also suggests that ‘you’ must be being addressed *by* someone else.

Readers become more aware of the presence of Cowell’s *Wizards* narrator as extract (4.i) continues. The narrating persona is referenced in the first-person as ‘I’ when they comment, ‘Well, I can tell you right now that you don’t’ in the fourth sentence. The verb ‘tell’ strengthens the new oral quality of the narration, indicating that the reader and narrator are involved in a shared language event, with metaleptic address occurring from the composition-world to the real reader outside the text. This is supported by the oral discourse marker ‘well’ and the modal adverb ‘perhaps’, which allows the narrator to cast doubt on the real reader’s knowledge of dark forests.

This is taken a step further through the use of the perception verb ‘feel’ as this puts the reader firmly in the action seat of the sentence – albeit placed there entirely (and cleverly) by the narrator. Prior to this moment, readers may not have

ever given much thought as to ‘what a dark forest looks like’, but suddenly they are being told that they do, in fact, feel as if they already have this knowledge; they may now even take umbrage with the fact that the narrator seems to doubt them. This is all put into the reader’s head by the narrator, but it forces the reader to begin thinking about what they *do* imagine a dark forest would look like – only to be told that whatever they are picturing is wrong a sentence later. As the prologue progresses, the narrator continues to describe the dark forest – and, later, the history of the wizards and warriors who lived there – but a lot of it is initially established in contrast to whatever mental image readers have already been encouraged to conjure: e.g. ‘These were forests darker than you would believe possible’ or ‘they stretched as far in every direction as you can possibly imagine’ (Cowell, 2017b: 11). Although still very much in the receptor role of the storytelling process, this efficiently brings the reader into the world-building and construction of the story and allows individuals’ imaginations to run free, which is particularly key in children’s literature (Jones, 2021; Leland et al., 2023; McGill-Franzen & Ward, 2018; Willett et al., 2013).

This involvement of the reader through the second-person pronoun also creates an oral quality within the text, the addressing of ‘you’ naturally indicating the presence of a speaker, usually ‘I’, as well. This simulated level of orality in written texts – that is, when there is an overt, oral narratorial persona doing the telling – is commonly linked to *skaz*, a term most associated with the Russian Formalists after Boris Eǰxenbaum’s 1918 essay, ‘The Illusion of *Skaz*’. Unlike conventional first-person narratives which address no one in particular, *skaz* narratives feature a narrator who ‘addresses the tale to some audience, whose presence is linguistically reflected in the tale itself’ (Banfield, 1982: 172).

Importantly, *skaz* narratives offer a ‘form of narrative prose which, in vocabulary, syntax, and choice of speech rhythms, displays an orientation towards the narrator’s oral speech’ (Eǰxenbaum, 1975: 214).

This is seen in abundance in Cowell’s novels, particularly in her *Wizards* series. The overt storytelling nature introduced in the prologue perfectly satisfies

the oral tone typical of *skaz* narration and, even when ‘you’ fades into the background when readers leave the prologue and enter the main story-world of the text, ‘the seed is planted that we are (or someone is) listening to a voice telling a story directly, in real time’ (Parker, 2018: 100). Combining this oral quality with the ostentatiously fairy tale-esque opening and encouragement of the reader to imagine the type of magical land common in fantasy stories creates the mental picture of a shared audience gathered round a campfire, for instance, listening to a real-life storyteller recounting a folk tale. From the very opening lines of the novel, the reader is aligned with ‘you’, thus allowing them to experience the novel as if ‘I’ is talking to them directly.

However, although the sense of an ‘I’-narrator telling this story to ‘you’ is maintained throughout the prologue, there are very few references to personal pronouns overall and the narration quickly swaps back into a more traditional third-person, past tense style that matches the opening sentences of extract (4.i). It starts to feel very standard and ‘story-like’ until the end of the prologue, when the presence of the narrator is made known again.

Firstly this occurs with an obvious swap back to the present tense and readers are clearly repositioned in the composition-world hearing the voice of the ‘I’-narrator:

**(4.ii)**

This is the story of a young boy Wizard and a young girl Warrior who have been taught since birth to hate each other like poison.

The story begins with the discovery of A GIGANTIC BLACK FEATHER.

Could it be that the Wizards and the Warriors have been so busy fighting *each other* that they have not noticed the return of an ancient evil?

Could that feather really be the feather of a Witch?

(Cowell, 2017b: 14)

Although this extract is devoid of any explicit linguistic reference to ‘I’, the presence of the overt narrator is felt throughout. Not only does it return to the simple present, but the use of proximal deixis in ‘this is the story’ indicates that the reader and narrator are meant to exist within the same language event, on the same ontological plane. Multiple references to ‘the story’ also draw the reader’s attention to the storytelling process that they have been pulled into, although I would suggest that here it is a *metanarrative* reference rather than metafictional (that is, it makes it clear that this story is being told to an audience by a narrator rather than explicitly highlighting the artifice of the overall book as a work of fiction). This follows the oral quality of the narration thus far and is corroborated by the use of interrogatives that imply epistemic uncertainty on the part of the narrator; of course, the narrator already knows the answers, but asking these questions involves the reader by encouraging them to imagine where this story might be going.

The following page has a hand-drawn illustration of a large black feather with the question, ‘Could this really be the feather of a witch?’ displayed in a hand-written font (Cowell, 2017b: 15). Again, the interrogative invites the reader to engage in conversation with the narrator – even though they have no possible way of replying – and the demonstrative ‘this’ (as opposed to ‘that’ at the end of extract 4.ii) signifies the audience’s supposed proximity to the teller of the story as the feather is meant to exist in a shared space. The hand-written font also plays into this as it deviates from the standard serif typography that the ‘story’ part of the book is published in, and indicates that this is the narrator butting in to share their own words and thoughts outside the diegetic story-world.

This becomes more apparent on the very last page of the prologue, which reads as follows:

**(4.iii)**

I am a character

in this story...

who sees everything,  
knows everything,  
I will not tell you  
who I am  
see if you can GUESS.

The story begins here.

(Don't get lost. These woods are dangerous.)

(Cowell, 2017b: 16)

As with the previous page, this entire section is displayed in the same hand-written font (thus also satisfying Waugh's (1984) *TYPOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT*), so readers know from visual clues alone that this is the voice of the narrator. More than that, however, are the linguistic clues. For a start, there is frequent reference to 'I', established in contrast to 'you' – the latter of whom is invited to 'guess' the identity of 'I' – and the whole passage is narrated in the present tense. This is as far as readers can possibly get at this stage from the main story-world of the *Wizards* series and they are placed firmly in the composition-world with the narrator, the teller of the story, who again makes metanarrative comments about '*this story*' which '*begins here*'.

All things considered, while certainly interesting, this would not be out of the ordinary in a book that more than satisfactorily deploys the commonplace postmodern techniques now used in mainstream contemporary children's literature (McCallum, 1996). However, this narrator takes things a step further by announcing that they themselves are 'a *character* in this story'. Instantly readers know that this makes the narrator an entirely fictional being (an important distinction to note in comparison to Fletcher and Bosch). This is somewhat at odds with the

metanarrative comments – as opposed to metafictional ones – seen throughout the prologue which, as Fludernik (2009: 61) says, usually ‘are taken by the reader as proof of authenticity’. To discover that the narrator *cannot* be real because they are themselves a character in what is so clearly a fictional story – a fictionality which has been reinforced from the very beginning of the prologue through the use of stock fairy tale phrases – completely conflates the teller roles on Booth’s diagram (Figure 4.1).

Similarly, the reader in the real world has already stepped part way into the role of ‘you’, the narratee in the composition-world (see Chapter 5). By the time they reach the end of the prologue, the real reader is even more aligned with this narratee through further use of proximal deixis (*‘this story’, ‘these woods’, ‘here’*) in addition to imperatives such as ‘see if you can guess’ and ‘don’t get lost’. This alignment begins to blur the external boundary between reality and fiction, allowing the real reader to exist simultaneously in the real world and as the ‘you’ who is being addressed in the composition-world by someone who is, by their own admission, also a diegetic character.

What is noteworthy about the *Wizards* series, particularly compared to the other texts analysed in this thesis, is that, while the composition-world overarches the diegetic story, the ‘I’-narrator does not intrude on the main story too much. In the prologue and epilogue of each book, this character-narrator is relatively chatty and speaks to ‘you’ about the process of telling the story as well as providing further opportunities for the reader to guess who is narrating:

**(4.iv)**

Have you guessed which of the characters in the story I am yet?

I could be any of them, Wish or Xar, or Caliburn-the-raven-who-has-lived-many-lifetimes, or Bodkin the Assistant-Bodyguard-who-wished-he-was-a-hero, or Crusher-the-dreamy-Longstepper-High-Walker-giant, or one of the sprites, or the hairy fairies, ANY of the characters at all. (Not Eleanor Rose or the werewolf – I couldn’t be either of THEM, because they weren’t in the first

book, so that would be cheating, and the narrator can be tricky, but they should not actually cheat, otherwise it's extremely annoying for the reader.)

I still cannot tell you who I am, I'm afraid, for as you can see, the story has not yet ended.

(Cowell, 2019: 455)

As with the previous extracts, (4.iv) is fully in the composition-world. It is told using the simple present and the oral quality is clear through the use of first- and second-person pronouns, simulating a dialogue through metaleptic transgressions, in addition to the opening interrogative to the reader, conversational rhythms and colloquialisms that are typical of *skaz* (Schmid, 2013). There are metafictional references to 'the story' and 'the first book', reminding the reader of the constructedness of the novel they are reading, and the deictic references in 'still' and 'yet' signify the shared proximity of the narrator and 'you'. I also particularly enjoy the extended section in which the 'I'-narrator explains first who they could be but then, more importantly, who they could *not* be, admitting that it would be unfair to make the reader guess their identity if they were not actually present in the story. This involves a further metafictional reminder regarding the artifice of the story and the role of the reader in the reading process.

Again, however, this full switch to the composition-world is predominantly only seen in the prologues and epilogues of the *Wizards* series. While the 'I'-narrator does intrude upon the diegetic story-world from the composition-world, it is usually only to offer parenthetical clarification such as in, 'The boy's name was Xar (which is pronounced 'Zar' – I don't know why, spelling is weird) and he really, really, *really* should not have been there' (Cowell, 2019: 13), or to maintain the storyteller voice by making generic-yet-seemingly-wise comments that indicate a slight tone shift from the main narration of the story-world, e.g. 'Ah, being a parent is so much harder than it looks. And just because you are old, does not mean that you do not make mistakes' (Cowell, 2019: 73) or 'If you want to sneak away quietly from a heavily guarded mine such as this one, you really shouldn't set fire to the gorse bush

that is hiding you' (Cowell, 2020b: 53). There is less explicit conversation with the reader (with 'you' typically referring more to a passive audience member rather than actively encouraging a response; see Chapter 5) and these narratorial asides usually pass briefly.

This is one of the biggest differences between Cowell's novels and those by Fletcher and Bosch. While all three authors use their respective 'I'-narrators in much the same way, positioning them conspicuously within a tangible level of narration in the overt act of narrating, Cowell's narrators are always diegetic characters who are telling a story at some point after it has occurred. In the case of the *Wizards* series, that narrator is a secondary character who – despite their own assertions about narrators being tricky – is only introduced as a diegetic character in the third book and definitely is not one of the main protagonists either; in Cowell's other famous series, *How to Train Your Dragon*, the 'I'-narrator is an adult version of the main protagonist, Hiccup (thus making him autodiegetic, using Genette's terminology, as opposed to the heterodiegetic narrator in the *Wizards* series). Neither, however, has any connection to Cowell and both are entirely fictional beings.

Bosch and Fletcher, on the other hand, introduce (fictional) versions of themselves as the 'I'-narrator in the process of writing their respective books. Referring back to Currie's distinction between narrative-making and narrative-telling, we know that the author (narrative-maker) and narrator (narrative-teller) are entirely separate beings. Yet it becomes a key tenet of their novels that, supposedly, the real author is also the one communicating with the real reader as they visibly create the book in real time; hence why their narrators can be considered internal authors (Currie, 2010) *and* textual enactor versions of their real-life counterparts. This is cemented by having 'Pseudonymous Bosch' and 'Tom Fletcher' as the printed names on the covers of their books too.

As the narrator of Cowell's *Wizards* series is a diegetic character who has taken on the role of the storyteller at the composition level (located temporally after



the events being narrated), it is clear that that 'I'-narrator can in no way be connected to Cowell herself and the child-reader understands this. However, paratextually, it is Cowell's name on the cover of the book and it is to her that the writing is credited; she is, after all, the person who literally invented the story. The narrative and its narrator are both fictitious and the overall novel – and wider series – is an artificial product created by the real-life Cowell. Nevertheless, following the pattern (and internal logic) established by both Fletcher and Bosch, attributing the novel to someone in no way connected to the actual story kind of breaks the magic.

The question that inevitably rises is how did this story reach the reader and physically make it into book form? In the cases of Bosch and Fletcher the answer is easy: they purport to have written their respective books themselves and are frequently seen in the writing process in the composition-world, and so it follows that they should also appear as both narrator *and* published name on the book's cover as they are both narrative-makers (in their fictional/contextual version of the real world) and narrative-tellers (within the story). Meanwhile Cowell is unequivocally not the diegetic character narrating the *Wizards* books and yet still takes ownership of the stories in the real world nonetheless.

On the one hand, this makes perfect sense because she is, after all, the real author and sole narrative-maker and this is something of which the real reader is equally aware. On the other, as seen in extract (4.i) it is part of the contextual construction of *The Wizards of Once* that the events and characters described are a real part of history: that at some point in Britain's past there really were tribes of wizards and warriors battling each other or, indeed, teaming up to defeat evil witches. While readers may put their knowledge of real-world history aside when reading fantasy to achieve full enjoyment of the genre through a logical suspension of disbelief, it is fair to say that magic has *never* existed within the British Isles – despite the narrator's claim to the contrary.

However, the lines between historical fact and fiction begin to blur even further when at the start of the third book in the series, *Knock Three Times* (2020a),

there is a note from Cowell herself before the prologue. In this note she introduces herself as a 'Lost Language Expert' who is translating *real* stories:

**(4.v)**

A long time ago, a young girl exploring the back of a cave somewhere in the British Isles discovered these papers, known as the 'Wizard books', hidden behind a large stone. Nobody has ever been able to read them, for they were written so very far away in the distant past that they used a vocabulary and a script that has never been seen before.

I have spent many happy years translating the papers of Hiccup the Viking from Old Norse into English. So I was excited to accept this even greater challenge, for these Wizard books were written in such a dark age that the language they used has been completely lost to us over the years.

After many years of study I have finally cracked the code of this lost language. And in doing so, I have uncovered something TRULY extraordinary.

Believe the unbelievable.

Every fairy story you have ever read has its basis in some truth.

It was not only dragons living in the distant darkness. Dragons were only a very, very small part of it.

*THIS was a time of MAGIC*

(Cowell, 2020a: vii)

The above note is the only time in the entire *Wizards* series that the reader has any kind of explicit access to Cowell herself. She is present here as an 'I'-figure, but one who is distinctly separate to the actual 'I'-narrator of the books (that is, the narrating persona in the composition-world whom we know is also a diegetic character).

However, Cowell's (fictional) role as translator of the 'I'-narrator's original story introduces another layer of narration encircling the composition-world readers have become accustomed to, for Cowell-as-translator is ultimately deciding what words get used and how the story is presented on the page. Thus the main 'I'-narrator's composition-world is embedded within – and mediated through – Cowell's own composition (or, at least, editing) level in which she is translating the stories. That being said, intrusions from Cowell's composition-world are infrequent and tend to come in the form of footnotes which provide additional commentary or information from her editing present, e.g. 'Witches speak the same language as we do, but each individual word is back to front' (2020a: 9; see also Chapter 5).

Of course, the translation aspect (and the anecdote about these books being found in a cave) is just as fictional as the main story-world in the *Wizards* series, although it offers an insight into the supposed motivation and background for writing these books in a similar way to Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as discussed earlier. Ultimately, it allows Cowell to suggest some form of authenticity for the story she's created. Logic dictates that everything that happens in *The Wizards of Once* is fictional: wizards, witches and warriors are not real races of people, nor have they ever existed in Britain; there's no such thing as sprites or giants or sentient spoons. And yet by providing a fictionalised background for the story audiences are now reading, Cowell is able to imply some level of factuality to these people and events. It becomes part of the story that these characters and their adventures are a real-life segment of Britain's past and have simply been forgotten by the history books, and that the magical, fantastical elements described in the *Wizards* series are just as real and historically valid as the Romans, Tudors or Vikings.

Speaking of Vikings, the inherently metafictional, intertextual reference in (4.v) to Cowell's other well-known series, *How to Train Your Dragon*, is particularly of note. Much like the *Wizards* books, the main story-world of Cowell's *Dragon* series is narrated in the third-person and past tense by a seemingly omniscient narrator. *How to Train Your Dragon* also features many of the same commonly used

postmodern techniques, such as stories within stories, playfulness with typography, and – importantly – an overt ‘I’-narrator at the composition level who is in control of the storytelling process. However, the ‘I’-narrator of the *Dragon* series is none other than the main character, Hiccup, who is writing a memoir of his youth now that he is an adult; readers are told this at the very start of the first book, in which he explains to ‘you’, the reader/narratee, that he ‘will tell this true story from [his] childhood’ (Cowell, 2017a: 15). The ‘truth’ here relies on the reader’s willingness to connect the character of Hiccup with the real-life history of the Vikings, just with the addition of dragons and other mythical creatures that somehow have supposedly been forgotten from our history books.

This claim of truthfulness is imperative both in the *Dragon* series and – by extension – *The Wizards of Once* too, especially given that part of Cowell’s identity as translator of the latter rests on the validity of her previous experience translating the ‘true’ story in the *Dragon* series. Although it is not mentioned in the first *How to Train Your Dragon* book, Cowell likewise positions herself not in the role of author, but as a fictional translator. All the words of the story are therefore filtered through her, but she is (supposedly) not directly responsible for the initial creation of them. The real reader is obviously aware of Cowell as the real (and implied) author, and so her presence as ‘involved with the narrative but not the original narrative-maker’ makes sense within the context of the stories, thus allowing her to purport the truthfulness of what happens within her books without needing the clearly fictional events to be tied to her as the sole narrative-maker in the real world.

A similar effect is established in the texts of both Bosch and Fletcher, although, as will become apparent, they are more heavily involved with the creation of the text themselves at the composition level and end up blending the roles of narrative-maker and narrative-teller more ostentatiously. Cowell, meanwhile, is (eventually) made visible but deliberately keeps herself separate from the ‘I’-narrator of her texts, both in terms of Hiccup telling his own story in the *Dragon* series and (for the most part) the unidentified narrator in *The Wizards of Once*.

Instead, the apparent omniscience of the 'I'-narrator in the *Wizards* books only raises more questions about the narrator's identity, especially as it must take an incredibly powerful being to reach from the diegetic level of the story into the mind of a fellow character to focalise much of the narrative through the protagonists' own eyes, thoughts and feelings. For example the line, '*I'll never forgive myself, either*, thought Wish sorrowfully to herself, as the enchanted objects tried to cheer her up' (Cowell, 2020b: 57) is focalised through Wish, one of the series' two main protagonists, with clear access to her direct, internal thoughts. This is something the 'I'-narrator would not normally have access to unless they were truly omniscient, nor is the focalisation wholly consistent to one particular viewpoint as just a few lines later it swaps to convey the thoughts of the sprite Squeezjoos: '*His brain clouded over again. Iss go back to my Masster the Chiwgink*, thought Squeezjoos, *but the Master is going to be SSSSSO angry with Squeezjoos*' (Cowell, 2020b: 57).

Of course, as readers know from the prologue of each book in the *Wizards* series, they are meant to guess who the narrator really is, so perhaps all of this works in the audience's favour as an extra clue. Indeed, it is not until the *epilogue* of the fourth – and final – *Wizards* book that the identity of the narrator is at last revealed and, prior to that point, they are simply called 'The Unknown Narrator' whenever they need to be addressed by the reader, for instance when signing off metaleptic letters written to 'you'.

That final epilogue begins like so: 'ANYONE WHO HAS SKIPPED TO THIS EPILOGUE BEFORE READING THE REST OF THE STORY IS A BIG CHEAT AND SHOULD GO RIGHT BACK TO CHAPTER ONE OR I WILL GET REALLY QUITE SHIRTY' (Cowell, 2020b: 377). Again the oral quality of the narrative is clear, as is the narrator's controlling hand in directing the reader and instructing them to follow the rules and conventions of fiction. The idea that the reader would become 'a big cheat' by skipping ahead borrows from playground language (Opie, 1996; Willett et al., 2013), while the idea of the narrator getting 'quite shirty' cements the colloquial *skaz* quality found in the narrator's voice within the composition-world.

As the epilogue continues, the 'I'-narrator concentrates on the concept of stories and why they mean so much to people. This relates to something said by one of the diegetic characters earlier in the book and thus offers the reader one last clue as to the narrator's identity.

**(4.vi)**

For this has been a story in search of its own narrator, who did not even know that she had got lost in the wildwoods.

I am the narrator of this story.

And my name is... *PERDITA*.

Yes, I bet that surprised you. HA! Shake me by the paw, and admit that you were startled.

[...]

So if you guessed the narrator was *Caliburn*... and I bet a lot of you did, you clever Readers... you were very nearly right. (But not quite.) For I am also the raven, the trickster, and Caliburn is my twin.

Caliburn looked like he started the story, didn't he? But it was me all along, hidden, Magic and invisible in the quiet still darkness of the sheltering trees, before I stepped forward and revealed myself to myself.

I am sorry if that is tricky. But a story *IS* tricky.

(Cowell, 2020b: 379-380)

As above, (4.vi) repeats the same techniques to cement it in the composition-world. It is told in the simple present by an 'I'-narrator who speaks directly to the reader, not just through 'you' but also with imperatives such as 'shake' and 'admit' and the tag question 'didn't he'. This dialogicity reinforces the oral quality of the narrative, as does the vocative reference to 'you clever Readers'.

Interestingly, the reminder of magic and the fact that Perdita has managed to keep herself 'hidden' and 'invisible' perhaps goes some way to explaining her relative omniscience for the rest of the series. Access to the protagonists' innermost thoughts and feelings is something that occurs in the works of all three of my chosen authors and so, equally, there may just be a practical element to it. After all, the overt narrator – whether a fictional character, secretive pseudonym or textual version of the real author – needs a story to tell and it would be pretty boring for that to happen without ever knowing what was going on in the protagonists' minds, especially in a children's book! For that reason, I shall move away from the concept (and possible difficulties with) omniscience as I proceed to analyse the narrators in books by Fletcher and Bosch.

For now, in summary, the consistent oral quality of the 'I'-narrator in the *Wizards* series fully positions them as the storyteller in direct communication with an audience at the composition level of the text. They – or rather *she* – visibly pass the story onto the reader and so are clearly in the role of narrative-teller. However, the events of the story are presented as factual rather than fiction, as if everything being described really did happen within history and the narrator is now simply recounting the tale as truthfully as possible. In this way, the 'I'-narrator also acts as a fictional narrative-maker in that they are choosing how to convey the story to the reader, hence why I am happy to refer to the level of their narration as the composition-world even if they are never seen visibly writing the book audiences are now reading (as is the case with Fletcher and Bosch).

Logically the role of narrative-maker is Cowell's alone, yet the contextual claim both from the internal author *and* from Cowell herself as translator/editor about the truthfulness of these books enforces the authentic telling of what happened – even when deployed alongside obvious markers of fiction that trigger the reader's schematic knowledge of fairy tales. The fact that Cowell makes herself a tangible part of the story as a translator (albeit at a higher level of narration in which both the main story-world and Perdita's composition-world are embedded, though still just as fictional) proves beyond doubt that, at least within the context of

the story, Cowell is not meant to be considered the narrative-teller (Perdita) or the sole narrative-maker either. Instead, the reader can fictionally cast Perdita, the ‘Unnamed Narrator’, in that role at the composition level of the text. Although the overall effect is the same, this is one of the biggest differences between the narrator in Cowell’s texts and the narrators created by Bosch and Fletcher, both of whom introduce versions of their real-life authorial counterparts into their respective texts instead.

#### **4.5.2) Tom Fletcher**

As outlined in Chapter 1, Fletcher’s inclusion in this project is of particular note given that he is, unlike Bosch and Cowell, a *celebrity* author. Again, this is not to undermine his status or abilities as a children’s author, but rather to showcase how complex postmodern and metafictional devices have become common enough in mainstream contemporary children’s literature that even newer authors, who might come to this commercial publishing field with little to no prior writing experience, are now deploying them readily. Certainly, Fletcher’s books feature some of the most ostentatious uses of typical postmodern and metafictional techniques that I have seen in *any* children’s texts. The confidence with which these devices are implemented has visibly increased with each publication and, with this in mind, I shall begin this section of my analysis with the opening lines of Fletcher’s debut middle grade novel, *The Christmasaurus*:

#### **(4.vii)**

This story starts like all good stories do, *a long time ago*. Not just a long time ago, but a very, *very*, **very** long time ago. Squillions of years ago, in fact. Long before your granny and your grandad were born. Before there were any human beings at all. Before cars and aeroplanes, even before there was the internet, there was something even better... DINOSAURS!

(Fletcher, 2017: 1)



As with Cowell's *Wizards* books, *The Christmasaurus* begins by establishing a storytelling event within a prologue. The proximal reference in 'this story' indicates that the teller/narrator and receptor/narratee supposedly exist on the same ontological plane, which is further reinforced by the use of 'you' and 'I' pronouns as the prologue continues, thus initiating a dialogue between the narrator and reader through metaleptic address from the composition-world. Furthermore, by deliberately italicising the phrase 'a long time ago' and suggesting that these recognisable words are a symbol of a *good* story, Fletcher – much like Cowell – triggers the reader's schematic knowledge of storytelling and likewise primes audiences to expect a traditional fictional tale.

Of course, this is almost instantly broken by the qualification that this story does not, as with most fairy tales, take place purely 'in the past', but rather much longer ago than readers could possibly be imagining based on their existing knowledge of fairy tales and stories. The font changes to highlight each individual word in the phrase 'very, *very*, **very**', becoming increasingly emphatic to stress how far back in time the audience really needs to go – although all the while keeping the traditional 'long time ago' format to reinforce expectations that this is going to be a *good* story that fulfils all the familiar beats of fictional tales already known (and presumably enjoyed) by the target readership. The time frame of this prologue is finally established, albeit in a rather tongue-in-cheek manner, through the colloquial 'squillions' and the idea that it happened 'long before your granny or grandad were born'. The latter phrase here recognises the average age of the target audience and jokingly suggests that the birth of their grandparents might be the furthest back a child-reader can go on their imaginary historical timeline.

The use of the second-person possessive further establishes the dialogic tone of the prologue, indicating that the teller of the story is aware of his audience and is addressing them directly. As shall be examined in Chapter 5, the presence of second-person pronouns in the text is a key element of postmodern fiction as it conflates Herman's doubly deictic 'you', invites the real reader to step into the gap

opened in the discourse (McHale, 1987) and also maintains the oral quality of a story being told *by* someone *to* someone else.

The prologue of *The Christmasaurus* continues to make occasional reference to 'you', often alongside metanarrative comments about the teller's role in communicating the story. For instance, lines such as, 'I'd like to tell you about two very special dinosaurs' (Fletcher, 2017: 2) and 'Now, I bet you're thinking that the egg was crushed instantly, right? Well – smartyclogs cleverpants – it wasn't, actually!' (2017: 7) encourage a dialogue between the narrator and the reader, as well as perpetuating the oral quality of narration. The narrator's own awareness of his role in the storytelling process is also made apparent through such phrases as, 'I know this sounds hard to believe, but it's definitely true, because this is a book and books don't lie' (Fletcher, 2017: 2).

As with *The Wizards of Once*, readers are encouraged to believe the events of Fletcher's novel and it becomes clear that the purported veracity of this story is again a fundamental part of the overall context. The narrator even acknowledges that it is going to be 'hard to believe', addressing the unlikeliness of the events and the real reader's potential unwillingness to accept them as true, but still doubles down on the factuality of the book, adding the emphatic 'definitely' to his claim.

I also particularly enjoy the rather tongue-in-cheek statement that readers should believe the narrator 'because this is a book and books don't lie'. For a start, there is an obvious metafictional reference to the physical book held in the reader's hand, particularly through the proximally deictic 'this', which reminds the audience of the overall artifice of the novel. More than that, however, is the idea that 'books don't lie'. Perhaps this is indicative of the kinds of texts that child-readers might be familiar with through their education at this point: textbooks, informational leaflets, atlases and other non-fiction books (Heeks, 1996). Certainly in those cases, books would indeed be expected to be factual as they are designed to teach their readers and pass on information.

Still, it is perhaps more likely that this is the narrator trying to play on the reader's expectations of the story and prevent any doubt on their part. Compare how Cowell referred to (obviously fictional) fairy tales in her translator's note for the *Wizards* series: 'Believe the unbelievable. Every fairy story you have ever read has its basis in some truth' (2020a: vii). Even if these fairy tales have moved away from their supposedly 'factual' origins through time and repeated storytelling, readers are nevertheless encouraged to believe even that which sounds entirely unbelievable in Cowell's novels.

Fletcher's *The Christmasaurus* is about a dinosaur that has survived to the present day and ends up working for Santa (also a fictional being, albeit one that the target readership may still believe in). It is the definition of unbelievable – or, at the very least, extremely unlikely. And yet the acknowledgement that the story will be 'hard to believe' and the claim that it is being written in a book and so must be real (for why else would an author waste their time recounting such outrageous events, presumably) establishes the narrator as a truth-teller. The mimetic, metaleptic communication established between the narrator and reader also contributes to this, privileging the composition-world as closer to the reader and therefore 'more real' (Macrae, 2020). In this way, from the very start of the prologue, the reader is encouraged to put their trust in what the narrator says and thus enters into conversation with them as a fellow interlocutor in the established language event.

Clearly it is going to be an important part of the story that readers engage with – and *believe* – the narrator in this way and so, for a successful reading of the novel, the narrator must establish the authenticity not just of the story they are telling, but also of themselves as narrative-teller at the very beginning. The prologue is the perfect place for this as it is a space reserved entirely for the voice of the extradiegetic narrator (in the first-person and simple present) and 'you', a narratee with whom the real reader quickly becomes aligned.

However, much like the start of Cowell's *Wizards* series, the use of 'I' and 'you' becomes relatively spaced out in this opening prologue of *The Christmasaurus*,

albeit only after firmly establishing the two interlocutors and the conversation between them at the very start. Instead, the main focus of the prologue here is introducing the backstory for the titular Christmasaurus and explaining the history of dinosaurs (which, by Fletcher's own admission, is much more exciting).

In fact, it is in the book's sequel – *The Christmasaurus and the Winter Witch* (2019) – that Fletcher's deft use of postmodern and metafictional techniques becomes more apparent. Consider the opening of that book instead, also in a prologue:

**(4.viii)**

This story starts like all good stories do, *a long time ago ...*

What do you mean, *that's how the first book started?* No, it isn't! OK, I'll check. Hang on...

Well, what do you know? You're right!

We can't have that. I'll change it.

How's this...

This story starts totally, completely, ginormously, differently to the first book, *a long time IN THE FUTURE!*

You didn't see *that* coming, did you, smarty-pants?

(Fletcher, 2019: 1)

A lot happens here in just a few short lines. Firstly, there is the intertextual reference to the previous book in the series with the use of the same opening line, not to mention the inherent metafictionality of even addressing that there is another book in the series to reference in the first place. As discussed earlier, Cowell also mentioned other books she had written, but this was used to establish and legitimise her fictional role as translator. Fletcher, instead, deliberately draws the reader's attention to the equal constructedness of both *Christmasaurus* novels,

therein further strengthening the voice of the internal author who is able to change what has just been written on the page.

The 'I'-narrator's chatty tone of voice adds to the humour throughout this, although it does rely on the reader having previously read *The Christmasaurus* in order to enjoy the full effect of the joke. If a reader comes to the sequel without knowing the first book, it will break the illusion of conversation when the internal author explains that 'you', the reader, are the one who noticed the repeated opening line.

This illusion of dialogue cements the idea of a shared language event between the internal author, 'I', and the reader, 'you'. Not only are these personal pronouns used throughout extract (4.viii), but the frequent deictic references – such as 'how's *this*' and 'you didn't see *that* coming' (the latter referring to the previous line of text that has been changed supposedly at the reader's insistence) – once again suggest that the narrator and reader are involved in a shared language event on the same ontological plane.

The dialogic quality of the composition-world is further cemented through the use of (admittedly one-sided) interrogatives, in which the narrator asks questions of the reader as if fully expecting a response. Although the real reader is unable to reply themselves, they effectively have words put into their mouth by the narrator, thus allowing for the implied back-and-forth interaction seen in extract (4.viii). This establishes a very conversational, oral tone in the narration, much like the *skaz* narrative style addressed in relation to Cowell's novels in the previous section. After all, not only are oral narratives typical of postmodern fiction (Fludernik, 2009), they also draw on a long-established oral tradition in storytelling, especially in relation to folk stories and fairy tales which would have originally been spoken rather than written down (Arizpe et al., 2010).

Returning to the concept of *skaz*, it is clear that simulated orality is a fundamental feature of such archetypal narratives. However, according to Schmid (2013), other characteristics include narratoriality, spontaneity, colloquialism,

naivety or clumsiness, and dialogicity. Extract (4.viii) displays all of these in abundance. It is undoubtedly oral as the 'I'-narrator explains his point of view through statements directed at 'you' and hints at a shared communicative space populated by 'we' (the reader/narratee and internal author/narrator); this also satisfies the dialogic quality described by Schmid. There are obvious uses of colloquialisms – such as 'ginormously' and 'smartypants' – and it is clearly meant to appear spontaneous as the narrator retracts what he has previously said (or, rather, written) and adapts the story going forward after making a mistake. In doing so, this perhaps also indicates a degree of naivety if one accepts that the narrator really did not intend to repeat himself verbatim and it is supposedly only at the encouragement of the reader that he goes to check the previous book.

That the narrator is willing to reference (and seemingly abandon his current narrative so he can go to find and inspect) the first book in the series further emphasises the metafiction on display here. This is solidified when one acknowledges that this narrator is not only the internal author of the text – visibly and spontaneously adapting what is on the page as he writes the novel in real time – but also a version of the external author too, therein blurring the boundary between fiction and reality.

For example, Fletcher begins his musical version of *The Christmasaurus* with a preface that introduces himself explicitly as the author: 'Hello-ho-ho, [i]t's Tom here, the oversized elf with silly glasses who wrote this book' (2017: i). He explains how it was music that inspired the story of *The Christmasaurus* in the first place and that, after publishing the original non-musical version of the book, he decided to write a soundtrack to go alongside it; the musical version then comes with an attached CD and has icons scattered throughout the book instructing readers when to play particular songs. Fletcher's typical narrative style is clear here, but this introduction exists outside even the composition-world so one might argue that the 'I'-narrator of the novel is still an entirely separate figure to this friendly, chatty authorial version of Fletcher.

This completely changes, however, with *The Creakers* (2018). The narrative structure is the same as Fletcher's *Christmasaurus* series: an overt 'I'-narrator who talks directly to the reader in the present tense and who intrudes upon the diegetic story-world with comments about the concurrent writing process and construction of the novel. For example:

**(4.ix)**

*Let's start on the day it all began.*

On the day it all began, Lucy Dungston woke up.

*Right. Well, that's a start, but it's not very exciting, is it? Let's try again.*

On the day it all began, Lucy Dungston woke up to a rather unusual sound...

*OK, that's a little better. Let's see what happens next...*

(Fletcher, 2018: 4)

There are two very distinct levels of narration on display here: the present tense, oral, *skaz* narration of the internal author at the composition level – represented through italicisation in (4.ix) – and the more traditional third-person, past tense references to the characters and events in the story-world. We know that the former can be attributed to the internal author because, as with *The Christmasaurus and the Winter Witch*, they are in control of the story and get to decide – or change – what is available to be read on the page. This again plays into the spontaneity and, perhaps, naivety of *skaz* narration, with the tag question, 'is it', and inherent plural suggested by 'let's' also contributing to an overall dialogic quality.

Interestingly, *The Creakers* is the only book by Fletcher in which the internal author is not introduced in a clearly delineated prologue. Instead, (4.ix) opens 'Chapter 1', with the earlier prologue focusing on setting the scene in the main story-world in the third-person and simple past (Fletcher, 2018: 1-3). It is assumed, therefore, that child-readers opening *The Creakers* will be so familiar with the usual style of Fletcher's writing that he does not need to spend time establishing his 'I'-

narrator in yet another prologue, but rather can bring in the internal author straight away as part of the creation of the story because audiences will already know to whom ‘I’ refers.

Of course, although it would be a relatively safe bet to assume that the ‘I’-narrator is a textual version of Fletcher himself – both internal and external authors having control over the text and a vested interest in telling it – readers still do not know this for sure. That is, at least not until part way through *The Creakers*. Fletcher had clearly become much more adept at deploying metalepsis by the time he wrote *The Creakers* and constantly has the internal author offering asides or commentary on what audiences are about to read from his position within the composition-world (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of these frequent metaleptic transgressions). One of these intrusions from the ‘I’-narrator at the composition level is particularly revealing:

**(4.x)**

Here we go. I told you this was going to happen. I warned you that Lucy would have to face the King. Don’t blame me. It’s not like I’m making this stuff up. If you didn’t go to the loo the last time I warned you, then now’s your last chance. No? You sure? Because, by reading on, you agree to the terms and conditions that I, Tom Fletcher, the author of this book, am not responsible if you pee your pants with fright in the next chapter.

(Fletcher, 2018: 261)

The simple present and purported dialogue between the narrator and the reader (as indicated by the use of interrogatives, proximal deictic reference to a shared communicative space in ‘Here we go’, and metafictional acknowledgement of ‘reading on’) puts (4.x) firmly in the composition-world and, seemingly, in close proximity to the real reader. It is also the first time Fletcher admits to being both the internal and external authors at a *textual* level. As seen with his preface to *The Christmasaurus* – and, additionally, his list of ‘Top 10 Things About Christmas’ (Fletcher, 2017: 362-366) or his letter to Santa at the end of *The Christmasaurus and the Winter Witch* – the



explicitly named voice of Fletcher-the-author is prevalent within the pages of his books, but always external to both the diegetic story-world *and* composition level. These sections are written in the same voice (and often tone) as the author's acknowledgements, for instance, and we know that an author's presence there does not equate to them being either the internal author or narrator of their own book.

However, by overtly declaring the identity of the internal author in *The Creakers*, it becomes clear that the 'I'-narrator in the process of narrating *all* of Fletcher's books is, in fact, a version of himself – that is, a 'textual enactor' (Gavins, 2013: 115; see also Emmott, 1997; Gavins, 2007) who exists at the level of narrative discourse within the text's composition-world. This then plays into a much wider metafictional effect. For a start, the fact that Fletcher simultaneously exists as the external author, internal author and narrator completely conflates Booth's teller roles. Crucially, the narrator's connection to a real-life figure means he cannot ever be considered a wholly fictional character-narrator, unlike in Cowell's *Wizards* series, nor does Fletcher ever appear as a character within his own diegetic story, unlike Bosch (see section 6.4). Instead, readers supplement their mental representation of the internal author with extrafictional knowledge of the real-life Fletcher and thus, when that same 'I'-narrator makes claims about the truthfulness of his clearly fictional texts, readers are encouraged to attribute the veracity of the story to Fletcher's real-life counterpart.

In addition to the examples discussed earlier, this is seen again in (4.x) where the internal author says: 'Don't blame me. It's not like I'm making this stuff up'. If this were just an arbitrary internal author, readers might accept that, while these events are contextually true to the narrator of the book, they are in fact fictional overall. That the internal author is meant to be a version of the real-life Fletcher means that it is a real figure who is claiming that 'this stuff' is accurate and factual. Logically readers ought to know that it is *not*, no matter what claims are made within the text, and yet it becomes a part of the story that they must believe all that the narrator says and accept it as true. In many ways this follows Waugh's (1984) DRAMATISATION OF THE READER in that readers are so fully aligned with the narratee

(for whom these events could be a real possibility) that they also accept them as true. I shall address this particular characteristic in relation to Bosch in the following section, as well as examining the positioning of the reader and subsequent readerly address more specifically in Chapter 5.

With this in mind, (4.x) features all of the same linguistic cues associated with the internal author version of Fletcher in the composition-world, not just in *The Creakers* but in every book he has written (admittedly with the exception of his most recent novel, *Space Band* (2022), which was published too late to be included in this thesis in any meaningful way, but which features an autodiegetic character-narrator in the role of internal author instead). There is a pervasive oral quality and a clear dialogue established between ‘I’ and ‘you’ in (4.x), just as in the other extracts taken from the composition-world of Fletcher’s novels; it is narrated in the simple present and demonstrates metanarrative awareness about the process of storytelling; there are frequent examples of proximal deixis which bring the reader and narrator closer together, while also metafictionally drawing attention to the act of reading and the physical presence of the book in the reader’s hand. The fact, then, that this internal author is none other than Fletcher himself is already a big step away from the dominant narrating persona in Cowell’s *Wizards* books. It is, however, just one step *closer* to the narratorial role of Bosch in the *Secret Series*, which I shall turn to now.

### **4.5.3) Pseudonymous Bosch**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Pseudonymous Bosch is the author that started this all. I grew up reading his books and they truly were my first introduction to postmodernism and metafiction – although I was not aware of those terms at the time. Although Bosch’s texts are slightly older than those of Cowell and Fletcher (the five books in his *Secret Series* originally being published in the UK from 2008-2012), I firmly believe that the devices and strategies deployed in his writing still make him a more than worthy addition to this project. It is also noteworthy to

examine the ways in which Bosch's narrator matches or supersedes the narrating figures that have already been discussed in relation to Cowell and Fletcher. After all, I commented earlier that I was beginning this analysis with Cowell as she was the least extreme of the three authors here. Bosch is considerably further along the scale in terms of how 'experimental' he might be considered. Much of this rests on the role of the narrator and – by extension – the reader, as shall become apparent.

Consider the following extract:

**(4.xi)**

WARNING:

DO NOT READ BEYOND THIS PAGE

!

Good.

Now I know I can trust you.

You're curious. You're brave. And you're not afraid to lead a life of crime.

But let's get something straight: if, despite my warning, you insist on reading this book, you can't hold me responsible for the consequences.

And, make no bones about it, this is a very dangerous book.

(Bosch, 2008: 3-5)

So begins *The Name of This Book is Secret*, the first book in Bosch's *Secret Series*. After moving past the warning on the opening page, readers find themselves in a prologue narrated by 'I'. The chatty, interactive narration of 'I' typifies this narrative layer, the composition-world of the novel. It is cemented in the present tense through the temporal adverb 'now', as well as the consistent use of the simple present in verbs like 'know', 'can' and 'make'. Furthermore, the plural implied in

'let's' and corroborated by the repeated use of the second-person pronoun indicates that 'I' is addressing someone.

In fact, instead of identifying 'I', the main focus of the book's opening appears to be on 'you'. At this point, readers do not necessarily know who 'you' specifically refers to, beyond some unidentified narratee (much as they only know that 'I' is the narrator at this point). Nevertheless, as seen previously with both Fletcher and Cowell, the doubly deictic (Herman, 1994) second-person pronoun 'functions as an invitation to the reader to project [himself] into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of *you*' (McHale, 1987: 224). In this way, the real reader feels like they are being addressed directly and thus begins to align themselves with 'you'.

In this particular case, this is further solidified by the narrator attributing 'you' with particular qualities at a very early stage: 'You're curious. You're brave. And you're not afraid to lead a life of crime'. It is unlikely that the real reader thinks of themselves in this way, but clearly the narrator believes these qualities are necessary for a successful reading of the story. By deliberately ignoring the warning at the beginning of the book – as readers are clearly intended to, despite the less than welcoming opening – the reader is thus ascribed the same characteristics as the 'you'-narratee, regardless of whether or not they are true. In this way, the foundation is laid for Waugh's (1984) EXPLICIT DRAMATISATION OF THE READER as they are drawn inside the text's external boundary through conflation with the implied reader and narratee (see Chapter 5).

This initial focus on 'you' means that, at this point in the prologue, readers do not know much about the narrator beyond his apparent appreciation for the reader's supposed willingness to live dangerously. Through this very communication with the reader, however, one can begin to infer a fair bit about 'I'. Like Fletcher, he is not a random 'I'-narrator but rather the internal author of the book and, as it later turns out, supposedly the external one, too. The emergence of this is seen in extract (4.xi) with the metafictional reference in 'this book', as the

proximally deictic demonstrative indicates the reader's theoretical proximity to 'I'. Who else, then, other than the internal author, exists on the same ontological level as the book being read – especially to the extent that they also have the ability to manipulate the content of the book by adding in '[their] warning'? Why, the author himself.

This becomes clearer as the text progresses and the narrator begins to comment on his construction of the story more explicitly. Following an entirely redacted 'Chapter One', 'Chapter One (and a half)' subsequently begins:

**(4.xii)**

I'm sorry I couldn't let you read Chapter One.

That was where you would have learned the names of the characters in this story. You also would have learned where it takes place. And when. You would have learned all the things you usually learn at the beginning of a book.

Unfortunately, I can't tell you any of those things.

Yes, this is a story *about* a secret. But it's also a secret *story*.

I shouldn't even be telling you that I shouldn't be telling you the story. That's how much of a secret it is.

(Bosch, 2008: 14)

Considering the linguistic elements discussed in (4.xi), it is clear that (4.xii) is still situated in the composition-world; it has first-person references to the narrator, directly addresses the reader, and is told using the simple present. More importantly, it is here that readers first see the narrator's hand in visibly creating the story. Not only does he have the ability to control what can or cannot be read (to the point of redacting an entire chapter directly before this), but he begins to offer commentary on his own way of communicating the narrative to his audience. This is particularly evident when he acknowledges that he: a) 'couldn't let you read

Chapter One' and b) 'shouldn't even be telling you that [he] shouldn't be telling you the story'. Both of these sentences identify the narrator as the internal author of the text.

The first (a) is clearly a metafictional device as it draws the real reader's attention to the act of reading and the fact that they have not had full access to the printed words on the page, therein highlighting the artifice of the novel and, hence, the overall fictionality of the story within. Meanwhile, (b) is another example of metanarration rather than metafiction as it relates to the telling of the story rather than its explicit constructedness. Crucially, as discussed earlier (section 4.3.2), metanarrative statements can be used to reinforce the illusion of reality as the reader feels like they are in direct communion with the narrator which establishes a sense of intimacy and trust between the interlocutors. As Fludernik (2009) states, this allows the reader to take the narrator's words – including any struggles they may display regarding the storytelling process – as more authentic.

In the case of Bosch's text, enjoyment of the novel comes from accepting – even if only as a pretence – that the composition-world is true: that a version of Bosch really is sitting in a dark room, writing the story of Cass and Max-Ernest, and offering commentary on his process as he does so. In the real world, everything about this book is fictional, from the pseudonym on the cover, to the various narrative levels within. However, through the collapse of both the teller and receptor roles, in addition to ongoing reference to the act of reading (or writing) 'this book', readers are encouraged to put their awareness of its artifice aside. As with Fletcher and Cowell, this is done, in part, through readers' direct, metaleptic communication with the narrator, reinforced by frequent metanarrative comments.

However, I would go so far as to argue that in the *Secret Series* it is not just the metanarrative comments, but also the *metafictional* ones that are meant to reinforce the validity of the text. Take, for instance, this passage, which occurs shortly after (4.xii):

**(4.xiii)**

I'll tell you what – I'll make you a deal.

To help you follow my story, I'm going to break my own rule – already! – and I'm going to give my characters names and faces. But remember these aren't their *real* names and faces. They're more like code names or cover identities, like a spy or a criminal would have.

If you don't like a name I choose, change it. If I write '*Tim* loved to pick his nose', and you prefer the name Tom to Tim, then read the line as '*Tom* loved to pick his nose'. I won't take offence. You can do that with all the names in this book if you like.

Or keep my names. It's up to you.

(Bosch, 2008: 15)

After announcing that it would be much too dangerous to share any information about this story – for the reader, himself, and the characters involved – Bosch relents and decides to proceed using fictional names. Given the published name on the cover of the book, it is clear that a pseudonym is already in use for the author of the text himself. Unless Bosch's parents were particularly cruel and decided that Pseudonymous was an appropriate name for a child, it is likely that his published name is a play on the word 'pseudonym' and the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch; the general use of pseudonyms is explored in more detail in a self-led Q&A session at the end of the second book in the *Secret Series* (Bosch, 2009: 411-414) and throughout the footnotes of his later spin-off mystery novel (Bosch, 2014), too.

In the real world, a particularly savvy reader might have googled Pseudonymous Bosch and learnt that the real author's name is Raphael Simon, although this was only confirmed in 2016 via a self-penned editorial in *The New York Times* (Bosch, 2016). As mentioned earlier, Simon is completely absent from even the extra-textual features of Bosch's books. Instead it is Bosch's own name, personality and backstory that are detailed in all of the usual author-identifying

moments. For instance, here is his ‘about the author’ summary on the inside back cover of *The Name of This Book is Secret*:

**(4.xiv)**

Pseudonymous Bosch is a pseudonym, or as he would prefer to call it (because he is very pretentious), a *nom de plume*. Unfortunately, for reasons he cannot disclose, but which should be obvious to anyone foolhardy enough to read this book, he cannot tell you his real name. But he admits he has a deep-seated fear of mayonnaise.

This is his first novel.

(Bosch, 2008: 397)

For all intents and purposes, then, Pseudonymous Bosch *is* the author. While not the real author, of course, readers will certainly build up a mental image of what they think Bosch is like (as they are intended to given the extra-textual information revealed about him within the book) and so it would make sense to say that the audience’s collective representation of the author of the *Secret Series* is closer to Bosch than Simon. Similarly, his presence as the published name on the cover of the book and on the copyright page feasibly makes Bosch the (fictional) external author of the text, too. Given that so much of the composition-world subsequently details Bosch’s process of writing this very same book, it follows that Bosch is also the internal author as well.

Realistically this is not all that dissimilar from the ways in which Cowell and Fletcher incorporate themselves into their respective texts. Cowell is not meant to be the ‘I’-narrator of either the *Wizards* or *Dragons* series, but she takes a level of (fictional) ownership of both when she introduces herself as a translator. Equally, Fletcher makes himself known as both the external and internal authors in his books, although both are ultimately meant to be an extended version of the real author.



Bosch is a blend between these two. Like Fletcher, he is both the external and internal authors of the books being read, but he is still an entirely fictional being. Simon is the only version of the author who really exists; he is the real author in the real world who really sat down at his desk and wrote these books for publication. Bosch does not exist. And yet it is a fundamental part of the *Secret Series* that Bosch is meant to be viewed as the real author – hence his name being the one on the cover and the blatant reference to the books being his creation alone. The reason for this is the purported truthfulness of everything that happens in the *Secret Series*.

We have seen this with Fletcher and Cowell already. They both claim that the events of their novels are also true and, through orienting their stories somehow in relation to elements of the real world, they are able to establish some (paradoxically fictional) authenticity. Bosch takes things a step further, as seen in extract (4.xiii). It is not only himself as the author who is given a fake name, but also the characters he is writing about: ‘I’m going to give my characters names and faces. But remember these aren’t their real names and faces’.

For a child-reader in particular, this runs the risk of becoming confusing. After all, everything Bosch writes is already made up as it is a novel so why does he draw such attention to the fictionality of already fictional entities? I believe it is because this actually allows him to stress the purported truthfulness of what he has written: by highlighting certain elements as fictional, Bosch can thus imply that others are *not*. When he introduces the protagonist, Cassandra, it is with the caveat that this is a false name for a real person – while also drawing attention to Waugh’s (1984) OBTRUSIVE PROPER NAMES. The reader thus experiences the narrative of the main story-world as usual, following Cass and Max-Ernest on their adventures, but is nevertheless meant to believe that all the events in the story – as weird and wonderful as they may be – really happened. All the while, Bosch can withhold specific bits of information from the reader (such as the names of the characters or where the story takes place) under the guise that he has to protect his audience from any ‘real’ information.

I cannot stress enough that this, obviously, is not the case. For readers of Cowell, history shows that wizards and dragons and magic have never existed in Britain. With Fletcher, readers know that Santa's sleigh is not pulled by a magical dinosaur, even if they do perhaps still believe in flying reindeer and Father Christmas himself. When it comes to Bosch, there aren't really any 11-year-olds trying to defeat evil alchemists anywhere in the world (at least, not to my knowledge). Still, for each author – and the varying degrees to which they claim authenticity in their work – it is a surprisingly effective tool to bring readers inside.

#### **4.6) Conclusion**

From even a cursory study of the opening chapters in these middle grade texts, it is clear that the narrators are fulfilling multiple sophisticated roles. Whether they exist as diegetic characters, overly-obtrusive 'I'-narrators, visibly creating internal authors, external authors published on the cover of the book, or all of these at once, there is obvious blurring of Genette's narrative levels and conflation of Booth's teller roles. This is made all the more apparent when clearly fictional narrators within the text not only address the real reader directly in simulated conversation, but also further blur the boundary between reality and fiction by explicitly connecting the narrator to the real author in some way. In Bosch's *Secret Series*, the real author (Raphael Simon) is eclipsed entirely in favour of attributing every single one of Booth's teller roles to a fictional entity; in Cowell's *Wizards* books, the intradiegetic narrator is quickly revealed to be a (mostly unknown) character within the story, but this is superseded by the external author's claim that she is translating a 'real' text; in the works of Fletcher, the internal author is identified as Fletcher himself and thus simultaneously takes credit for the creation of the text in the real world and the supposedly spontaneous writing of the novel within the composition-world, too.

This is typical of postmodern, self-conscious texts which ‘often play with narrative levels in order to question the borderline between reality and fiction or to suggest that there may be no reality apart from its narration’ (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005: 95). The conflation of narrative levels and Booth’s respective teller roles results in a semi-permeable boundary between the obviously fictional story-world and reality, forcing readers to ‘explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text’ (Waugh, 1984: 2). Naturally, this requires readers to employ sophisticated reading strategies to successfully navigate the novel and separate the truth from the fiction (or, rather, what is merely contextually true within the text).

That this technique is so prevalent in children’s literature speaks volumes. Not only are children (as relatively inexperienced readers compared to most adults who regularly engage with and enjoy postmodernism and metafiction) able to cope just fine with such complex strategies, but the dominance of these devices in contemporary, popular children’s fiction – especially in texts by celebrity authors like Fletcher – illustrates that child-readers *can* and *do* cope just fine with them! Why else would they have become so normalised or even mainstream?

Nor is this popularity reserved for the narrator alone. As demonstrated in this chapter, the role of the OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR (Waugh, 1984) at the composition level allows for subsequent sophisticated postmodern features within these texts. The most prominent of these will be examined in the following two chapters. First, Chapter 5 reorients the composition-world and considers the text from the other side of the narrator’s dialogue: from the perspective of the (dramatised) reader or narratee. Chapter 6 then addresses the metaleptic blurring of boundaries between narrative levels in more detail, expanding upon the brief introduction given in section 4.3.2 and focusing on how these texts push the limits of existing narratological terminology. To an extent, this has already been demonstrated here in relation to Genette’s typology of narrators and thus I will continue to use terms such as internal author, composition-world and diegetic story-world throughout this analysis, following the definitions outlined in this chapter.

# 5) The narratee, the reader & you

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## 5.1) Introducing the reader

Just as narrators have always been a crucial part of narrative study, one must also acknowledge the presence and position of another fundamental figure: the reader. After all, ‘a literary text can only produce a response when it is read’ (Iser, 1991: ix) and thus cannot wholly be separated from the real-life person whose eyes glance over the page, interpret the words and engage with the written narrative.

The previous chapter, in its consideration of the prominent narratorial figures in my chosen texts, illustrated the close relationship between overt narrators and their respective audiences. This is evidenced in the simulation of spontaneous conversation in a shared communicative space (located temporally and spatially at the composition level alongside the internal author’s narrating present) and naturally implicates the reader through extensive use of the second-person pronoun, consistent metafictional references to the reader’s own role in the narrative and reading processes, and frequent deictic markers that signify the reader’s supposed proximity to the narrator.

Of course, that narrator – given that they are a textual construction, regardless of any claims to the contrary – cannot access the real reader and is logically addressing an unnamed narratee instead. Still, just as these postmodern narrators conflate Booth’s (1991) teller roles and subsequently problematise some of the existing narratological terminology by exceeding the limits of traditional definitions, so too do the *narratees* in my chosen texts. This chapter therefore offers a parallel to Chapter 4, outlining how Booth’s *receptor* roles – the narratee, the implied reader, and real reader (Figure 4.2) – are equally conflated and how this potentially complicates the reading process for children who are suddenly dramatised and expected to become a collaborator (or even *character*) within the fiction.

Firstly, it is important to outline the differences between these three receptor roles as, while they are conflated in my chosen texts, they are traditionally treated as much more distinct figures. As Prince (2003) explains, the reader is '[t]he decoder or interpreter (of a written narrative). This real or concrete reader is not to be confused with the implied reader of a narrative or with its narratee and, unlike them, is not immanent to or deducible from the narrative' (81). Crucially, the reader – or rather THE REAL READER (see Figure 4.2) – exists purely outside the fiction. They are a real-life, tangible individual who holds the physical text in their hands, scans their eyes over the page and, as Prince says, decodes the written narrative with which they are engaging. They cannot be accessed directly by any of the other figures identified by Booth, regardless of any potential claims from the internal author or narrator within the text to the contrary, and thus the real reader exists in their own bubble alongside the (published) text in the real world. For this reason, it can prove understandably problematic for narratologists to try and interpret or explain the real reader's reaction to a text. After all, every single individual who engages with a text may decode it in a wildly different way.

Thus Booth introduced the IMPLIED READER to his model (see also Iser, 1991: 34-38). Like the implied author, the implied reader is a theoretical construct and must be distinguished both from the real reader and the narratee. It is, instead, '[t]he audience presupposed by a text' (Prince, 2003: 43) or rather the figure who 'is perceived by the reader as acting out the role of an ideal reader' (Fludernik, 2009: 23). The implied reader is constructed by the real reader based on their own response to a particular work; the real reader imagines the 'kind of reader...that the text has or had in mind as its audience' (Toolan, 2001: 63) and builds a mental figure by combining textual clues along with any relevant attitudes, beliefs and characteristics inscribed in the text. This balances the onus between what the real author initially created – and thus what the text requires the implied reader to be – and the real reader's own, individual interpretation of those textual elements.

This is particularly useful for my analysis as many of the extracts used in Chapter 4 frequently referenced an overt narratee ('you') who functions as a

dramatised or characterised reader at the composition level in direct conversation with the internal author ('I'). While that narratee is not the real reader, the prevalence of 'you' in each of my chosen texts provides evidence that helps the real reader construct their version of the implied reader. It is crucial to clarify that the implied reader is not an accessible figure; it is a purely mental construct on the part of the reader, albeit one based on the clues given in the text. However, due to the playful metafictional qualities in my chosen texts – particularly the repeated reference to the role of the reader and the very act of reading, along with consistent metaleptic blurring of reality and fiction – it is understandable that real readers may conflate their mental image of the implied reader with the 'you'-narratee addressed in the composition-world of the text. After all, Booth's teller roles have already been conflated beyond easy separation in these texts so who else could be the intended target audience at each respective narrative level other than 'you'?

Of course, this is taken a step further in the middle grade novels examined in this thesis as to successfully navigate each story – especially in the cases of Bosch and Fletcher – the real reader must align themselves with 'you' and cast themselves in the role of 'reader of the text'. This is an easy and natural progression into the world of the fiction because the constant metafictional references to the act of reading and the construction of the text reminds the real reader that they themselves are indeed reading the text in question and are thus fulfilling the same actions and directives as 'you' at the composition level. If we accept that the implied reader acts as a stepping stone or bridge between the real reader and the 'you'-narratee – i.e. the real reader's mental construction of who is meant to be reading the book based primarily on the narrator's direct address to 'you' at the composition level – then we are able to conflate Booth's receptor roles just as we simultaneously conflate the teller roles (as seen in Chapter 4). Not only does this result in a sophisticated metaleptic transgression across multiple narrative layers including the external boundary of the fiction, but it is also a particularly common technique in comedic or playful texts where 'the implied reader position is understood to be filled with somebody capable of enjoying the ironical remarks by the narrator, and the real

reader will ideally take on that role' (Fludernik, 2009: 23). This cements the postmodern, playful qualities of my chosen texts and evidences once again the stylistic sophistication that child-readers are capable of understanding and enjoying.

## **5.2) Defining 'you': narratees and internal readers**

Although the real reader exists only in the real world and logically cannot enter the realm of a fictional text, the second-person pronoun somewhat circumvents this impossible transgression. In fact, it 'functions as an invitation to the reader to project himself or herself into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of *you*' (McHale, 1987: 224). Even if that *you* 'turns out to refer to a fictional protagonist, [it] initially always seems to involve the reader' (Fludernik, 1995: 106) and, as such, '[n]arrative *you* produces an ontological hesitation between the virtual and the actual by constantly repositioning readers' (Herman, 1994: 379).

As with the other postmodern and metafictional devices discussed so far, this 'ontological hesitation' forces the reader to question how an ostensibly fictional text connects to the real world, especially when they feel they are being personally addressed as 'you' and thus envision the narrator within the text to be traversing the external boundary of the fiction – again achieving McHale's (1987) semi-permeable narrative boundaries.

However, from a narratological perspective, it is not the real reader being addressed at the textual level, but rather the NARRATEE. That is, 'the intrafictional addressee of the narrator's discourse...who belongs, just as the narrator does, to the fictional world even though this person is not active on the plot level and exists only "offstage"' (Fludernik, 2009: 23). The narratee is a purely fictional being who exists on the same ontological level as the narrator (the figure whom the narratee is addressed by) and must be explicitly distinguished from the real (and implied) reader, as shown in Figure 4.5. It is in this way that Herman's (1994, 1997, 2002)

doubly deictic 'you' becomes most useful, simultaneously indexing a story-world participant and an extrafictional addressee through use of the second-person.

As a brief side note, the 'you'-narratee who exists alongside the overt narrator at the composition level should also be distinguished from any *character-level* narratees addressed within the diegetic story-world, such as when a diegetic character tells a story to a fellow character within the main narrative. While that same narrative can logically be attributed to the overarching narrator – who is, at least in my chosen texts, conceptualised as an internal author in the composition-world – the narratee addressed in those moments is *not* the same as the 'you'-narratee with whom the *reader* is conflated. With this in mind, any references to the 'you'-narratee in this chapter should be understood as the figure who is (contextually) reading the story alongside the internal author in the composition-world. I will, however, introduce specific terminology to navigate any potential confusion by highlighting the manner in which the reader is conflated with this specific 'you'-narratee.

After all, that the presence of 'you' should naturally implicate the reader by encouraging a real-world figure to align themselves with a fictional presence within the text complicates the distinctions outlined above. It is therefore unsurprising that it is a technique prevalently used in postmodern writing, where the real reader is ostentatiously dramatised and brought into the world of the fiction through linguistically-aided alignment with the 'you'-narratee. In addition to the prevalent use of the second-person, this alignment tends to be reinforced through consistent metafictional reference to the physical construction of the book and the real reader's current situation reading that very same text. As the extracts in this chapter will show, this results in the complete conflation of Booth's receptor roles with 'you' simultaneously referring to the fictional narratee at the composition level of the text and the real reader in the real world who, like the 'you'-narratee, is also reading the book.



With this particular element in mind, I should like to return to – and possibly extend – Currie’s (2010) concept of internal and external authors which was introduced in Chapter 4 (section 4.3.1). Citing Dr Watson in the Sherlock Holmes stories as a prime example, Currie separates the diegetic character who is fictionally writing the stories we read from the real-life Conan Doyle; they are thus the internal and external authors of the book, respectively. Following this terminology, I outlined how the narrators of my chosen texts fulfil a similar role or, in some cases, take it to an even further extreme. Cressida Cowell, for instance, is very clearly the external author of the *Wizards* series, while the diegetic Perdita is the figure telling the story as it progresses and seemingly controls the construction of the narrative. It is later revealed that Cowell herself is supposedly translating Perdita’s texts into English and, consequently, she steps partway into the role of a fictional internal author (or, at least, editor and translator).

By comparison, Pseudonymous Bosch and Tom Fletcher are much more overt in their conflation of Booth’s teller roles at every narrative level and thus act as their own external *and* internal authors simultaneously. They are both the published, credited author on the external covers of their respective books and on the copyright pages, for instance, but are also seen as figures at the composition level within the text who are both writing the story as it progresses, thereby satisfying the *visible* role of the internal author, too. Currie’s framework is therefore particularly useful in relation to my chosen texts and provides an easy way of delineating between the real author and the ‘I’-narrator (likewise conflating the two by way of the implied author).

Given that in each of these texts the internal author converses with an overt narratee who is meant to be in the process of reading the book as it progresses – or, in the case of Cowell’s *Wizards* series, listening to the story unfold – it follows that we might also require a distinction between the external and internal *reader*, too.

Indeed, there are a plethora of examples from classic literature that similarly make use of an overt ‘you’-narratee who is deliberately characterised as ‘the reader

of the text' within the diegetic story. Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller* immediately comes to mind, where the protagonist is a reader who is likewise 'about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel' (Calvino, 1998: 3) but who is not the real reader – although the use of the second-person at the start of the novel is meant to encourage the real reader to align themselves with 'you' initially. As the story progresses, the references to 'you' become increasingly specific until the point at which it is obvious that 'you' must refer to a fictional character instead. In this circumstance, there are two separate readers involved in the reading process; the real reader in the real world is the external reader, while the diegetic 'you' is a fictional internal reader.

This is not entirely the case in my chosen texts, however, as in these novels the 'you'-narratee who is reading or experiencing the story in real time is at no point involved at the diegetic level of the story, unlike in Calvino's novel where 'you' becomes the protagonist. Still, both function as internal readers who are explicitly characterised as being 'the reader of the text'.

This distinction is explored further by Goetsch (2004). Dividing the idea of an internal reader, he considers FICTIVE (extradiegetic) and FICTIONAL (intradiegetic) readers, 'distinguishing between reader figures on the level of the narrator and those on the level of the action' (Goetsch, 2004: 188-189). The latter, FICTIONAL READERS, are 'represented by those persons in the narrative who become active as readers and are characterized as such' (Goetsch, 2004: 189). By this he refers to existing diegetic characters who read – for whatever reason – within the story-world; this is often achieved through the introduction of character-level reading activities like texts being read aloud by characters or the inclusion of interpolated tales which the real reader effectively reads over a character's shoulder.

Importantly, a fictional reader must be intradiegetic and engage in the reading activity at the diegetic level of the story-world. While the 'you'-narratee at the composition level is technically intradiegetic because they exist purely within the pages of the book and are thus wholly a part of the fiction, Chapter 4 illustrated

the difficulties in applying such terminology to the internal author's contextually extradiegetic composition-world. In this way, the 'you'-narratee is removed from the diegetic fictional reader as their role within the text is instead shaped as a direct by-product of the narrator at the composition level rather than as a designated reader within the main story-world. By this definition, a better example of a fictional reader in my chosen texts would be when Cass and Max-Ernest read 'The Story of the Bergamo Brothers' in Pietro's diary (Bosch, 2007: 140-162) or when characters check 'The Spelling Book' in *The Wizards of Once* (Cowell, 2017b: 133-146).

Instead, the prominent 'you'-narratee at the composition level is better described as a FICTIVE READER. As Goetsch comments, fictive readers are 'descendants of the listener figures in classical and medieval epics' and 'appear chiefly in those narratives which direct attention to the process of narration' (2004: 190). This is the term that falls closest to the overt 'you'-narratees displayed in my chosen texts as each exists on the same ontological level as the narrator and is theoretically (and fictionally) able to communicate through a shared language space. As Goetsch explains:

Fictive readers may be invited to participate in dialogue with the narrator, asked to read critically and use their imagination, or challenged to formulate their own conclusions. [...]

One function of fictive readers is to sketch various kinds of relationships with readers that writers like or do not like to engage in. Another function is to give the narrator scope for self-dramatization. Fictive readers also help to make real readers aware of narrative procedures and to keep them attentive. Moreover, they serve as a means of persuading the audience and appealing to their judgment.

Important as these functions are, one should not forget that reader manipulation on the level of narrator and fictive reader may also be a highly entertaining kind of feigned communication. The real reader, who attempts to respond to the role the text as a whole offers him or her, can follow the

communication between narrator and fictive reader from a safe distance and even enjoy the narrator's occasional jibes at the audience.

(2004: 191-192)

The situation described in this final paragraph is precisely what we see happening at the composition level in the works of Fletcher, Bosch and (to a slightly lesser extent when it comes to direct 'feigned communication') Cowell. The 'you'-narratee is presumed to be talking directly with the internal author, answering questions, offering opinions and laughing at their jokes in a shared language event. The real reader, through alignment with this narratee, steps into the discourse at the composition level and, in doing so, takes on the role of the same fictive reader, likewise filling in the gaps in the conversation that is described between 'I' and 'you' on the page.

Indeed, Goetsch provides a list of the most popular variants of the fictive reader as seen in classic literature:

1. The reader who is, seriously or not, defined as the narrator's friend or privileged partner
2. The reader as an understanding companion and a fellow-traveller in the fictional world
3. The reader who is willing to exercise his mind and imagination
4. The inattentive, impatient, indifferent reader who has to be mobilised
5. The prejudiced reader whose expectations and norms are challenged
6. The incompetent reader who has to be criticised or ironized

(2004: 193-194)

For each of these, Goetsch cites examples from the likes of *Jane Eyre*, *Tristram Shandy*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and so on. As with Waugh's (1984) list of postmodern features in Chapter 3, it is unsurprising that these are all well-known and highly regarded texts that exist in the popular psyche as part of a literary canon or, in the case of the more explicitly postmodern material, the cultural avant-garde (Lewis, 1994). Yet Goetsch's fictive reader variants are also prevalent in my chosen

middle grade texts: (1) the reader is cast as the narrator's communicative partner; (3) the reader is asked to think critically about the story and use their own imagination to supplement what the narrator shares; (4) the reader is criticised if the internal author thinks they have not been paying enough attention or valuing their writing enough; (5 & 6) the reader is playfully mocked by the narrator, especially for expecting the story to go in one direction when fictional conventions are deliberately undermined instead.

I would also like to draw particular attention to (2): 'the reader as an understanding companion and a fellow-traveller in the fictional world'. Depending on your interpretation of 'companion', the proximity of the 'you'-narratee to the 'I'-narrator at the composition level of the text enhances the friendliness between the two interlocutors. Of course, the way Goetsch is actually using 'companion' here refers more to a reader who is 'along for the journey', as it were, and experiences the story alongside the narrator as a passive spectator. This kind of reader is spoken to – or *at* – but is not necessarily given the space to respond even contextually within the fiction.

This is an interesting concept in relation to my chosen texts because the real reader *is* progressing through the story in real time and, as part of their alignment with the narratee in the composition-world, they are meant to be (fictionally) doing so alongside and in direct communion with the narrator. That narrator, as outlined in the previous chapter, is also the internal author so it follows that – within the rules of the fiction – readers can only ever experience the story-world alongside the narrator as they are the person writing it in purportedly real time as it develops. This could perhaps be interpreted in the same way as being an 'understanding companion' or 'fellow-traveller'. However, the fictive reader takes a much more active role in my chosen texts and almost becomes a co-collaborator alongside the narrator in the composition-world, viewing and traversing the fiction while simultaneously being invited to lend their own hand in its construction.

This is a crucial distinction and one that is not addressed by Goetsch. In the different roles outlined for fictive readers, he conflates passive figures – ‘Reader, I married him’ (Brontë, 1966: 453) – with those who are more actively involved in the narrative discourse – ‘You must have a little patience...[as] you proceed with me’ (Sterne, 1912: 8). This is something I hope to rectify in my own analysis, especially given the EXPLICIT DRAMATISATION OF THE READER which, as Waugh (1984) acknowledges, is a key postmodern element. Casting the reader in a more active role within the storytelling process also heightens the interactivity of these texts, which might encourage readerly engagement amongst younger target audiences. It is my hope that the extracts used in this chapter will once again demonstrate not only the sophisticated nature of contemporary children’s fiction, but also how this material is more than able to stand up to the canonical texts cited by Goetsch by comparison.

### **5.3) Analysis**

#### **5.3.1) *Bosch’s collaborative reader***

There is no better place to start this consideration of the dramatised fictive reader than with the ‘you’-narratee established in the opening pages of Bosch’s *Secret Series*. Consider again the following extract, which was used in the previous chapter to introduce the composition level of the text:

##### **(5.i)**

WARNING:

DO NOT READ BEYOND THIS PAGE

!

Good.

Now I know I can trust you.

You're curious. You're brave. And you're not afraid to lead a life of crime.

But let's get something straight: if, despite my warning, you insist on reading this book, you can't hold me responsible for the consequences.

And, make no bones about it, this is a very dangerous book.

(Bosch, 2008: 3-5)

As mentioned in Chapter 4, these opening lines offer far more information about the characteristics of 'you' than they do of 'I'. The narratee and, by extension, the reader are deemed to be curious, brave and unafraid to lead a life of crime, purely by ignoring Bosch's initial warning and turning the page. When I first read these words as a child myself, I was aware that such attributes could not have been further from the truth (if anything, I was a little bit timid and happy to invest any curiosity I possessed into the world of fiction rather than criminal activity), but I understood that from the *storyteller's* perspective these were necessary qualities needed to engage properly with the book.

Considering this extract again as an adult, it is a clear example of Waugh's (1984) EXPLICIT DRAMATISATION OF THE READER. 'You' is used constantly in the composition-world to indicate direct address from the internal author to the fictive reader and thus the real reader, feeling implicated by the use of the doubly deictic second-person with no other obvious interlocutor(s) to attribute it to, believes that they are being directly addressed by the narrator and steps into this shared discourse space. This is a key difference compared to Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (section 5.2) as in that novel 'you' is revealed to be an entirely separate fictional character who is in no way related to the real reader, despite the deliberate ambiguity at the start of the text as 'you' sits down 'to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel' (Calvino, 1998: 3) just as the real reader does. Still, in both cases the reader *is* being dramatised. In Calvino, the reader is invited into the world of the fiction and then replaced with a purely fictional character; in Bosch's *Secret Series*,

the reader is aligned with the 'you'-narratee at the composition level and addressed as a fictive reader, but is simultaneously required to act as 'the reader of the text' in both the real world and within the novel.

This is a crucial distinction as the entire story stems from the fact that Bosch, unable to keep a secret, is writing this book and that the real reader must not tell anyone what they are about to discover within its pages. The fantastical events of the story are meant to be interpreted (at least contextually) as true and Bosch's claims to veracity rely on the reader keeping one foot in the real world – and subsequently imagining how the characters and key plot points might impact their normal, everyday life – while they are simultaneously addressed at the composition level through alignment with the 'you'-narratee. If the real reader rejects this merging across the text's fictional boundary, the novel's entire premise falls apart.

For this reason, Bosch goes further than dramatising the reader through ascribed characteristics alone. He encourages alignment with the fictive reader through constant and explicit metafictional reference to the very act of reading, much as Calvino does at the start of his novel, such as in (5.i): 'if, despite my warning, you insist on reading this book'. Although this is logically addressed to the fictive reader in the composition-world, the real reader is likewise fulfilling the action of 'reading this book' by reading that very line. This conflates the fictive reader and the real reader as both are engaging in the reading process simultaneously, therein metafictional reference to one automatically includes the other. Furthermore, the proximal deixis of the demonstrative 'this' signifies that the narrator and his addressee are positioned on the same ontological level (the composition-world), enhancing the sense of direct communication between 'I' and 'you'. As there are no other interlocutors obviously present with the 'I'-narrator, 'you' must refer to whoever is reading the internal author's text at that precise moment. Within the composition-world that is the fictive reader, but in the real world it is the real reader who is engaging with the physical book. Consequently, the two are brought together and conflated, therein successfully collapsing Booth's receptor roles and transgressing the novel's external boundary.



This is not rare in Bosch's texts and the ludic quality of his writing is frequently emphasised to playfully dramatise the reader further. While (5.i) laid the groundwork for bringing the real reader into the world of the fiction and establishing them as a fellow interlocutor within the composition-world, the following extract takes this even further. (5.ii) opens the second book in the *Secret Series* and fully cements the reader as 'the reader of the text' in both the real world and within the context of the story, too.

**(5.ii)**

I, the reader of this book, certify that I am reading this book for entertainment only. Or to avoid cleaning my bedroom or doing my homework. I will not try to uncover the true identities or locations of the people described in this book. Nor will I try to contact any secret society mentioned in this book. Although the story may concern an ancient and powerful Secret, I hereby deny any knowledge of this so-called Secret. If I am ever asked about it, I will run from the room. Unless I am on an aeroplane, in which case I will close my eyes and ignore the person speaking to me. And if all else fails, I'll scream. I will not repeat a word of this book under any circumstances. Unless I just can't help it.

Signed,

Reader \_\_\_\_\_\*

Date \_\_\_\_\_

\* NORMALLY, I WOULD ASK THAT YOU SIGN IN BLOOD. BUT LATELY I HAVE FOUND THAT KETCHUP WORKS JUST AS WELL – AND IT IS MUCH LESS PAINFUL.

(Bosch, 2009: 5)

Firstly, the use of a contract injects an added level of playfulness in terms of the content and ultimately parodies the language and structure of legal discourse. The

humour and syntax are trademarks of Bosch's writing style – and the internal author's voice is visible in the footnote at the bottom of the page – but overall this deviates from what the reader is used to seeing in the novel's narration. This makes sense as, by definition, parody is:

a kind of literary mimicry which retains the form or stylistic character of the primary work, but substitutes alien subject matter or content. The parodist proceeds by imitating as closely as possible the formal conventions of the work being parodied in matters of style, diction, metre, rhythm, vocabulary.

(Kiremidjian, 1969: 232)

In other words, parody takes a familiar medium and adapts it into a new but still entirely recognisable form, using that layered duplication to create humour (Lukens, 1999). This clearly follows what we know of metafiction as it self-consciously lays bare the conventions and constructs of the form that is being parodied. Of course, this also requires the reader to recognise the codes of the parodied material in order to understand and appreciate the humour. Consequently parody – as with so many other sophisticated postmodern or metafictional devices – assumes 'certain levels of literary and interpretive competence' (McCallum, 1996: 398). As Waugh explains:

There has to be some level of familiarity. In metafiction it is precisely the *fulfilment* as well as the *non-fulfilment* of generic expectations that provides both familiarity and the starting point for innovation. The well-worn conventions of realism or of popular fiction are used to establish a common language which is then extended by parodic undermining and often amalgamated with cultural forms from outside the mainstream literary tradition, including journalese, television influences such as soap opera, cinematic devices and the effects of such genres as space opera.

(1984: 64)

Given that the texts examined in this thesis are targeted at child-readers, one might be surprised that parody is as popular in mainstream children's literature as it is. True, some children may not yet be able to fully engage with the parodied text and might miss some of the humour or entertainment that stems from that section of the book they're reading. However, most child-readers should be able to notice when the discourse appears to change; that is, when the text they are reading or the narrative voice to which they have grown accustomed significantly alters in some way – even if they are not yet experienced enough as readers to pinpoint exactly how they know that change has occurred.

This is clear in (5.ii). The contract parodies legal discourse in terms of structure, with sentences repeatedly starting with an 'I will' assertion, and through formal language such as 'I hereby deny any knowledge'. The way it is laid out on the page corroborates this further with space for the reader's signature and date underneath the main declaration; this is in addition to the page being sectioned off with a hard border, a title introducing it as a 'Binding Contract', and an author's note on the previous page that states: 'Please read the contract on the following page very carefully and copy it out in your best handwriting. If you refuse to sign, I'm afraid you must close this book immediately' (Bosch, 2009: 3).

Again, the real reader understands that this is all part of an ongoing game. Readers are meant to believe that the contents of this book – and the wider series – are dangerous and true in equal measure and recognise that Bosch, in his claim to authenticity, is trying to dissuade his audience from reading further. He started the first novel with an explicit warning not to read the book. When the reader inevitably ignores that comment and turns the page, they are cast as a brave, courageous, dare-devil. Presumably understanding that they are not going to listen to any more potential pleas, Bosch places the responsibility of reading firmly onto the reader's shoulders in the second book by requiring them (at least fictionally) to sign a contract that supposedly prevents them from revealing anything they have read.

This is a playful and highly effective use of parody that capitalises on the naturally high addressivity of the parodied material to further dramatise the reader and make them part of the fictional discourse. It is also far from the only example in the *Secret Series*. The fourth book opens with a list of ‘Warnings, Disclaimers, Fine Print & etc.’ (Bosch, 2011: 3) that replicates the kind of terms and conditions associated with medication. That particular novel also features a ‘Pseudo-manifesto’ (Bosch, 2011: 4-5) that borrows from political discourse. A few other examples include a pop quiz that parodies the familiar language of school and exams (Bosch, 2009: 249-241), an explicit overview of Hitchcock’s tropes before a particularly scary moment (Bosch, 2010: 78-79), or the draft graduation speeches that recur throughout the fifth novel (Bosch, 2012: 40-42, 136-138, 226-227). There are far too many examples to cite individually here, but all of them more than satisfy the common techniques and tropes of metafiction.

There are four main strategies whereby metafictional novels can be self-conscious about their existence as language: parodic play on specific writing styles; thematised wordplay, such as puns, anagrams, clichés; variation of print conventions and the use of marginalia, footnotes and epigraphs – strategies which draw attention to the physicality of texts; and deliberate mixing of literary and extra-literary genres, such as the journal, letter, newspaper items, historical documents, and so on.

(McCallum, 1996: 405)

(5.ii) is a prime example of EXPLICIT PARODY OF PREVIOUS TEXTS, WHETHER LITERARY OR NON-LITERARY (Waugh, 1984) and just one case of many in the *Secret Series*, therein signifying the popularity of this device in contemporary mainstream children’s literature. Furthermore, it solidifies the role of the reader as ‘reader of the text’ and aligns them once again with the fictive reader at the composition level. After all, as well as agreeing to keep the plot of the book to themselves, the reader has also just ratified their own role: ‘I, the reader of this book’. This fully dramatizes the reader and allows the real reader to step into the text and engage in direct communication

with the internal author. It also establishes the reader – or, rather, the role of the reader – as a crucial part of the story and its construction.

We see this particular element plainly at the start of Bosch’s first book, too. As addressed in Chapter 4, Bosch admits that the character names used in the *Secret Series* are fictional creations that are presented in place of the characters’ real names: ‘They’re more like code names or cover identities, like a spy or a criminal would have’ (Bosch, 2008: 15). By drawing attention to certain elements as ostentatiously fictional, Bosch is thus able to imply that other parts of his story are not, and hence establishes the purported veracity of the overall plot. As part of this, he invites the reader to be a core part of the novel’s construction. Not only are readers allowed to change the names he picks for his characters – ‘If you don’t like a name I choose, change it’ (Bosch, 2008: 15) – but they are solely in control of where the book is set.

### **(5.iii)**

Although the real location of this story will have to remain a mystery, to make it easier for all of us, why don’t we say the story takes place in *a place you know very well?*

We’ll call it Your Hometown.

When you read about the town the characters live in, just think of the town you live in. Is the town big or little? By the sea or by a lake? Or is your town all asphalt and shopping malls? You tell me.

When you read about the characters’ school, think of Your School. Is it in an old one-room schoolhouse or in a bunch of double wide mobile homes? You decide.

When they go home, imagine they live on Your Street, maybe even in a house right across from yours.

Who knows, maybe Your Street is where the story really takes place. I wouldn't tell you if it was. But I couldn't tell you for certain that it's not.

(Bosch, 2008: 16)

The chatty, informal, *skaz*-inspired narration places (5.iii) firmly within the composition-world and signifies a shared communicative situation between the internal author and fictive reader. The prevalent use of 'you' is naturally dialogic, especially when coupled with numerous interrogatives that invite responses from an active addressee but do not actually leave space for the real reader to reply. Nonetheless, these techniques linguistically implicate the reader and conflate them with the fictive reader at the composition level.

Although unable to reply directly, the interrogatives here force child-readers to consider their real-life answers. Through encouraging the reader to situate this story in their hometown, Bosch effectively creates a 'do-it-yourself' opening in which a key part of the story – the setting – is constructed entirely by the reader. As a child myself, I believed it was far more unlikely that these events would be taking place in Lincolnshire than that these events would be taking place *at all*. Yet even when reading these books as an adult over a decade later, I am aware that the mental image I still have of Cass and Max-Ernest's school is one that draws entirely from my own school at the time. By inviting the reader to think about these elements themselves, all through the deliberate withholding of key information that one would '*usually* learn at the beginning of a book' (Bosch, 2008: 14; emphasis added), Bosch makes the real reader his collaborator in the creation and construction of the story. Through this, he further encourages child-readers to develop not only their imagination and world-building skills, but also their knowledge of fictional conventions.

SUBVERTING FICTIONAL CONVENTIONS is one of the key elements listed by Waugh (1984) and it is particularly useful in relation to metafiction for children. The reason I highlighted 'usually' in the previous quotation is that it illustrates how Bosch draws attention to what readers would normally be expecting to learn were he not

deliberately withholding that information. Experienced readers understand that the opening of a book is typically used to set the scene, offering a comprehensive who/what/where/why/when/how style of introduction. Toolan (2001), for instance, points out that ‘the establishment of an identifiable setting is a strong psychological preference in most readers’ (91), while Fludernik (2009) comments on how ‘a detailed description of places, objects and clothing as well as of people conjures...a real world, thus creating the illusion that the novel is depicting reality’ (54). Nodelman & Reimer (2003) suggest that this is even more crucial in children’s literature where authors are required to orient their readers in the story-world by building a solid bridge between the real world and the fictional reality of the text. They call this ‘concretization’, explaining that:

[I]magining as literally and completely as possible the world and the people a text describes is the only way that many children know of building consistency from the texts they read. This seems to be the reason that so many children and other inexperienced readers worry about the logic and coherence of the worlds that texts enable them to concretize – why they so often get angry when there are inconsistent details in descriptions of places and people or confusions in the sequence of events.

(Nodelman & Reimer, 2003: 58)

Bosch subverts this entirely, withholding crucial information from the child-reader and forcing them to fill in the blanks instead. On the one hand, much of this is a deliberate thematic ploy that ties into the overarching premise of his story; Bosch supposedly needs to keep things from the reader in order to protect the people involved in the true events of the *Secret Series* and so he deliberately highlights the fictionality of the text to claim that other elements are real. I would, however, also argue that Bosch’s continuous and varied subversions of literary conventions are actually insightful attempts to *educate* child-readers, too.

As discussed in Chapter 2, many critics have written on the didactic nature of children’s literature, especially concentrating on how it moved from authoritarian

tales of morality in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to playing an important role in teaching children life-skills and socialisation (Immel, 2013). While I have committed, as much as possible, to analysing children's fiction from a purely linguistic perspective, it is still difficult to escape the clear awareness that such authors have of their target readers and how that affects their writing. As Hunt (1994) comments, '[i]t is arguably impossible for a children's book (especially one being read by a child) not to be educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology and, by extension, didacticism' (3).

Considering the use of metafiction and postmodernism for children more specifically, Cross (2004) argues that:

[T]his kind of fiction is didactic not only *despite* the evidence of more complex postmodern narrative devices, but it can actually be *more* didactic precisely *because* of the inclusion of such strategies. The use of some complex narrative devices, metafictional techniques in particular, can, paradoxically, *increase* the strength of any didactic messages, whether these are conscious or not on the part of the author.

(56-57; original italics)

She proceeds to explain that this new form of didacticism aims, above all else, 'to facilitate young readers' own interpretations and enable more active participation in meaning-making' (Cross, 2004: 57). While I might quibble whether a text can be considered didactic purely because it teaches *something* – as opposed to the more traditional sense of the term relating specifically to moral and ideological instruction (Golden, 2021) – I completely agree that the postmodern and metafictional devices Cross outlines do enhance the reading experience and make child-readers active participants in the construction of narrative. As addressed in relation to postmodern picturebooks in Chapter 3 (section 3.3), critics like Stevenson (1994) have similarly highlighted how the presence of playful metafictional devices and the inversion of standard reading expectations can actually teach children about storytelling, bookmaking and the construction of texts.



By ostentatiously subverting the traditional opening structure of his novel, Bosch lays bare the process of constructing his story-world and characters and thus actually teaches his audience the very conventions of fiction that he is undermining. After all, '[b]y involving readers in the production of textual meanings, metafiction can implicitly teach literary and cultural codes and conventions...and hence empower readers to read more competently' (McCallum, 1996: 398). Having orchestrated the conflation of the real reader with his fictive reader/'you'-narratee, Bosch establishes an implied collaboration at the composition level in which the child-reader becomes part of the story's construction themselves.

The first book in the *Secret Series* is bookended by this particular concept. After becoming an active part in the world-building of the story at the start of the novel through Bosch's reluctance to share key information, things escalate at the end of the book when Bosch point-blank refuses to finish writing it.

**(5.iv)**

Only bad books have good endings. If a book is any good, its ending is always bad – because you don't want the book to end.

More importantly – more importantly to me, anyway – endings are hard to write.

You try wrapping up your story, showing how your characters have grown, sewing up any holes in your plot, and underlining your theme – all in a single chapter!

No, really. Try.

Because I'm not going to do it.

(Bosch, 2008: 340)

I described extract (5.iii) as a 'do-it-yourself' opening; the chapter from which (5.iv) is taken is literally titled 'Chapter Thirty-Two: Do-It-Yourself Ending'. Following this refusal, Bosch provides summaries for each individual character so that he does not

‘leave you hanging entirely’ (2008: 340) and, in doing so, effectively writes the ending himself anyway, albeit in a somewhat fragmented manner. Still, this information is offered under the guise of providing nothing more than guidelines for the reader to follow when they write their own ending, which can then be included in the blank space left shortly afterwards, titled ‘Chapter Thirty-Three: Your Version’.

As before, the reader is invited to be a co-constructor of the fiction and, in this case in particular, is allowed to have a degree of creative control by engaging with the story as a *writer* in the real world and not just a fictive reader in the text’s composition-world; this makes the reader ‘explicitly aware of his or her role as a player’ (Waugh, 1984: 42) and quite literally ‘[demands] a more writerly engagement from the reader, opening up meaning as opposed to shutting it down’ (Bird, 2010: 209). Furthermore, the supposed lack of a true ending from the author is very postmodern in itself as it, again, ostentatiously subverts literary conventions. Similar examples commonly cited from acclaimed postmodern texts include Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and Johnson’s *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs*, the latter of which tells the reader ‘to provide your own surmises or even your own ending, as you are inclined’ (Johnson, 1973: 41).

I doubt that anyone who has read either of these texts would expect such a similar premise to be employed in a book aimed at children, yet here it is. Of course, to mitigate any potential confusion and to satisfy his target audience’s curiosity, Bosch does then write a more conventional ending – presented as ‘Chapter Zero: The Denouement’ so as not to offend anyone who put genuine time and effort into writing their own ending first – which ultimately rounds off the novel and properly sets up the next book in the series. That this occurs only after a blank space in which the reader is asked to insert their own pages, coupled with repeated metafictional reference to the formation of the chapters at the end of the book, ultimately highlights the text’s artifice and construction once again. Bosch successfully executes a postmodern and sophisticated ending to his story, the likes of which are traditionally only seen in the most highbrow, experimental fiction,

while both breaking *and* fulfilling typical literary conventions. In doing so, he shows obvious awareness of his target audience, but still manages to expose them to a variety of metafictional strategies that will enable child-readers to learn the very conventions he is breaking and therein read more competently.

### **5.3.2) Active vs. passive readers**

One of the central tenets of this thesis is that, while perhaps extreme in its pervasiveness, Bosch's application of sophisticated postmodern techniques is by no means rare in contemporary children's literature. Indeed, a number of the elements discussed already in this chapter are reflected just as competently in the works of Tom Fletcher. As established in Chapter 4, Fletcher and Bosch utilise a similar narrative structure with an overt, visibly creating internal author ('I'-narrator) who is in the process of writing the story and talking to the fictive reader ('you'-narratee) at the composition level of the text. Unlike Bosch, however, Fletcher is far happier to provide the reader with as much information as possible and seems to draw genuine pleasure from assisting his audience through the reading process. At no point does he withhold information or force the reader to take over as creator, for example.

Just like Bosch, however, Fletcher ostentatiously cements the real reader as a fictive reader within the text. This is especially apparent in the interludes between chapters in *The Creakers* (2018), where the narrative switches back to the composition-world and the internal author speaks directly to the reader about the book as it is created and read, respectively, in real time. As (4.x) in the previous chapter demonstrated, that internal author is meant to be interpreted as Fletcher himself: 'I, Tom Fletcher, the author of this book' (Fletcher, 2018: 261). By the same logic, readers are meant to understand that the 'you' who is being addressed by that internal author is a conflation of the fictive reader (an unnamed narratee who is likewise in the process of reading *The Creakers*) and the real reader in the real world, again satisfying Herman's double deixis.

With this in mind, we see the same kind of characterisation of the real reader as the 'reader of the text' in Fletcher's writing as we did in Bosch. Admittedly, Fletcher does not fully dramatise the reader quite like Bosch did – hence my reference to the process as 'characterisation' instead – but the real reader is still very much encouraged to think about their active role in the reading process as the text progresses. A particularly useful example that highlights the role of the reader in relation to the internal author's narration comes towards the end of *The Creakers*.

**(5.v)**

This is it. You're almost there. Only three chapters to go and you'll know how it all ends. I already know what happens. If I wanted to, I could spoil it for you right now by saying that Lucy gets chopped to bits by the big drill and is never seen again. Or perhaps Lucy gets superpowers and melts the drill with laser beams from her eyeballs. Maybe both those would make better endings than what really happened. There's only one way to find out...

(Fletcher, 2018: 301)

The oral quality of this first-person, present tense narrative puts the above extract firmly in the composition-world of *The Creakers*. There is a clear metaleptic address from the narrator to the reader through the use of the second-person, but there is also a reminder about the logical impossibility of this. These chatty interludes rely on believing that the reader and narrator are able to communicate in real time, with comments being made about the process of reading and writing the book as it progresses. In (5.v), however, Fletcher admits that '[he] already [knows] what happens', thus breaking this illusion.

Rather than actually spoiling the ending for the reader, Fletcher inserts a moment of playful comedy that simultaneously underlines the respective teller and receptor roles of the fiction. Similar to Bosch, Fletcher uses an almost parodic quality to suggest different alternative endings. The first, which sees Lucy being gruesomely chopped up by a drill, draws from the world of horror, guts and gore – an unpleasant image for any age group, let alone young child-readers! The second

borrowed from superhero movies/comics and the classic laser-beam-eyes trope. Moreover, the inclusion of both alternative endings indicates an expectation that child-readers will be familiar with the source materials from which Fletcher is borrowing in order to appreciate and recognise the humour here. Of course, this is instantly undermined by the modality in the following line – ‘Maybe both those would make better endings’ – which makes it clear that neither of those events are ‘what really happened’.

Instead, at this point, the reader is reminded of their role in all this. While the humorous interludes about horror or superhero-style endings might encourage the reader to consider different plot points, and perhaps also subconsciously evaluate how likely they are within the context of *this* story, logically they know that the true ending is already decided. Indeed, Fletcher has reminded readers that ‘[they’re] almost there’ with ‘only three chapters to go’. Again, this aligns the real reader with the ‘you’-narratee in the composition-world and conflates the real and fictive readers, metaleptically blurring the narrative boundaries between fiction and reality and allowing the reader to (contextually) communicate with the internal author. The ellipsis at the end of this narratorial interlude contributes to this characterisation even more, tantalising the reader into turning the page so that they may continue reading the story.

Although *The Creakers* displays Fletcher’s most prevalent ongoing communicative situation between the internal author and fictive reader with the frequent dialogic interludes between chapters, the characterisation of the real reader as ‘the reader of the text’ has always been present in Fletcher’s writing. For example, his debut novel *The Christmasaurus* quickly establishes the narrator and narratee within a storytelling situation through lines such as, ‘I’d like to tell you about two very special dinosaurs’ (2017: 2). While both ‘I’ and ‘you’ are unidentified at this early stage of the novel, contextual knowledge of Fletcher’s writing (discussed in Chapter 4) and linguistic cues signify that this is meant to be interpreted as Fletcher talking to the reader directly. Or rather, that is, a fictional version of Fletcher who is acting as the internal author or textual enactor (see

section 4.3.3; also Emmott, 1997; Gavins, 2007, 2013) within the composition-world of the text and sharing a communicative space with the fictive reader. As this chapter has illustrated thus far, the fictive reader is quickly aligned with the real reader through prominent use of the second-person, plenty of ongoing metafictional references to the reading process, and proximal deixis to indicate how both the real and fictive readers are meant to have access to the same physical book: ‘A little more *the title of this book...* The Christmasaurus!’ (Fletcher, 2019: 34; original italics).

Whereas Bosch used this shared communicative space to fully dramatise the reader and make them part of the story’s construction, Fletcher positions the fictive reader as more of an audience member, albeit one who is still actively (and contextually) encouraged to engage in conversation with the internal author and think critically about the story they are reading (Goetsch, 2004). Hence there is still metaleptic address whenever the internal author speaks to ‘you’ in the composition-world, such as when Fletcher pauses his diegetic story to clarify that ‘Yep, you heard that correctly’ (2019: 22), but the reader is never cast as such a dramatised individual, unlike in Bosch’s *Secret Series*.

Indeed, when it comes to Fletcher’s writing, the reader is not even wholly ‘individual’ either. Consider the following two excerpts from *The Christmasaurus and the Winter Witch*:

**(5.vi)**

To the casual observer, it would appear that there was nothing here. That’s because, to see Santa’s North Pole Snow Ranch, you have to be invited.

Lucky for you then that Santa has allowed me to give you all your very own Cosmos-Converting Candy Cane.

Here you go: [drawing]

(Fletcher, 2019: 49-50)

**(5.vii)**

That's because the kind of wishes you can see only live in the forests surrounding the North Pole, and they only exist at Christmas.

Now, I bet you're all thinking, *That's great, Mr Narrator, but what does a wish look like?*

Well, I'm glad you asked. This is a wish: [drawing]

(Fletcher, 2019: 63)

Both of these extracts will be considered in more detail in Chapter 6, particularly in relation to the inclusion of self-reflexive images at the story-level of the text and the inherent metaleptic transgressions subsequently triggered. However, I wanted to draw attention to them in this chapter as well as they are examples of the few times that Fletcher addresses his audience as anything other than 'you'. Instead, in (5.vi) and (5.vii) he says 'you *all*'.

So far, I have treated second-person references in my chosen texts as singular references to the fictive reader as a contextually active interlocutor at the composition level (and, by extension, the real reader outside the text); as shall be illustrated in Cowell's *Wizards* series presently, this also extends to the characterisation of the reader as a passive audience member who is being spoken *at* or *to*. Certainly, a singular form of address helps to reinforce the illusion of direct conversation between the internal author and the reader. As someone who has worked extensively in radio alongside my academic pursuits, I can tell you that one should only ever refer to the audience in the singular: a presenter is talking to *you* alone. After all, the goal is to create the feeling of direct, intimate conversation between the presenter and the audience.

For the most part, the same seems to apply in the narrator-reader relationships established in the works of Bosch and Fletcher, in particular, especially given that the ongoing metafictional references to 'you' engaging with the physical book tend to imply a solitary reading experience in which a friendly

storyteller is speaking directly to an individual child-reader. Logically, readers understand that these books are intended for a wide target audience, but during the reading process it often feels like ‘you’ are in this independently, an effect reinforced by the aforementioned alignment with a singular ‘you’-narratee to whom the internal author/narrator is speaking. By addressing ‘you all’ in the extracts above, Fletcher moves away from the designated fictive reader and instead makes individual readers aware that they are not alone in engaging with this particular text in the real world.

This does not entirely negate the illusion of direct conversation between two interlocutors, however. Following the continuum of second-person singular references outlined by Sorlin (2022: 12; see also Kluge, 2016), ‘you’ can be used as ‘representative of a larger entity’:

- You1 – ‘you’ meaning ‘I’
- You2 – ‘you’ meaning ‘I’ as representative of a larger entity
- You3 – anyone
- You4 – ‘you’ in front of me as representative of a larger entity
- You5 – ‘you’ meaning the person in front of me

The ‘you’ addressed in the works of Bosch and (with the exception of the previous two extracts) Fletcher would constitute You5 in Sorlin’s above typology; this is the individual fictive reader addressed by the internal author within the composition-world. When an element of plurality is introduced, as in ‘you all’ in extracts (5.vi) and (5.vii), this swaps to You4. Of course, as acknowledged, these texts are always intended for a wider target audience upon publication and, as such, one could argue that *all* references to ‘you’ in these works fall under the You4 category.

Indeed, in her analysis of Henry Fielding’s *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his Friend Mr Abraham Adams*, Sorlin (2022: 139) categorises the ‘authorial audience...that the author has in mind’ as You4, while also demonstrating how that audience can be ‘more or less individuated’ through elements of apostrophe and direct address as well as ascribed characteristics such



as the specification of gender, marital status or other diversifying traits. Fielding cycles through a variety of addresses when talking about a wide range of differing readers (see Sorlin, 2022: 139-140) and thus proves that ‘the You4 category can be more complex than a mere reference to “you” [...] [for] You4 as authorial audience has a plurality of formal incarnations, enhancing readers’ liberty to occupy and not to occupy the Reader position’ (Sorlin, 2022: 140; see also Phelan, 2005, 2017).

When Fletcher briefly acknowledges the multiplicity of his readership in (5.vi) and (5.vii), it reinforces the You4 categorisation by reminding real readers of their membership within a wider group. Given the target audience of Fletcher’s middle grade novels, one could even argue that, in doing so, this actually *strengthens* the oral quality of the composition-world by drawing on the traditions of oral storytelling. For one, it potentially links to familiar storytelling situations for the real child-reader, triggering schematic knowledge of having stories read aloud, often in a shared environment, by parents, teachers, librarians and so on (Lesesne et al., 2018). This plurality indicates a wider community and helps the child-reader feel like they are part of a group who is being addressed; it also connects to archetypal oral traditions which would see a story being dictated to a communal audience (Fludernik, 2013).

Moreover, it illustrates the narrator’s awareness of his audience and solidifies his role as the person – or voice – who is confidently leading the story from an overt telling position at the composition level. In fact, drawing attention both to the role of the narrator (e.g. ‘Mr Narrator’ in 5.vii) as well as the wider target readership results in a heightened awareness of the construction of the text and thus strengthens its inherent metafictional qualities. After all, metafiction ‘self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality’ (Waugh, 1984: 2).

As seen time and time again, Fletcher’s texts are inherently metafictional and the effect of ‘you all’ adds to this. Not only does it trigger a blatant metafictional transgression from the composition-world to the world of the real reader, but it

cements the reader as an audience member who is engaging with this narrative through the reading process. It is not, therefore, a huge jump to remind the real reader that they are not the *only* reader, simultaneously reminding them of the fictionality of the text that they are engaging with too, regardless of Fletcher's previous attempts to claim veracity for the events described within. This reinforces the conversational style of the composition-world in which the narrator and reader are supposedly speaking directly, while also metafictionally drawing specific attention to the role of the narrator in the storytelling process which, again, highlights the constructedness of the text.

Still, for the most part, the fictive reader takes an active role in the reading process in Fletcher's texts. They are not a fully dramatised part of the narrative's construction, as in Bosch's *Secret Series*, but they are very clearly cast in the role of 'reader of the text' and repeatedly referenced as such. Following Goetsch's (2004) variants outlined in section 5.2, Fletcher's fictive reader is most definitely the narrator's communicative partner, an understanding companion, a fully mobilised reader who is encouraged to pay attention to the story, and one who is asked to 'exercise his mind and imagination' by thinking critically about the plot and characters' decisions (albeit only when explicitly encouraged to do so by the internal author). Thus, the reader takes an *active* part in the story.

By comparison, Cowell positions the fictive reader in *The Wizards of Once* (and, by extension, the real reader too) as an audience member who is being *told* a story rather than *reading* one specifically. Chapter 4 addressed the oral quality of the composition-world in the *Wizards* series and how it evokes images of sitting round a campfire listening to an oral folk tale. Although the second-person address is still made in the singular – or, at least, not as obviously plural as the examples in (5.vi) and (5.vii) – this 'you' takes a much more passive, purely spectating role in the narrative process.

However, we must remember that there are technically two different composition levels in the *Wizards* series: one in which the main internal author/'I'

narrator is concocting the story as it goes (a diegetic character later revealed to be Perdita) and another in which Cowell herself is supposedly translating Perdita's stories into English for publication. This allows for two separate 'I'-narrators who address 'you' from different narrative spheres, though neither appear to allow – or indeed expect – a response from their addressee(s). This links to the kind of 'you' examined by Parker (2018) which he associates with contemporary implementations of *skaz*, commenting on simulated oral narratives that speak directly to 'you' only at the very opening of a text, but drop it quickly after a few lines.

The *you* disappears for the rest of the text, but the seed idea is planted that we are (or someone is) listening to a voice telling a story directly, in real time. Such passages are more than ornamental framing instruments. They formally indicate a narrator's presence, even if he or she remains anonymous or underdeveloped. McHale (1985) and Fludernik (1994) both suggest that repetition of the word *you*, even when clearly not referring to a reader or narratee, tends to lead readers into the text by the force of the communicative act it suggests.

[...]

But, as any reader knows, to read is to discover a shared membership between an author and yourself, a possible fraternity[.] An indefinite *you* can also suggest experiences or sensations shared by narrators and readers, or readers and characters, establishing connections between them on this basis, before character traits or behaviours readers may potentially share, idealise, or reify are elaborated. Often a single use of *you* in a text's opening lines is in the conditional (e.g. 'you would'), suggesting regular, habitual events observed by a generalised *you*, an anonymous member of the community in which the tale unfolds.

(Parker, 2018: 100-102)

The ‘indefinite you’ to which Parker refers here has its origins in Herman’s (2002) ‘impersonal’ or ‘generalised’ second-person, with the specific term used in Parker’s quotation above being attributed to Hyman (2005: 163) to describe a version of the pronoun that is ‘neither singular nor plural, nor both, nor even neither, but *indefinite*’. This fits with the ‘you’ seen in the *Wizards* series (and, to an extent, my other chosen texts) where the (real) author is unable to clarify exactly who is going to be reading the text they create and so logically introduces ‘indefinite’ references that can apply to any and all readers – again connecting to Sorlin’s You4 category where ‘you’ is used in the singular as representative of a wider authorial audience.

What is interesting about Parker’s analysis is that the introduction of ‘you’ – however brief it may be – plants the idea that the reader is ‘listening to a voice telling a story directly, in real time’. This is taken to the extreme by Fletcher and Bosch, where ‘you’ is addressed repeatedly, consistently and pervasively and encouraged to take a much more active role in the reading process. In Cowell’s *Wizards* series, on the other hand, ‘you’ occurs far less frequently and addresses a more passive audience member instead, particularly in Perdita’s composition-world.

When Perdita, the main ‘I’-narrator, speaks to ‘you’ it usually occurs via quick narratorial asides that, when embedded within the main story, trigger a brief world-switch back to the composition level. This connects to oral storytelling traditions and acknowledges the listener, but without encouraging any active participation beyond simply being addressed. For example, as discussed in relation to extract (4.i) in the previous chapter, comments such as ‘Perhaps you feel that you know what a dark forest looks like. Well, I can tell you right now that you don’t’ (Cowell, 2017b: 11) implicate the reader and situate them as an audience member in the storytelling process, but restrict them to a mostly passive, spectating role.

By contrast, Cowell’s use of ‘you’ in her sections of the novel – where she intrudes upon the story-world in the role of editor and translator – are much more clearly directed at the fictive reader and lean slightly more towards the kind of

address utilised by Bosch and Fletcher. These interruptions tend to appear parenthetically or, more often, as footnotes such as when Cowell clarifies Perdita's comment about the character Looter:

**(5.viii)**

Looter was tall, handsome, good-looking and extremely pleased with himself. He had just spent three months changed into a graxerturgleburkin,\* but he seemed to have recovered from the experience.

\* LONG STORY. YOU CAN READ ABOUT IT IN 'WIZARDS OF ONCE, TWICE MAGIC' IF YOU LIKE.

(Cowell, 2020a: 246)

The start of (5.viii) is firmly in the main story-world, following a diegetic character, Looter, in the third-person and past tense. As the diegetic story-world is contextually being narrated by Perdita (from an encircling composition-world in which she speaks directly to a listening 'you'-narratee), it is wholly her domain within the overall narrative. By comparison, the footnote at the bottom of the page triggers a switch to *Cowell's* composition level in which she is editing Perdita's story and which thus frames all of the narrative levels attributed to Perdita. Cowell's use of 'you' refers more obviously to the real reader (by way of the fictive reader) by metafictionally pointing out that the audience 'can read' a previous book in the *Wizards* series. While relatively tame compared to Fletcher and Bosch, this signifies a more active role for the reader where they are physically able to interact with the narrative (i.e. by walking away from this book and going to find something else to read) rather than just having it spoken *at* them.

Interestingly, the use of footnotes to direct readers to an existing publication rather than explaining the current narrative situation in more detail is something seen frequently in both Bosch and Cowell's writing. For example: 'This was a strength Xar shared with his father Encanzo, as you will find out if you read Book 2,

*Twice Magic*. It's really rather good' (Cowell, 2020b: 78) or 'If you've read *If You're Reading This, It's Too Late* then you know I am referring to Cass's friend, Mr. Cabbage Face, the homunculus, now sadly deceased. If you haven't read the book, well, then it really is too late. I've just spoiled the ending' (Bosch, 2010: 134). Again, these comments make overt, metafictional references to the reading process and position the reader in a much more active role in relation to the narrative with which they are engaging.

As a side note, Fletcher has not, to date, introduced footnotes into his texts, although that in no way undermines the pervasive switches between narrative levels in his writing (as shall be addressed in Chapter 6), nor does it preclude him from beginning to use them more prevalently in the future should he wish. Instead, Bosch and Cowell are the main footnote-users amongst my chosen authors and both deploy them to offer commentary on the diegetic narrative as a textual enactor/internal author version of themselves from the composition-world.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, Perdita – the diegetic character narrating the *Wizards* series – can likewise be considered an internal author as, even though she does not detail the creative process of her stories as explicitly as Fletcher and Bosch, she is still seen visibly telling the story as it unfurls and controls its production from the composition-world. The parameters of Perdita's composition level were introduced in Chapter 4, with her presence as the internal author being most evident in the prologue and epilogue of each *Wizards* novel as she speaks to 'you' in the present tense about the mystery of her identity and the ongoing storytelling process. Often this is coupled with metanarrative comments, further solidifying the 'I'-narrator's role as the storyteller. For example:

**(5.ix)**

Let me introduce you to these three unlikely heroes. Xar, as I said, was the thirteen-year-old second son of the King of Wizards. His name was pronounced 'Zar', I don't know why, spelling is *weird*. [...] Xar's Magic had not come in yet, and so he had set a trap to catch a Witch and use its Magic for

himself. As you can imagine, this was not a very good plan, and as a result of this, Xar had a Witchstain on his hand that was beginning to control him.

(Cowell, 2020b: 10)

The above extract opens the first chapter in the final *Wizards* book and offers a quick recap of the key characters and plot points. Think of it as the literary equivalent of the usual ‘previously on...’ openers from the world of television. The *skaz*-infused narration – typified by the overall orality, the use of an overt ‘I’ storyteller, and the ‘restrictedness of intellectual horizons’ and ‘colloquialism’ (Schmid, 2013) in ‘I don’t know why, spelling is *weird*’ – puts this at the composition level of the text. In this case, it is Perdita’s composition level (rather than Cowell’s encircling *editing* level) as she is the one telling the story to the audience.

Unlike the address to ‘you’ in Cowell’s footnotes, the use of ‘you’ in (5.ix) is much more passive in nature. The first ‘you’ functions as part of a metanarrative comment in which Perdita reminds the audience of the novel’s protagonists but does not necessitate or allow for a response from the reader. Instead, readers experience the narrative passively and simply let Perdita continue her introduction without interruption. Likewise, the ‘you’ in the final sentence of (5.ix) potentially invites the reader to think critically about Xar’s decision but realistically functions as a more general comment to bring the audience onside and ensure they too agree with the *narrator’s* judgement that it ‘was not a very good plan’. While Fletcher and Bosch might be more likely to include an interrogative here to actively encourage child-readers to evaluate characters’ decisions or exercise their imagination by providing their own alternative, Perdita’s narrative style moves on too quickly for this and, instead, feels more like the storyteller simply expects the audience to nod their heads in passive agreement.

## 5.4) Conclusion

Whether positioning the reader in a passive or active role, there is always an awareness of some kind of audience being addressed as 'you' in these texts. Bosch is by far the most extreme, fully dramatising his reader by making them a co-collaborator in the construction of his story. Fletcher efficiently and effectively conflates the real reader with an obvious fictive reader, encouraging purported dialogue between the 'I'-narrator and 'you'-narratee within the composition-world, but also reaching out to the real reader and asking them to critically engage with the story they are reading. When Cowell herself (as editor and translator) addresses 'you' in the *Wizards* series, she appears more conscious of the real-life reader and thus introduces additional metafictional comments that remind child-readers of their active role in the reading process. On the other hand, Perdita, the internal author of the *Wizards* books, is a much more traditional storyteller and casts 'you' as a passive audience member who is listening to her oral tale. This does, however, correlate to the oral, storytelling situations that children are already likely to be familiar with through 'read aloud' practices in school and at home. Thus it is not entirely disorienting when the illusion of direct communion with the narrator is broken, such as when Fletcher refers to multiple readers at once in 'you all' or when the target audience is less explicitly cast as 'the reader of the text' in the *Wizards* series.

Both the narrator and reader are consistently aware of the ongoing narrative process, regardless of how actively involved readers are in its construction and meaning-making, and the prevalent use of 'you' underlines this. Whether it is truly intended to address the real reader or not (as in the case of Calvino), readers are naturally implicated by the double deixis encoded in 'you' and believe that they themselves are being spoken to from within the text. This is especially apparent when there are no other interlocutors present alongside the internal author/narrator at the composition level and, as such, the external boundary between fiction and reality is collapsed as the real reader aligns themselves with the fictive reader/'you'-narratee.



While this may appear superficially confusing as it requires readers to suspend their disbelief about what is real and what is not and competently navigate conflated narrative levels, this is actually something child-readers are able to handle just fine. As mentioned previously, this conflation of ontological boundaries between narrative levels – including the external boundary between the text and real world – is called metalepsis and shall be examined more closely in Chapter 6.

# 6) Metalepsis

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## 6.1) Types of metalepsis

The previous two chapters have demonstrated in abundance that the texts used in this study all rely heavily on the blurring, blending and breaking of narrative levels. Whether it be the narrator within the story speaking to the real reader outside the text or, as shall now be seen in this chapter, an authorial figure communicating directly with their own fictional creations, there are multiple and consistent crossovers between narrative levels in these example texts. As addressed in Chapter 4 (section 4.3.2), this blurring of ontological layers is called metalepsis, a term outlined by Gérard Genette in his seminal *Narrative Discourse* (1980; originally published 1972) to refer to ‘any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe...or the inverse’ (234-235). Hanebeck (2021) points out that this definition necessitates the construction and conceptualisation of

separate and hierarchically structured ontological levels – whose boundaries can be paradoxically and illegitimately ‘crossed’ (or negated) by narrators, narratees or characters in a movement named ‘narrative metalepsis’.

Accordingly, the meaningful application of the narratological category initially presupposes the allocation of narrators, characters (and, possibly, by implication, existents, events, and utterances) to one distinct diegetic level in an unambiguous spatiotemporal structure of ‘universes’ with clear boundaries – and then the allocation of the very same entities to another diegetic level, the (implied) movement being either from the world of the telling to the world of the told or vice versa.

(18)

Concentrating on the hierarchical structure encoded in Genette’s diegetic levels (see Figure 4.1), he goes on to explain that:

In Genette's definition of metalepsis, the boundary separating the levels in that hierarchical structure is decisive: *acts of narration* create and hierarchically connect diegetic levels. The transgressive nature of metalepsis consists in crossing the boundary or boundaries instigated by narrative acts. This is modelled on – or at least agrees with – the representational logic of everyday lived experience: the past of the 'reality' in which someone tells a story and the evocation of a fictive world are, from the perspective of the addressee, both physically inaccessible.

(Hanebeck, 2021: 19)

According to Hanebeck, metalepsis not only prioritises but is also *instigated* by acts of narration, as it is the narrating process itself that constitutes the logical boundary between the world of the telling (extradiegetic narrative discourse) and the told (diegetic story-level). It is therefore unsurprising that, while by no means exclusive to postmodern texts, metalepsis is commonly associated with such material as it goes hand-in-hand with the typical postmodern and metafictional elements of disrupting, distorting or in any way drawing attention to the narrative structure (and therefore the inherent artifice) of a text and its manner of being told or overtly constructed. Ryan (2004), for instance, calls metalepsis 'one of the favourite toys of postmodern culture' (439), with Malina (2002) similarly observing that it provides 'an apt tool for depicting and enacting some of the key philosophical reconceptualizations of postmodernity' (2).

The most conventional understanding of metalepsis focuses on blatant ontological shifts by characters and narrators across narrative levels:

[M]etalepsis is a narrative technique in which ontological axioms, e.g. that authorial narrators live in a different world from that of their characters, are undermined with the result of destroying one's impression that the narrated world is real. When characters gang up against their author as in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), or, as in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1927), set off to find their maker, or when the male

narrator suddenly spends the night with his female protagonist (also O'Brien), these are all instances of a metaleptic transgressing of boundaries between telling and told, and destroying the fictional illusion. Metalepses can also be generated at the discourse level when the narrator projects him/herself (at least empathetically) towards the level of the characters and becomes involved in what happens, as if s/he were standing there in the flesh.

(Fludernik, 2009: 100)

To Fludernik's list of examples can also be added the kind of vertical metaleptic transgressions seen repeatedly in the previous two chapters, in which the fictional narrator crosses the external boundary of the text and speaks to the reader in the real world. While present across a wide range of genres and literary periods, these narratorial asides to the reader are commonly associated with metalepsis in postmodern texts and are often 'implicit in the postmodernist use of the second person' (McHale, 1987: 226).

The direction of these transgressions relates to the 'ontological hierarchy' (Richardson, 1994: 319) displayed in Figure 4.1. In *ascending* metalepsis 'a fictional character or narrator jumps from an embedded story-world to a hierarchically higher one', while in *descending* metalepsis 'a narrator or a character jumps into an embedded storyworld or an author jumps from the actual world into the storyworld' (Bell & Alber, 2012: 168). It is therefore crucial to delineate between different narrative levels – such as the composition-world and diegetic story – in order to identify when the boundaries between them have been crossed, blurred or removed altogether.

Such distinctions are indicative of the extensive body of work dedicated to metalepsis, as critics 'have been offering definitions of the form(s) of the narratological category of "metalepsis" for more than 30 years and have debated its functions as well as its theoretical implications' (Hanebeck, 2021: 11). Fludernik

(2003: 388), for instance, distils the types of metalepsis originally outlined by Genette into an implicit four-term typology:

- Type 1: authorial metalepsis which foregrounds the constructedness and fictionality of the story by ‘undermining the realistic expectation that the narrator merely tells a story over which he has no power’ (Fludernik, 2003: 384).
- Type 2: narratorial metalepsis consists of ‘the literal move of the narrator to a lower narrative level of embedded story world, or of a character to a lower (intra)diegetic level’ (Fludernik, 2003: 384), often to enhance the reader’s immersion and lift the mimetic illusion (see Pier, 2016).
- Type 3: lectorial metalepsis ‘implicates the narratee on the story level or the protagonist as narratee on a superior (discourse) level’ (Fludernik, 2003: 385), such as through ‘the raising of a character from an embedded tale onto the superior (usually extradiegetic) plane’ (385).
- Type 4: rhetorical or discourse metalepsis where the telling and the told is presented as simultaneous. While this may not initially present a boundary transgression, ‘the projected simultaneity metaphorically moves the narrator into the realm of the fictional world’ (Fludernik, 2003: 387).

The latter of these groups takes its name from a distinction formulated by Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) who divides metalepsis into *rhetorical* and *ontological* forms (with Fludernik’s Type 2 and Type 3 categories above constituting sub-variations of ontological metalepsis).

Employing a ‘computer stack’ metaphor in place of Genette’s traditional narrative levels, Ryan explains that:

Rhetorical metalepsis interrupts the representation of the current level through a voice that originates in or addresses a lower level, but without popping the top level from the stack. [...] An aside to the audience in drama would constitute a rhetorical metalepsis looking in the other direction: from

the fictional world toward the real one. Rhetorical metalepsis opens a small window that allows a quick glance across levels, but the window closes after a few sentences, and the operation ends up reasserting the existence of boundaries. This temporary breach of illusion does not threaten the basic structure of the narrative universe.

(Ryan, 2004: 441)

This final sentence underlines the inherent implausibility of some metaleptic transgressions. While rhetorical metalepses briefly open windows to see across narrative levels without ever leaving the original world from which the metalepsis begins, *ontological* metalepses are ‘physically impossible and some are also logically impossible’ (Bell & Alber, 2012: 186). After all, none of the figures affected by metaleptic transgressions – neither readers, authors, narrators, or characters – can really swap or move between ontological domains, ‘which would involve, for example, authors physically entering their own texts, characters speaking to readers, or heterodiegetic narrators interacting with the characters to which they have no ontological association’ (Bell & Alber, 2012: 169). Yet this is precisely what seems to occur in ontological metalepsis.

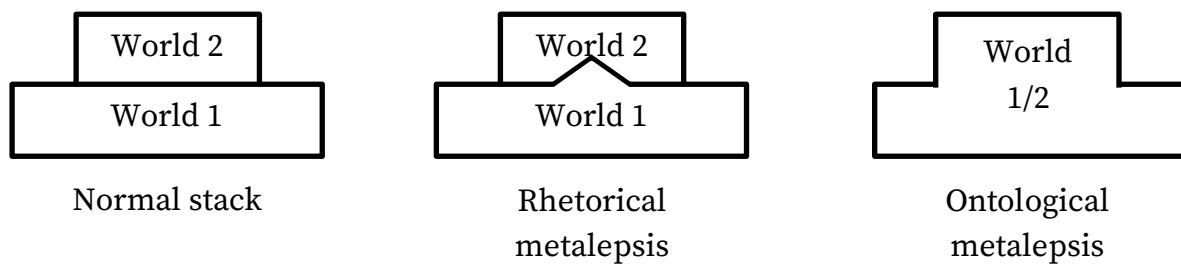
Whereas rhetorical metalepsis maintains the levels of the stack distinct from each other, ontological metalepsis opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination. These levels, needless to say, must be separated by the type of boundary that I call ontological: a switch between two radically distinct worlds, such as ‘the real’ and ‘the imaginary’[.] [...] In a narrative work, ontological levels will become entangled when an existent belongs to two or more levels at the same time, or when an existent migrates from one level to the next, causing two separate environments to blend.

[...]

We may compare rhetorical metalepsis to a benign growth that leaves the neighbouring tissues unaffected, and ontological metalepsis to an invasive growth that destroys the structure of these tissues.

(Ryan, 2004: 442)

The distinction between rhetorical and ontological metalepsis – and Ryan’s benign vs invasive growth analogy – is visually represented in Figure 6.1.



**Figure 6.1:** *Metaleptic transgressions across boundaries in three narrative situations (adapted from Ryan, 2004: 441-442).*

As Figure 6.1 shows, a ‘normal stack’ keeps all involved worlds completely separate, with no blurring of the boundaries that exist between them. Rhetorical metalepsis, meanwhile, allows for small, temporary intrusions from one world to the other but still keeps the overall ontological boundaries between those worlds in place. Ontological metalepsis, on the other hand, removes those boundaries altogether and creates a blended world that combines elements from both worlds, such as the people, language, tense and so on.

This is a useful distinction, especially when identifying transgressions quickly or at a superficial level. Indeed, as the previous two chapters have shown, one of the most prevalent features of the texts analysed in this thesis are the frequent narratorial asides from the internal author in the composition-world to the real reader outside the text. Following Ryan’s definition, these interludes open a small window across the boundary of the fiction itself but do not trigger a full ontological jump for either participant as the narrator ‘remains in its original world

but moves to...the actual world through visual or verbal address' (Pantaleo, 2019: 20). These asides would therefore be considered ascending rhetorical metalepses.

By contrast, ontological metalepses 'involve disorienting transgressions of boundaries that are physically or logically impossible' (Bell & Alber, 2012: 167) and so tend to appear less frequently in fiction – and are significantly more complicated to navigate. They occur when narrative levels are conflated beyond separation and there is a full ontological swap from one world to another. A prime example is the moment in Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* when the narrator – a figure often interpreted as a textual version of the real-life Fowles (Lambrou, 2021: 36) – leaves his present day narration and joins his fictional character, Charles, in a Victorian train carriage at the diegetic level of the story (see section 6.4). This completely conflates the previously established level of narrative discourse (world 1) with the diegetic story-world (world 2) and thus, when the two men interact in the train carriage, they subsequently inhabit a space that constitutes both levels simultaneously (world 1/2). This would be an example of descending ontological metalepsis.

As Bell & Alber (2012) argue, there is something entirely illogical and unnatural about ontological metalepses. Perhaps this is why they are so commonly associated with postmodern texts and the blatant disruption of narrative structure. Certainly it is these types of transgression – more so than Ryan's rhetorical metalepses – that are considered by McHale (1987: 119-121) when he cites Hofstadter's strange loop phenomenon. This loop occurs when, 'by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started' (Hofstadter, 1980: 10) and thus a so-called 'tangled hierarchy' is created because what were once presumed to be 'clean hierarchical levels take you by surprise and fold back in a hierarchy-violating way' (Hofstadter, 1980: 691). In addition to linking to Waugh's (1984) CHINESE-BOX STRUCTURES and INFINITE REGRESS, this conflation of narrative levels into a tangled, inseparable mess effectively removes any tangible ontological boundaries and is thus much more complex to navigate. Such transgressions also necessitate a more



substantial suspension of disbelief as the real reader is required to accept the completely impossible migration of a figure (usually a character or narrator) from one layer to another, such as when Emma Bovary leaves Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* to move to modern-day New York in Woody Allen's 1980 short story, 'The Kugelmass Episode' (ascending ontological metalepsis).

With brief transgressions that equate to opening a metaphorical window across narrative boundaries, rhetorical metalepses are much easier to follow by comparison. As Ryan explains, a quick interlude from one narrative level to another allows figures on either side of that particular boundary to communicate temporarily, but the window then shuts and those participants carry on as if it were never there at all. Although this does allow for brief metaleptic transgressions and the provisional blurring of boundaries, Ryan argues that rhetorical metalepses actually *reinforce* our awareness of those boundaries because there are no true ontological jumps and the reader is reminded of how implausible – and impossible – any movement would be.

It is perhaps for this reason that it is rhetorical metalepsis that seems to occur more commonly in children's literature. Section 6.2 will discuss some of the existing scholarship that examines how child-readers navigate such transgressions, but the previous two chapters in this thesis have already demonstrated the abundance of metalepses in my chosen middle grade texts. After all, the real reader is quickly aligned with the fictive reader at the composition level and appears to engage in direct conversation with the 'I'-narrator who is writing the story; this constitutes ascending metaleptic address from the composition-world within the text to the reader outside the fiction. When that same 'I'-narrator, the internal author, subsequently intrudes upon the diegetic world to offer critical commentary on their own fictional story or, on rarer occasions, to speak to diegetic characters directly, that triggers descending metalepsis.

Following Ryan's definitions, these would all constitute rhetorical transgressions as they occur only briefly and no participants (whether that's the real

reader, internal author/narrator or diegetic characters) make a full ontological jump to a different narrative level. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, there are moments when the use of metalepsis in my chosen texts pushes the limits of Ryan's terminology or, rather, proves that it is not always easy to separate metaleptic transgressions into such binary either/or categories. For this reason, I shall use Ryan's existing classifications as the base for my analysis here, but will ultimately suggest a possible modification that better suits the extracts discussed in section 6.3. Primarily, I shall evaluate Ryan's window metaphor as well as proposing a sliding scale on which her existing categories sit at opposite ends.

## **6.2) Metaleptic children's literature**

That a sophisticated device like metalepsis should be aimed at child-readers at all is already notable. As with so many other postmodern elements, metalepsis is narratively complex and requires 'certain levels of literary and interpretive competence' (McCallum, 1996: 398) to navigate. Yet, *equally* as with so many other postmodern elements, it is rife in contemporary children's literature and there is a plethora of evidence showing that child-readers are not only capable of understanding this device, but also seem to thoroughly enjoy it too!

Pantaleo (2008, 2011), Arizpe & Styles (2016) and Daugaard & Johansen (2014) are just some of the scholars who have examined both written and visual metalepses in picturebooks for younger readers, employing empirical research to show 'how students in Grades 1 through 7 have most competently engaged with and interpreted metafictional literature, appreciating the participatory, playful, and challenging nature of these texts' (Pantaleo, 2019: 17). Moving closer to the target reading age of the material examined in my own thesis, Bhadury (2013) considers metaleptic transgressions in middle grade books by Cornelia Funke and Michael Ende. Unlike some of the more language-based research cited here, Bhadury's study prioritises her own interpretation and interaction with the texts she examines.

Focusing less on linguistic cues – and, indeed, featuring no linguistic examples from any of her chosen texts – Bhadury instead considers how these books depict ‘complex reader-book relationships...by addressing the desire for accessing the fictional realm’ (Bhadury, 2013: 302).

Through their depictions of the processes of storymaking and storytelling, Funke’s metatextual novels provide her readers with a distinct form of critical engagement via an introduction to some of the underlying principles of narrative – specifically, novelistic – formation. In this way, Funke encourages a critical, analytical readership; such authorial strategies introduce a young audience to different ways of reading, and promote a deeper understanding of diverse texts in terms of the principles governing narrative and other textual content.

(Bhadury, 2013: 307)

With the first novel, *Inkheart*, published in 2003, Funke’s *Inkworld* trilogy thematically focuses on the magic of books and the art of reading. The central character, 12-year-old Meggie, learns that she and her bookbinder father are able to bring fictional characters out of stories and into the real world when reading aloud. As such, Bhadury argues that the novels depict ‘self-conscious narratives that display an extraordinary consciousness of books as both material artifacts and imaginative objects’ (301), dealing ‘not only with readers and the dynamics and pleasures of reading, but with the whole life cycles of books’ (303).

Funke presents to her readers a concise overview of the book trade as a whole – from writing to publishing, to its consumption, to its inclusion in libraries and archives. The trilogy’s cast of characters include, for instance, booklovers (Meggie), book restoration specialists (Mo), eccentric book collectors and connoisseurs (Elinor), authors (Fenoglio and Orpheus), royal patrons (Violante), and master illustrators (Balbulus). The depiction of the trajectory of production and consumption of books also serves a more subtle pedagogical purpose. While seeking to instruct her young audience in the life

cycles of books, Funke complicates their awareness of the levels of interaction and complexity that may characterize one's relationship with a book – bookbinders are readers too, for instance – shaking an unquestioning assumption that only the artifact and its consumer exists in an imaginative/interactive milieu, with no one else in the equation. The child reader thus gets an idea of others who may also lay claim to a text and help determine its fate.

(Bhadury, 2013: 303)

While Funke's heroes are all booklovers, the *Inkworld* novels are populated by 'illiterate villains intent on burning and destroying books, as well as instances of the indifferent callousness that can lead to the demise of entire libraries' (Bhadury, 2013: 303). It is clear, therefore, that Funke's trilogy is *thematically* metafictional taking, as it does, the central concept of 'bookishness' and reading. This connects to ideas raised by Hermansson (2019) about children's metafiction often featuring a 'youthful bookworm' (29) as the protagonist – much like Meggie in *Inkheart* – who is 'shown to benefit greatly from the ability and experience of reading, which often has lifesaving ramifications' (30; see also Webb, 2016); real-life child-readers are then encouraged to align themselves with the ideal readers presented in such texts.

It is, however, difficult to deem Funke's novels *linguistically* metafictional – especially compared to some of the more blatant examples from children's literature demonstrated in this thesis. The *Inkworld* novels are not written to be self-conscious of their narrative process or status as language, but rather demonstrate a more overt meta-awareness of fictional conventions and construction (Hutcheon, 1984), therein '[fostering] an awareness of how a story works' (Mackey, 1990: 181) by highlighting the act of meaning-making – or rather, as Bhadury explains – *book* making. Funke evidently offers her readers an understanding of the conventions and principles of novelistic narratives and provides the tools to engage with literature critically by doing so.

This is supported by Pantaleo who, in multiple studies, has shown that interacting with metafictional texts encourages child-readers not only to understand how narratives are made, but also to construct new ones themselves:

I have also described how elementary students created their own metafictional multimodal texts after reading, discussing, and writing about literature that features metafictional devices, and reported how various types of written and visual metaleptic transgressions were evident in students' multimodal stories[.]

(Pantaleo, 2019: 17; also 2009, 2011, 2016)

While Pantaleo acknowledges that the students in her classroom-based study were taught about breaching narrative boundaries *without* being taught the specific term 'metalepsis', her research revealed that students were still confidently able to identify examples of metaleptic transgressions in *Snappy the Alligator (Did Not Ask to Be in This Book!)* by the American children's author Julie Falatko. As she explains:

Overwhelmingly, the metaleptic devices written about by the students are rhetorical in nature (90.63%). The following three rhetorical metaleptic devices accounted for approximately 70% of the number of examples written about by the students: a character directly addresses readers in words or images, a narrator's narrative discourse is 'heard' by a character in the fictional world, and a character directly addresses the narrator. With respect to direction, 60.94% of the rhetorical metaleptic device examples are ascending and 39.06% examples are descending.

(Pantaleo, 2019: 20)

This is fascinating research for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the fact that these Grade 4 students (aged approximately 9-10 years-old; the British equivalent is Year 5) were able to competently identify and then accurately write about metalepsis is sure-fire proof that children *can* cope with the kind of strategies that have traditionally been considered far too complex and sophisticated for such a target audience. Although

they were not aware of the term metalepsis itself, the children in Pantaleo's study were able to recognise and understand a variety of rhetorical *and* ontological metaleptic transgressions, of both ascending and descending direction. When asked to identify the ways in which 'readers are made aware of the processes of how the story is created' (Pantaleo, 2019: 20), students identified the following metaleptic transgressions in *Snappsy*:

### **Ascending Rhetorical**

- Character directly addresses reader in words or images
- Character directly addresses narrator
- Character comments on his/her own story
- Narrator addresses readers

### **Descending Rhetorical**

- Narrator's narrative discourse is 'heard' by character in fictional world
- Narrator directly addresses character
- Narrator comments on his/her own story to character(s)

### **Ascending Ontological**

- Mise-en-abyme

### **Descending Ontological**

- Narrator becomes a character in fictional world

(Pantaleo, 2019: 21)

That students identified rhetorical transgressions at such a higher rate than ontological ones lends weight to the idea that the former are easier or more accessible to navigate, especially for child-readers. This likely stems from the fact that none of the figures involved in these transgressions ever physically shift from their existing narrative levels. For example, when the narrator at the composition level (either in my chosen texts or in the case of *Snappsy*) appears to speak directly

to the reader in the real world, there is no true conflation of ontologies and logically both the reader and narrator remain firmly in their existing levels, even if the linguistic impression created is of a ‘highly entertaining kind of feigned communication’ (Goetsch, 2004: 192; see section 5.2) in a shared space.

Moreover, the plethora of metaleptic transgressions available to identify in *Snappsy* in the first place demonstrates just how sophisticated children’s literature can be. *Snappsy* is a picturebook, as are most of the texts used by Pantaleo in her various studies, and yet even this kind of material, specifically intended for younger readers, abounds with sophisticated postmodern strategies like metalepsis. Nor, as I have mentioned previously, is this by any means rare when looking at children’s literature more widely. The texts considered in my own thesis have a target reading age of approximately 8-12 years-old, but there are plenty of examples for older and younger children, too, not to mention the increasing presence of postmodern strategies in other mainstream cultural fields like fantasy, films, comics and video games (Kukkonen & Klimek, 2011; Ryan, 2006; Thoss, 2014).

It is, therefore, my intention to further this discussion by analysing metalepsis in example texts by Cowell, Bosch and Fletcher, considering the overt manner in which such devices are put into play and also addressing the difference between (and limits of) Ryan’s rhetorical and ontological categories.

### **6.3) Rhetorical metalepsis**

#### **6.3.1) *Opening a window***

According to Ryan (2004), before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nearly all metalepses in literature were rhetorical in nature. That is, to say, the kind of transgressions identified and described by Genette (1980) when a figure addresses someone at a different narrative level, usually a character (descending) or the reader (ascending), but without leaving their original narrative sphere in doing so. This kind of metalepsis

can end up reinforcing the very boundaries it appears to break, even while it delivers an often comical, conversational interlude between figures at different narrative levels. As Ryan says, a metaphorical window is opened between narrative layers and participants on either side are able to look or speak through the gap; they remain aware of the opaque boundary surrounding that window and, importantly, do not step through the gap themselves.

This is certainly the most common form of transgression in my chosen texts and, as seen in Chapters 4 and 5, the respective internal authors all frequently appear to break the external boundary between reality and fiction and speak directly to the reader from the composition-world. Cowell even goes a step further by establishing at the start of her *Wizards* series that the novels are being narrated by a character in the book (so ascending rhetorical metalepsis when the *character* directly addresses the reader), with the words themselves subsequently being translated and filtered through Cowell herself. By comparison, both Fletcher and Bosch ostentatiously set themselves up as external and internal authors simultaneously, and so the communicative nature of the composition-world – helped by the chatty, *skaz* narration and frequent use of personal pronouns – more obviously indicates the apparent proximity between ‘you’ and ‘I’. Again, though, this is an illusion and these brief conversational interludes are almost always wrapped up reasonably quickly in favour of getting back to the main story-world where the plot is unfolding, hence why they are examples of ascending rhetorical metalepsis and not ontological, at least according to Ryan’s terminology.

Furthermore, these texts tend to delineate the narrative levels within them pretty clearly, presumably to facilitate child-readers who otherwise would have to swap back and forth between the composition-world and the diegetic story-world every time the narrator tried to talk to them. In Bosch’s novels, for instance, although readers are consistently made aware of the overarching presence of the internal author, who frequently interrupts the main story-world to offer commentary on the text, this is typically done by introducing an entirely new chapter that swaps the narrative back to the easily identifiable composition-world



with the overt 'I'-narrator. This keeps the chatty, present tense narrative of the internal author distinct from the third-person, past tense story-world and assists child-readers in the reading process by avoiding the need for them to repeatedly make sudden, abrupt swaps between narrative styles.

Similarly, when the internal author does interrupt the diegetic story-world more explicitly, it tends to be presented parenthetically – e.g. 'Grandpa Wayne (as you know *if* you've read my first book, and if you haven't, what can I say there are risks to everything) was a retired auto mechanic' (Bosch, 2009: 175) – or as a footnote at the bottom of the page – such as, 'It doesn't surprise me that Ms. Mauvais's chef would want to make shark fin soup' (Bosch, 2009: 74). Again, this means the narrative of the story-world is not disrupted too much, and child-readers do not have to cope with constant world-switches between narrative levels.

The following example, in which a more abrupt world-switch from the diegetic story-world to Bosch's composition-world does occur, is relatively rare in the *Secret Series*:

**(6.i)**

A magician's house is impossible to find. At least that is what Cass was beginning to think.

"Are you sure this is the right street?" she asked.

"How could I be sure? I've never been here before," Max-Ernest pointed out.

"Do you *think* it's the right street then?"

"Well, the sign said—"

Wait! Stop! Hold on!

I just realized I was about to reveal the name of the magician's street. That would have been a serious mistake. It's one thing for Cass and Max-Ernest to

make the ill-fated journey themselves; I could never live with myself if you placed yourself in the same danger they did.

Let me begin again. This time, I promise to pay attention[.]

(Bosch, 2008: 72)

Extract (6.i) begins in the main story-world. It starts with the free direct thought of Cass (hence the simple present), but quickly moves to the typical narrative style of the diegetic story-world, as evidenced by the third-person reference and simple past in the reporting tag, 'she asked'.

Shortly after, however, this narrative style is interrupted – literally – by the internal author. The three imperatives, while subject-less, are indicative of address to someone *from* someone else, so readers can infer that this is once again the 'I'-narrator in the composition-world talking directly to 'you'. This is confirmed in the next line, when Bosch admits that he was about to reveal a bit of information that should, as per his own rules, remain secret. Furthermore, although the simple past is still used initially, 'I just realized', the adverb 'just' shows that this specifically relates to the very recent past: that is, what Bosch *just* wrote on the page. All of this, again, typifies Waugh's (1984) VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR, especially as he quickly offers to start the passage again, while his deliberate and sudden intrusion upon the diegetic story fulfils the OVER-OBTRUSIVE quality, too.

Importantly, it is a prime example of rhetorical metalepsis. The transgression from the composition level into the story-world initially constitutes descending rhetorical metalepsis, with the narrator briefly putting the story on hold while he speaks from his own level of narrative discourse (hence why it is not ontological metalepsis because 'I' is still very much in his own narrative level even as he intrudes upon the story-world). The fact that 'I' then also addresses 'you' subsequently allows for ascending rhetorical metalepsis from the narrator to the reader.

Of course, the above example offers a very abrupt metaleptic transgression that, as I said, is relatively rare in Bosch's novels. Even as the text continues directly after (6.i), as shown in (6.ii), Bosch returns to his usual tendencies of maintaining a relative distance between the narrative levels – whether that be graphological or parenthetical.

**(6.ii)**

A magician's house is impossible to find. At least that is what Cass was beginning to think.

'Are you sure this is the right street?' she asked.

"How could I be sure? I've never been here before," Max-Ernest pointed out.

"Do you *think* it's the right street then?"

(Now watch this: I've come up with a very novel way of hiding the street name. I'm going to leave it blank.)

'Well, the sign said \_\_\_\_ Road," Max-Ernest continued.

(Bosch, 2008: 72-73)

This is much more typical of Bosch's writing, with the inclusion of brackets around the internal author's intrusive comment clearly separating it from the main narrative of the diegetic story. In just two simple sentences displayed parenthetically, the narrative has swapped to the oral tone of the composition-world, with proximal deictic markers such as 'now' and 'this' signifying the internal author's shared communicative space with the reader; the addition of the first-person, present tense narrative style of 'I' is also clearly at odds with the third-person, past tense diegetic narrative.

Of all the authors used in this project, Bosch is the one who typically exhibits the most effort in delineating between the narrative levels in his texts. In addition to displaying intrusive metaleptic comments parenthetically, as in (6.ii), he frequently

uses footnotes to convey the thoughts and opinions of the internal author without disrupting the diegetic story. For instance:

**(6.iii)**

Once [Cass] solved the mystery of what happened to the magician, maybe then she could confide in them – and maybe then they would trust her again.\*

[...]

\* SHOULD SHE HAVE CONFESSED ALL? I WILL LET YOU, READER, BE THE JUDGE – AS EXPERIENCED AS I KNOW YOU ARE AT PLOTTING AND SCHEMING AND GETTING IN AND OUT OF SCRAPES. GROWN-UPS CAN BE USEFUL AT TIMES – MONEY AND CAR RIDES COME TO MIND. BUT THEY ALSO HAVE A HABIT OF GETTING IN THE WAY WHEN YOU WANT TO DO SOMETHING THEY DON'T APPROVE OF.

(Bosch, 2008: 118)

Footnotes are used prevalently throughout Bosch's texts, usually with the purpose of educating the reader with something useful but not entirely pertinent to the plot (e.g. 'Seeing letters in colour is sometimes called *audition colorée* – coloured hearing' (Bosch, 2008: 152) and 'As it happens, she *was* right; it was a solarium – albeit a unique one' (Bosch, 2008: 224)) or with comic asides to the reader (as in, 'But please don't draw any conclusions about the kind of people who write novels. After all, not all novelists are power-hungry madmen – some are power-hungry madwomen' (Bosch, 2008: 142)). In every case, these footnotes offer a world-switch back to the narrative of the internal author in the composition-world but completely distinct to, and without any further interruption or intrusion upon, the diegetic narrative in the main story-world.

The very presence of footnotes in these texts, regardless of what is included in them, is fascinating in relation to children's literature. Given their association with academic discourse, it is already somewhat odd that footnotes should be found in books aimed at a target readership of children, let alone to the level and

frequency at which they occur in Bosch's texts. Hardly a chapter goes by without the use of at least one footnote (often more) and they perfectly mimic the format and style of those used in academic discourse. Indeed, in her analysis of *Barney's Version*, Gavins (2013) observes that Richler's use of footnotes 'adds to the impression of the novel as an edited autobiography, although, of course, the editor is just as fictional as the main narrator of the novel' (77). McCallum (1996) likewise cites footnotes as one of the 'main strategies whereby metafictional novels can be self-conscious about their existence as language', highlighting how they 'draw attention to the physicality of texts' and deliberately mix 'literary and extra-literary genres, such as the journal, letter, newspaper items, historical documents, and so on' (405). Often, the presence of footnotes in postmodern texts is meant to reinforce the purported authenticity of the text, while simultaneously reminding the real reader of its fictionality through blatantly SELF-REFLEXIVE IMAGES, OVER-SYSTEMATISED STRUCTURAL DEVICES and EXPLICIT PARODY OF NON-LITERARY TEXTS (Waugh, 1984).

In the *Secret Series*, the claim that everything described in these books really happened is a central tenet of the story, and one that the reader is meant to buy into for a successful reading of the novels. In many ways, the frequent use of footnotes with genuine facts or interesting tidbits of information (such as defining synaesthesia) does help to reinforce Bosch's claim to veracity because it, again, situates the fiction in relation to elements that are demonstrably true. After all, Bosch tells readers himself – via a footnote, of course – that 'mixing some truth into a lie is always the most effective technique' (2008: 62).

However, Bosch's footnotes go so much further than this. As outlined above, they offer him an easy way of constantly intruding upon the story-world without actually interrupting it. While (6.i) saw the internal author literally cutting off his own diegetic narrative and forcing a sudden world-switch to the hierarchically superior composition-world, Bosch's footnotes allow for self-contained interludes that avoid disrupting or frustrating the reading process. This is all the more obvious in (6.iii), where the 'I'-narrator addresses the reader directly, first with the opening interrogative that invites the reader to share their own thoughts, and then through

the second-person pronoun alongside the vocative 'reader'. As with the opening of *The Name of This Book is Secret*, the reader is quickly dramatised and told that they are 'experienced...at plotting and scheming and getting in and out of scrapes'. Awareness of the target readership is also demonstrated with the humorous remark about the role of grown-ups in a child's life. As a side note, Bosch develops this idea in his spin-off instructional novel, *Write This Book: A Do-It-Yourself Mystery*, in which there is an entire section dedicated to removing the parents from most children's books so they don't disrupt the protagonists' inevitable adventure(s) by 'getting in the way, making your heroes eat breakfast or do their homework' (Bosch, 2014: 58).

This awareness of his target audience in terms of what is written on the page presumably also carries over to *how* it is written, therein supporting my claim that the use of footnotes – while potentially stylistically complicated and inherently self-reflexive – actually makes the reading process easier for children to navigate. (6.iii) is also a clear example of ascending rhetorical metalepsis, something which Pantaleo has demonstrated is not overly challenging for child-readers to identify or understand. It contributes to the inherent postmodern quality of the story, seemingly breaking the boundary of the text by allowing the reader and narrator to engage in communication directly (albeit while maintaining the physical ontological boundary between them, hence why it's still rhetorical metalepsis). It also draws attention to the role of the reader, contributing to the metafictional feel of the text, too. But, crucially, it is kept deliberately separate from the main narrative of the story-world.

Bosch, I am sure, could have found a way of inserting the footnote in (6.iii) into the main narrative. Although it would have necessitated a change in narrative style, the overall effect would have remained the same with the real reader still being invited to cast their opinions on Cass's decision to lie to her grandfathers. The fact that it does not, then, surely indicates Bosch's awareness of his target audience. This story (and the way it is told) is already incredibly sophisticated, and the self-reflexivity of the footnotes only makes it more so. However, the footnotes allow Bosch as the internal author to be a consistent presence within the story-world, but

without actually entering the diegetic level himself. To do so would either require constant world-switches because of the frequency with which Bosch uses descending rhetorical metalepsis to comment on the events of his own story, or it could be turned into descending ontological metalepsis if Bosch – as the internal author – were to move himself fully to the diegetic level and appear physically alongside his characters (see section 6.4).

Instead, to avoid any confusion or potential strain on the child-reader, Bosch deploys footnotes where necessary to avoid overly blending the narrative levels beyond recognition. As Ryan said: ‘Rhetorical metalepsis opens a small window that allows a quick glance across levels, but the window closes after a few sentences, and the operation ends up *reasserting the existence of boundaries*’ (2004: 441; emphasis added). This is precisely what we see in Bosch’s *Secret Series*. The internal author/narrator never leaves the composition level (at least that we know of at this point). The real reader only exists in the real world, even if they are invited to step into the composition-world through the consistent use of second-person pronouns and repeated metafictional techniques that position them as the fictive reader alongside Bosch’s ‘you’-narratee. The diegetic characters are completely separate from all of this as well, and cannot be accessed physically by any of the other figures seen at hierarchically superior narrative levels.

Indeed, in each of the texts examined here, the real reader does not have access to the diegetic level in which the main story unfolds. As illustrated in the previous chapters, any appearance of ‘you’ (whether referring to the internal author’s fictional narratee or indicating direct address to the real reader outside the text) is exclusively controlled by the narrator from the composition level. Even if the second-person is fleetingly mentioned within the diegetic story-world – as in ‘Now, Wish wasn’t entirely what you might expect from a Warrior princess’ (Cowell, 2019: 85) – it is still very much done in the style of the internal author *telling* the story to ‘you’, rather than actually bringing ‘you’ to the diegetic level. Again, this serves as rhetorical metalepsis as no figures actually change their ontological positions between narrative levels.

Often these more blended examples further the metanarrative qualities of my chosen texts too. For example:

**(6.iv)**

The other Wizards drew their swords, and the growling snowcats' fur stood up with fear to such an extent that they looked like furry puffballs. The wolves padded restlessly, trying to form a protective circle around their humans. Only the smaller sprites shared Xar's enthusiasm, but that was because they were too young to know any better.

I don't know if you have ever seen a sprite, so I'd better describe these ones to you.

There were five larger sprites, all faintly resembling a human crossed with a fierce, elegant insect.

(Cowell, 2017b: 25)

The sudden introduction of 'I' part way through this extract is an ascending rhetorical metaleptic transgression in which the narrator begins talking directly to 'you' outside the text. It instantly triggers a world-switch to the composition-world, where 'I' and 'you' can communicate directly, but it does so without ever leaving even the graphological context of the diegetic story-world. Indeed, other than a new line break, this snippet of metalepsis is fully embedded within the third-person, past tense narrative style of the diegetic story-world and could easily be glossed over if not for the linguistic cues.

Once again, it reinforces the oral quality of Cowell's *Wizards* series and any reference to 'you' within the diegetic level mimics a real-life storyteller passing an aside to a passive reader (or listener) in their presence, as discussed in Chapter 5. The purpose, therefore, is less to offer commentary on the story or invite direct communication with the reader, as with Bosch, but rather to solidify the narrator's role in telling the story to the reader personally. It does not reveal anything about the internal author's personality or character, nor does it offer their thoughts on the



context of the events they are telling us about. Instead, it is a simple way for the storyteller to introduce some necessary description by attributing that very necessity to the reader, as if they had requested it first.

Unlike Bosch and Fletcher who actively encourage purported dialogue between the internal author and real reader, Cowell's 'I'-narrator uses the composition-world to exert her control over the diegetic narrative but casts the real-life child-reader as a passive listener who is addressed but not necessarily expected to respond. Returning to (5.ix) and metanarrative comments such as 'Let me introduce you to these three unlikely heroes' (Cowell, 2020b: 10), it is clear that the ascending rhetorical metaleptic transgressions towards the reader outside Cowell's novels instead simulate oral storytelling and underline the narrator's own awareness of their role in communicating that story to an audience.

Fletcher, on the other hand, deliberately uses the composition-world in each of his texts to establish a direct dialogue between the narrator (a fictional version of the real-life Fletcher) and the reader in the real world, often through the use of interrogatives. Consider the following:

**(6.v)**

Have you ever made a wish?

Of course you have! Silly me.

OK, but have you ever *seen* a wish?

No, I didn't think so!

That's because the kind of wishes you can see only live in the forests surrounding the North Pole, and they only exist at Christmas.

Now, I bet you're all thinking, *That's great, Mr Narrator, but what does a wish look like?*

Well, I'm glad you asked.

This is a wish: [drawing]

(Fletcher, 2019: 63)

As seen in previous chapters, the chatty, oral tone established here is commonplace in Fletcher's texts and cements this extract within the composition-world. The use of interrogatives followed immediately by an assumed answer that effectively puts words into the reader's mouth builds the illusion of spontaneous dialogue between two interlocutors, despite neither actually being able to communicate directly or leave their respective narrative spheres.

Following Ryan's definition, this would be yet another example of ascending rhetorical metalepsis. Not only is this interlude relatively brief, with the text soon returning to the main diegetic story in which the protagonist, William, has just met Santa, but the boundaries between the reader and the internal author are made clear when the reader becomes aware that they have not truly been able to answer the narrator's questions. Furthermore, the reference to 'Mr Narrator' – when putting words into the reader's head – draws explicit attention to the role of the narrator in the storytelling process and highlights his purported authorial control over the story's construction, therein further reinforcing the logical narrative boundaries between the real world and the fiction.

That same constructedness is also evidenced through the inclusion of a drawing. For the purposes of Fletcher's novel, a wish apparently looks like an upside down dandelion with wings attached at the base and an overall magical *sparkle*. No linguistic description is given for what a wish looks like so the illustration on the page (courtesy of artist Shane Devries) is the only thing on which readers can base their mental image. The fact that the narrator is evidently aware of this to the extent that he deliberately directs the reader's attention to the drawing – introduced via the proximally deictic, 'This is a wish' – not only highlights the construction of the physical book and the authorial control that the visibly inventing narrator has over it, but it also triggers yet another metaleptic transgression.

The narrator has chosen to include a physical image at the composition level of the text, knowing that it will be viewed and accessed by the reader in the real world. Combining this with a proximal deictic reference, however, implies that the reader is meant to be fictionally sharing the same space as the narrator (through alignment with his 'you'-narratee in the composition-world) and thus it could be argued that there is a more significant blurring of the narrative boundaries separating the real world and composition level at this particular point. Of course, even though the reader is able to access the image at the composition level, logically none of the respective participants ever leave their existing ontological planes and so, following Ryan's definition, this would still be an example of rhetorical metalepsis.

Yet the ostentatious inclusion of self-reflexive images within the text, combined with the underlying implication of a shared communicative space, perhaps moves this particular transgression a step away from being purely rhetorical. This is all the more apparent given that this is not the only occasion in Fletcher's writing in which narrative boundaries are crossed in this way. A similar transgression occurs just a few pages earlier in *The Christmasaurus and the Winter Witch* when Fletcher comments:

**(6.vi)**

To the casual observer, it would appear that there was nothing here. That's because, to see Santa's North Pole Snow Ranch, you have to be invited.

Lucky for you then that Santa has allowed me to give you all your very own Cosmos-Converting Candy Cane.

Here you go: [drawing]

OK, this is just a drawing, so it's probably best you don't eat it – but its magic is no less powerful.

(2019: 49-50)

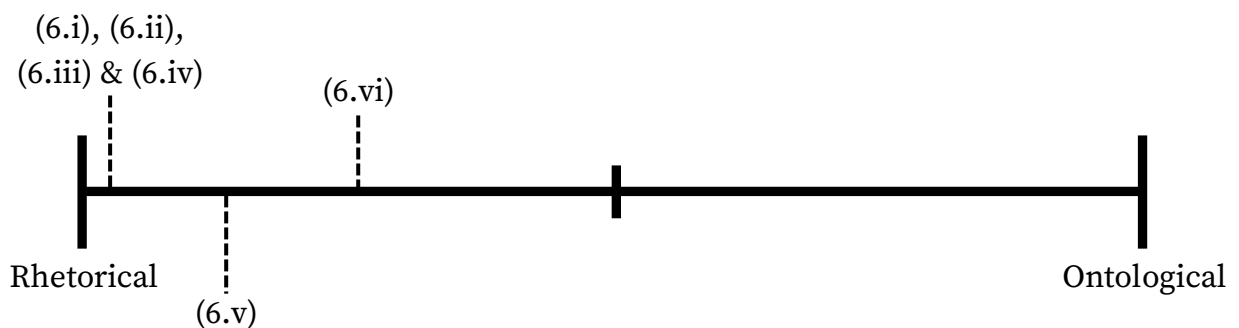
As with (6.v), this extract sees the 'I'-narrator deliberately directing the reader's attention towards a 2D image on the page. This time, however, he acknowledges that it is 'just a drawing', highlighting the artifice and construction of the image, albeit while simultaneously claiming that it is still a magical item that is presumably based on something real (at least within the context of the story). When Fletcher advises the child-reader not to eat the hand-drawn candy cane, there is a clear metaleptic transgression that goes further than just the usual rhetorical metaleptic dialogue between the internal author and reader. Not only does it reinforce the multiple narrative levels between the real world and the text, it also emphasises the *physical* image that exists only on the page of the *physical* book held in the hands of the real reader.

What is noteworthy here is that this 'Cosmos-Converting Candy Cane' has apparently been given to Fletcher (the internal author/narrator) by Santa (a diegetic character in the book, albeit one that triggers the reader's own schematic knowledge of Father Christmas). The candy cane is thus a story-level item that has been given to the narrator by a diegetic character, and the narrator in the composition-world is now acting as an intermediary to pass the item to the reader outside the text. That final step is a logical impossibility (Bell & Alber, 2012) and so the candy cane is replaced with a drawing instead, something that the narrator acknowledges through proximal deictic reference as he points the illustration out to the reader.

Overall, this is a much starker transgression than the image of the wish in (6.v). While the previous drawing was provided to help the reader imagine what a key story element looked like, (6.vi) relies on a purely fictional item reaching out from the diegetic level towards the reader in the real world. Following Ryan's classification, it still does not fully disrupt the overall narrative structure and the metaleptic transgression in which the candy cane appears is brief, thus it would likely be considered rhetorical in nature. If anything, having the drawing on the page instead of the real candy cane further reminds the reader of the logical narrative boundaries within the text.

However, there is something about it that *feels* more ontological. By no means is this a full ontological conflation like those seen in Fowles, Pirandello or O’Brien, in which the narrator and character levels are blurred beyond distinction, but it still feels like a step away from being a purely rhetorical transgression as Ryan defines it. For this reason, I should like to propose a slight amendment to Ryan’s initial terminology. The distinction between rhetorical and ontological metalepsis is still crucial and, I will say, incredibly helpful as an easy way to identify initial transgressions between narrative levels. My personal preference would be to consider these terms less of an either/or binary and instead propose that they exist as opposite ends of a sliding scale or cline.

If such transgressions were considered along a spectrum, for instance, then (6.i), (6.ii), (6.iii) and (6.iv) would all sit firmly at the rhetorical end of the scale. (6.v) would move slightly further along, with (6.vi) being even closer to the ontological side; both of these would, however, remain on the dominant rhetorical side of the scale, as shown in Figure 6.2.



**Figure 6.2:** *Metaleptic spectrum ranging from ‘rhetorical’ to ‘ontological’.* Extracts (6.i, 6.ii, 6.iii, 6.iv) are purely rhetorical metalepsis; (6.v) is mostly rhetorical with a possible ontological element; (6.vi) is mostly rhetorical with a clear ontological element as a story-level item is passed vertically to higher narrative levels.

Introducing a spectrum of metalepsis also helps to classify *ongoing* metaleptic transgressions, such as those more prominently displayed in the shared communicative space established between the internal author and reader in Bosch’s

*Secret Series* and Fletcher's *The Creakers*. While there is still an overt composition-world within *The Christmasaurus and the Winter Witch* – which thus allows for the direct narratorial address to the reader seen in extracts (6.v) and (6.vi) – the majority of the novel takes place at the diegetic level with the internal author intruding either parenthetically (to allow for graphological demarcation) or very briefly at the start of new chapters to set up key information. *The Creakers*, on the other hand, divides the diegetic chapters with short interludes in which the narrator speaks directly to the reader about how the novel is progressing as he writes it (in the composition-world) and as the audience reads it (in the real world) in real time. For instance:

**(6.vii)**

*How are you getting on? Sorry I've not spoken to you for a while – I've been busy writing this story, and I guessed you'd be busy reading it. It's all getting a bit topsy-turvy, isn't it? All this upside down, backwards stuff! In fact, if you turn this book upside down and read this page backwards, it tells a nice story about fluffy kittens.*

[written upside down at the bottom of the page]

*...Only joking. Just wanted to see if you'd turn the book upside down.*

(Fletcher, 2018: 229)

Again, (6.vii) is firmly within the composition-world, satisfying all the linguistic cues in terms of tense, person and style. This extract is also graphologically distinct from the main story-world; the narratorial interludes between chapters in *The Creakers* are printed in italics on an entirely new page, with the background coloured grey (as opposed to the plain white page of the main fiction). As seen with Bosch in extracts (6.ii) and (6.iii), this allows for an easy world-switch that requires very little effort on the part of child-readers as it is both linguistically and visually signposted that there is a change in narrative levels. In the case of (6.vii), readers are jumping from the diegetic level back up to the composition-world, whereupon

there is – following Ryan’s terms – an ascending rhetorical transgression from the narrator to the reader.

Firstly, the narrator addresses the reader directly with the opening interrogative, ‘How are you getting on?’ Although this does not require – or even give space for – a response, it once again establishes the shared communicative space between the reader and internal author. Rather than putting words into the reader’s mouth this time, Fletcher apologises for his prolonged absence. This refers specifically to a lack of these conversational interludes between chapters; logically he has always been present as the narrator telling the story presented within the diegetic level but, as he admits himself in the next clause, ‘I’ve been busy writing this story, and I guessed you’d be busy reading it’.

This shows a meta-awareness of the storytelling process, acknowledging the respective teller and receptor roles as the reader progresses through the novel. Furthermore, by laying claim to the writing process, it is again indicated that the narrator is a (fictional) version of the real-life Fletcher, who is of course also the published name on the front cover of the novel and who, logically, is the one writing the book. Despite the implication that the reader is following Fletcher’s writing process in real time and then communicating simultaneously and spontaneously via the composition-world in the simple present, readers know that all these chatty moments already exist and that the composition level is temporally located some time prior to the publication of the novel. The frequent ascending rhetorical metaleptic transgressions, however, encourage the reader to put this knowledge aside and engage with the narrator as if communicating directly.

This also allows for moments of playful comedy such as that seen at the end of (6.vii). Fletcher jokingly suggests that ‘if you turn this book upside down and read this page backwards, it tells a nice story about fluffy kittens’. Firstly, the continued proximal deictic references to ‘this book’ and ‘this page’ signify the supposed closeness between the narrator and reader, further cementing the illusion of a shared conversation space at the composition level of the text. Although

implausible, this makes readers feel that they are being told the story at the same time as it is being written, therein giving the overt 'I'-narrator the power to play around with the text that readers are engaging with on the page.

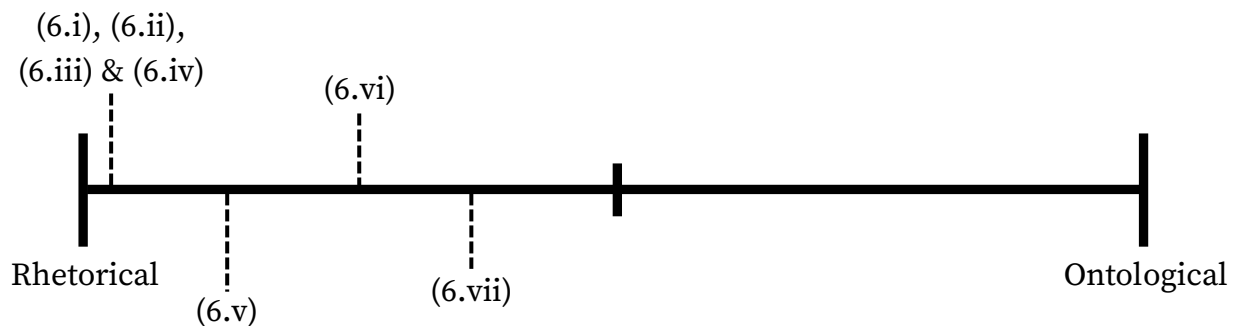
Furthermore, the playful nature of this is perfectly captured when it is jokingly suggested that reading the page backwards will reveal 'a nice story about fluffy kittens' rather than the darker, scarier story that the reader will have to engage with should they proceed as normal. This inverts the usual cultural reference to backmasking: 'the encoding of audio materials (such as words conveying a secret message) on a recording in such a way that they can only be heard and understood when the recording is played backwards' (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Within popular culture, backmasking is commonly associated with Christian groups claiming that prominent rock artists were using the technique to hide Satanic messages in their songs – a claim that remains unsurprisingly unfounded. For Fletcher to suggest that reading this particular text upside down and backwards in order to have a *nicer* experience not only conveys how potentially unpleasant the existing story will turn out to be should readers continue reading, it also jokingly turns the usual cultural reference to backmasking on its head (literally in this case).

Although it is the reader's choice to turn the book upside down – albeit likely without really expecting it to reveal a story about fluffy kittens – the idea is placed in their mind solely by the narrator. When one does, inevitably, turn the book around it is revealed to be a practical joke or 'gotcha' on the part of the narrator: 'Only joking. Just wanted to see if you'd turn the book upside down'. In some ways this might make the reader feel gullible; after all, how could one fall for such a silly trick? However, it also reveals a lot about the relationship that has been established between the reader and narrator at this point in the book. Readers clearly feel close enough to the narrator – and trust him equally – so that when he makes a comment about something relating to 'this page' they expect him to follow through on it, which he does. It also signifies an element of playful interactivity where the real reader must engage with the physical text in some way beyond just reading the



written words on the page – especially when they then witness Fletcher poking fun at them, as if he has literally just seen them turn the book upside down.

By Ryan’s terminology, this is ascending rhetorical metalepsis as it consists of the narrator talking directly to the reader again. However, the EXPLICIT DRAMATISATION OF THE READER (Waugh, 1984) in the real world makes this interaction move away from being purely rhetorical in nature. By getting the real reader to turn the book upside down, the narrator within the text is able to force the reader’s hand *in the real world* – admittedly through a practical joke to test their gullibility. This implies an added level of authorial control that transcends the external boundary of the fiction and pushes the real reader to move and engage with the physical book held in their hands. Consequently, as with (6.vi), while this technically constitutes rhetorical metalepsis as it is a brief interlude and does not fully disrupt the text’s narrative boundaries or trigger a full ontological swap, it still feels like something more because there is a fictional element within the text that is reaching (at least contextually) beyond the novel’s limits. Again, this can be positioned further along the metaleptic spectrum, indicating that it is more than ‘just’ rhetorical (Figure 6.3).



**Figure 6.3:** *Metaleptic spectrum showing (6.vii) as mostly rhetorical but with the ability to affect action in the real world, hence possible ontological blurring.*

### 6.3.2) *Pulling back a curtain*

The extracts analysed above illustrate the limits of Ryan’s binary terms when it comes to rhetorical and ontological metalepses, with certain situations stemming towards an ontological *feel* even if they are technically rhetorical in nature. For this

reason, viewing Ryan's categories as opposite ends of a sliding scale is helpful and one can position these transgressions along the spectrum to reflect this better.

I would, however, also like to address the ways in which the consistency and prevalence of the composition levels in my chosen texts further problematise Ryan's original categories. The illusion of a shared communicative space between the internal author and real reader naturally triggers ascending metaleptic transgressions when the 'I'-narrator speaks directly to 'you' from within the text's composition-world. In some cases, like Cowell, these narratorial asides are reasonably brief and cast the reader in a passive role. In Fletcher and Bosch, however, the reader is encouraged to take a much more active role and can even become a co-collaborator in the construction of the narrative (see Chapter 5).

Of course, the reader does not ever actually leave their position in the real world and the internal author does not venture beyond their own narrative sphere in the composition-world. Yet the sheer omnipresence of this composition-world effectively creates an ongoing shared language space – at least within the context of the novel – that essentially serves as a combined world between the reader and narrator, in which the diegetic story is then embedded. Thus, the real reader is never able to escape the knowledge that the narrator is supposedly *right there* alongside them and waiting to engage in spontaneous, real time conversation once again.

For example, at the height of a particularly tense moment in *The Name of This Book is Secret*, Bosch cuts off a diegetic chapter to start another one at the composition level entitled 'Chapter Seventeen: I've Changed My Mind':

**(6.viii)**

Or maybe I should say I've come to my senses. Rather than continuing to narrate the adventures of Cass and Max-Ernest, I'm going to end this book here – while they're still safe. More importantly, while you're still safe.

I know, you're angry with me. You've read this far – you feel you've earned the right to know how the story ends.

Go ahead: laugh, scream, cry, throw the book at the wall.

If you knew – well, there's the rub, you don't know, do you? If you knew the truth, I was going to say, if you knew everything this story entails, all those grizzly, gruesome facts, all those horrible, harrowing details, you'd thank me for sparing you. Alas, since you don't know, you will go to your grave hating me, thinking I am your enemy – when, for the first time, I am acting like a friend.

(Bosch, 2008: 188)

Firstly, the direct address to 'you' indicates blatant ascending metalepsis from the internal author in the composition-world to the reader outside the text (who is naturally implicated in the second-person pronoun and aligned with the fictive reader/narratee). Readers are also reminded of their role in the ongoing storytelling process with a metafictional reference to how much they have read so far, coupled with the suggestion that they might throw the physical book at the wall to vent their frustration that Bosch is refusing to continue the story. Like Fletcher before, Bosch uses interrogatives to reinforce his address to the reader – although in this particular example it never quite simulates a full dialogue as in (6.v) – and reminds his audience of the purported veracity of his text through the claim that he has to stop to preserve the safety of both the real reader and the diegetic characters.

Of course, within just a few pages, the novel picks up again and readers return to the diegetic level as Cass ventures into the villains' lair. Interestingly, the reason Bosch ultimately decides to continue writing is through the illusion that the reader has bribed him with his favourite chocolate. The real reader does not actually have a say in this; the words are already written on the page (about halfway through the nearly 400 page novel so logically the story was always going to proceed regardless of audience input) and the decision to go and fetch the chocolate that will inspire the rest of the book is made entirely by Bosch within the composition-world:

‘It would be wrong to eat the chocolate without offering you something in return. I’m not the sort of person who accepts a bribe and then pretends he doesn’t know what the bribe means’ (Bosch, 2008: 189-190). If anything, this brief chapter reads more like a dramatic monologue in which the reader watches – with simultaneous trepidation and humour – as the speaker has a minor breakdown and convinces himself to follow through on what he previously thought was a terrible decision: ‘In short, if I want to eat the chocolate, I must keep writing’ (Bosch, 2008: 190).

As with the extracts discussed previously, this is rhetorical metalepsis following Ryan’s terminology. Although approximately three pages in total, this chapter is a brief interlude from the diegetic story-world and features no ontological jumps between narrative levels for either the internal author or real reader. Instead, Bosch puts his story on pause, opens Ryan’s metaphorical window between the composition-world and the real world, and shouts across to the reader to explain why he has decided not to continue. The reader watches the internal author deliberate, but eventually the window shuts and the story resumes as normal.

It is this idea of the window closing that feels problematic to me, however. The prevalence of the composition-world here means readers can never fully escape the internal author’s presence. Even when he is not talking to ‘you’ directly, the reader is nevertheless aware that at any moment they could read a new line or turn the page and be confronted with the overt ‘I’-narrator in the composition-world. As such, it feels overly simplistic to suggest that once the window of rhetorical metalepsis has closed, the opaque boundary between narrative levels returns completely. Although those boundaries are in place, the reader is in a constant state of preparation in case they get broken again. To my mind, this sense of readiness or anticipation is not accurately conveyed by Ryan’s window analogy.

Instead, it might be better replaced with a metaphorical curtain. When a rhetorical metaleptic transgression occurs, that curtain is pulled back and briefly removes the tangible boundary between narrative levels. This potentially simulates a conflated space, but the communication between participants proceeds as Ryan

originally suggested – without anyone physically crossing that ontological boundary – and eventually the curtain is drawn shut again. A curtain, however, is less substantial than a window: a sudden breeze might knock it astray, opening a chink that reveals the other side; noise might creep through the material; it can be pulled back at any moment with more speed, surprise and (perhaps) panache than opening a window.

Importantly, a curtain better reflects the flimsy nature of a narrative boundary that has already been crossed before. If the narrator has spoken to the reader once, it is likely that it will happen again and the reader waits with bated breath for that direct communication to start once more. Rather than conceptualising an open window, the narrator instead keeps pulling back a curtain between the narrative levels and revealing himself as the true mastermind and creator as the story progresses. Importantly, even when the curtain is drawn, the reader is aware of both the narrator *and* the curtain's presence. Thus these metalepses cannot be purely rhetorical in nature as it is more than a '*temporary breach of illusion*' (Ryan, 2004: 441; emphasis added) and ultimately does '[cause] two separate environments to blend' (442), even if the basic structure of the overarching narrative universe remains intact.

In addition to accommodating the inescapable omnipresence of the composition-world that makes the reader constantly aware of the *possibility* of metaleptic communication with the internal author, my proposed curtain analogy also better explains the flimsy border between narrative levels when, in Fletcher's *The Creakers* in particular, diegetic characters are able to overhear the narration that is going on above them. Consider the following extract which displays descending metalepsis:

**(6.ix)**

(a) Lucy's eyes darted around her room. (b) She knew hiding underneath her duvet wasn't going to get her out of this. (c) She couldn't run out of the door

or the Creakers would snatch her. (d) She looked at her bedroom window, but it was far too high to jump.

(e) *Would you be quiet while I'm thinking!* Lucy thought.

(f) *Who, me? Sorry!*

(g) *Where can I go?* she thought. (h) *Not out of the door, not out of the window.* (i) *They'll find me in the wardrobe... there must be another way.*

(Fletcher, 2018: 97)

This is a particularly curious example – although by no means rare in *The Creakers* – and I should like to examine it line by line, as marked above. It begins firmly in the main story-world, as evidenced in (a), and is narrated in the third-person, using the simple past. The reference to Lucy and, more specifically, the frantic movement of her eyes signifies that the events of this passage are focalised (Genette, 1980) through her character-level perception.

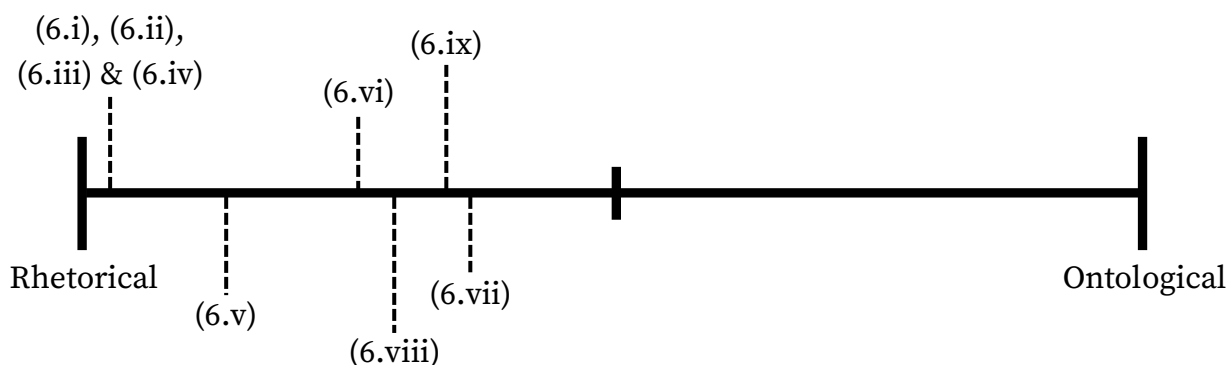
At (b), the mental verb ‘knew’ brings readers closer to Lucy’s current internal experience through psycho-narration, a verbal rendering of ‘characters’ feelings, fears, wishes and motivations’ (Fludernik, 2009: 80) within the narrative discourse. Although ‘the language of psycho-narration originates with the narrator, the character’s consciousness is the theme of the discourse’ (Rundquist, 2017: 36; see also Cohn, 1978) and, as such, readers feel like they are able to access what is going on inside Lucy’s head. This is supported by the proximal deictic demonstrative ‘this’ (referring to Lucy’s current situation) and the future projection, ‘wasn’t going to get her out’, which are aligned with the character’s perception rather than the narrator, even if the grammar still reflects the standard third-person narrative style of the diegetic world with references to ‘she’ and ‘her’. This continues in (c) with subjective modality in ‘couldn’t run’ that, again, projects the character’s perspective and in (d) where one can assume that the evaluation of it being ‘too high to jump’ stems from Lucy, especially given the perception verb ‘looked’ earlier in the sentence.

The language here can ultimately be attributed to the narrator, but it is mediated through character-level subjectivity that indicates Lucy's focalisation and perception instead. What is interesting is that the presentation of Lucy's internal thoughts is then interrupted by none other than Lucy herself! Apparently annoyed at the running commentary from the narrator, she begins talking to him directly in (e) to ask him to be quiet. This suggests that the narrator is acting as some kind of intermediary in translating Lucy's thoughts to the reader, thus supporting the subjective colouring and psycho-narration discussed already. However, it also signifies that Lucy is able to *hear* the narration outside her own head.

Sentence (e) is directed at the narrator and begins a telepathic conversation between Lucy, a diegetic character within the main story-world, and the internal author version of Fletcher in the composition-world. At (e) this triggers ascending metalepsis, from the diegetic level to the composition-world; at (f) this swaps to descending metalepsis when Fletcher replies and offers his apologies. As (e) and (f) are brief transgressions, they would likely be considered rhetorical following Ryan's original definitions, and by (g) any sign of metalepsis has passed. Yet this entire conversation, while humorous, is logically impossible and there is no way that Lucy should have been able to hear the narrative that readers are currently reading.

With this in mind, rather than opening a window between these narrative layers, my replacement curtain analogy not only allows for the direct transgression when Lucy and Fletcher begin talking to each other, it also explains how the 'noise' of Fletcher's narration was able to creep across the existing narrative boundary and be overheard by Lucy. Furthermore, the direct interaction that happens here within the fictional world temporarily suggests that the events of the narrated story are occurring simultaneously alongside the actual act of narration or, to be more specific, the *creation* of the story given that the narrator is also the internal author at the composition level. This is a further logical impossibility as there are multiple moments in *The Creakers* when the reader is addressed as if the writing of the novel is happening concurrently as it is read (although that is just as illogical in reality).

Again, this brings (6.ix) further away from the rhetorical end of the metaleptic scale, as shown in Figure 6.4.



**Figure 6.4:** *Metaleptic spectrum with (6.viii) and (6.ix) added midway across the rhetorical side of the scale.*

A similar interaction takes place a few pages later when Lucy – having followed the titular monsters into the Woleb, the mysterious, back-to-front and upside-down world beneath her bed – worries about going further:

**(6.x)**

- (a) *I don't fancy going down there!* she thought.
- (b) *Good idea, Lucy!* (c) *(Although what Lucy didn't know was that in a few chapters she would be going much deeper into the Woleb.)*
- (d) *What?* thought Lucy.
- (e) *OH, NOTHING! Carry on – you were about to escape!*
- (f) *Oh right!* thought Lucy.

(Fletcher, 2018: 107)

As with (6.ix), this extract begins relatively normally. The opening line (a) is direct thought, typographically highlighted in italics with an attached reporting clause, and positions the character as the deictic centre through the simple present and reference to 'there' (meaning the Woleb).



However, while (b) is graphologically presented exactly the same way, it actually switches to free direct *speech* as the narrator intrudes upon the diegetic level to speak telepathically to Lucy again, as in (6.ix). Sentence (c) then offers a parenthetical aside to the reader – thus ascending metalepsis – that metafictionally draws attention to the construction of the novel by talking about what will be happening to Lucy ‘in a few chapters’. The brackets around (c) indicate that this is for the reader’s attention only, but Lucy hears it nonetheless and queries it in (d). Panicking slightly, the narrator responds in all capitals in (e) and instructs Lucy to get on with her escape, as if the outcome is not already known by him. After all, not only has the narrator already confessed what is going to happen in a few chapters, the real reader is also holding the physical book in their hands and so knows exactly how far into the story they are at this point. As illogical as this supposedly simultaneous conversation is, the illusion must remain that Lucy has free will over her actions at the diegetic level, and so she accepts the narrator’s instruction and carries on with her adventure.

Interestingly, it is the kind of transgressions seen in (6.ix) and (6.x), where a character first ‘hears’ the narrative discourse as it is supposedly being produced in real time (descending metalepsis) and then responds to the narrator directly (ascending metalepsis), that were most commonly identified by the students in Pantaleo’s study, introduced in section 6.2. Although I have argued in favour of placing such transgressions further along a metaleptic spectrum, in addition to highlighting the flexibility and potential flimsiness of certain narrative boundaries through a metaphorical curtain, Pantaleo commits to Ryan’s original binary.

Snappy hears a disembodied voice narrating his life as it happens. For Snappy and the chicken narrator, the narrating time of scenes coincides with their narrated time. Not only does Snappy communicate to both readers and the narrator his strong dislike about the narrated story events he hears, but he also makes rebuttal statements and engages in actions that affect the chicken narrator, and consequently the content of his narration. This example of descending rhetorical metalepsis is connected to the

ascending rhetorical metaleptic device of character directly addressing narrator. [...]

Three students wrote about the descending rhetorical device of the narrator directly addressing a character in his fictional world.

Sabria: In *Snappy the Alligator* readers are made aware of the process of how the story is created. For example, the narrator chicken talks to Snappy. This is important to the story because it would be like an ordinary story if Snappy and the narrator didn't interact with each other.

(Pantaleo, 2019: 21-22)

I particularly enjoy Sabria's comment that, without these metaleptic, metafictional and postmodern devices, *Snappy* 'would be like an *ordinary* story'. Without knowing more from Sabria, I would not like to postulate that 'ordinary' here equates to 'boring' or 'not exciting'. However, the fact that she deliberately makes this evaluative distinction does at the very least indicate that she – along with many of the other students in Pantaleo's study – finds the postmodern techniques displayed in *Snappy* to be interesting, intriguing and noteworthy compared to more traditional 'ordinary' material.

The reader responses evidenced in Pantaleo's study are paramount to my own research as one of the primary aims of this thesis relates to whether such strategies actively encourage interactivity and engagement from child-readers. Moreover, the fact that so many of these young students can competently identify and explain sophisticated postmodern techniques like metalepsis also corroborates the claim that the skills of child-readers are often dismissed in scholarship, with academics sometimes making misleading generalisations that 'misrepresent the tastes and abilities of many individual children' (Nodelman & Riemer, 2003: 16). Certainly, 14 of the students in Pantaleo's study were able to identify and talk about moments when the narrator's narrative discourse is 'heard' by a character in the fictional world, with Sabria being one of the three who cited examples of the narrator addressing a character directly.

Other students commented on the ways in which metaleptic communication between the narrator and protagonist actively changes the story and/or character development:

Elise: In *Snappy the Alligator* readers are made aware of the process of how the story is created. For example, on opening 3 Snappy is talking to the Narrator because the Narrator is talking about Snappy's life. Snappy tells the Narrator he is an awful narrator.

Briar: In *Snappy the Alligator* readers are made aware of the process of how the story is created. An example is when Snappy says to the Narrator, 'I do not want to be in this story!' This is important to the story because it makes it funny and if Snappy said nothing to the narrator there would be no character to the story and the story would not be as interesting.

Judson: The last example is the narrator is asking readers rhetorical questions on opening 8 which is important because it shows he knows readers are reading the book. The questions give readers ideas what Snappy might be doing but then Snappy tells us what he's really doing.

Soraya: In *Snappy the Alligator* readers are made aware of how the story is created when the Narrator tells the story and then Snappy interrupts saying things like, 'No I don't!' and 'You really ARE cheating me off!' This is important to the story because without Snappy interrupting, the book would only be from the narrator's point of view and we would think Snappy was a big mean alligator.

Freja: The third example is on opening 9 when the narrator said, 'Well you have to come out. The story is really boring now.' It makes it seem like the story is happening now. This is important to the story because you can see it happening now so the story is being made as you read the book.

(Pantaleo, 2019: 21-22)

Each of these comments makes clear reference to some form of rhetorical metaleptic transgression, describing, identifying and explaining the effect competently. These are Grade 4 students so are the prime age range to be classified as too 'inexperienced' or 'unsophisticated' to understand postmodernism and metafiction, yet Pantaleo has provided a plethora of evidence to show that this generalisation is far from true. The prevalence of such techniques not just in *Snappy* or the texts discussed in my own project, but also across the wider field of children's literature surely demonstrates that child-readers can cope just fine with metaleptic transgressions, particularly of the rhetorical style.

#### **6.4) Ontological metalepsis**

While I advocate treating Ryan's ontological and rhetorical classifications as a sliding scale, I acknowledge that all the extracts examined so far in this chapter (and those highlighted by Pantaleo's students) would naturally sit on the rhetorical side of the divide, even if some feel more ontological than others. In various ways, the previous extracts have all offered brief transgressions between narrative layers by opening a window – or, rather, drawing back a curtain – that allow participants to communicate across distinct narrative boundaries, often in the form of conversational interludes between the narrator, reader and character(s). Although some have stemmed slightly more towards the ontological end of the scale, the participants in the examples given so far have remained in their existing narrative levels without any true ontological swaps or conflation. There has certainly been little evidence of Hofstadter's 'strange loops' or 'tangled hierarchies' in these extracts, thus supporting the idea that more rhetorically-inclined transgressions are perhaps easier for child-readers to navigate.

That is not to say, however, that the students in Pantaleo's study were entirely unable to recognise ontological metalepses and it should be acknowledged that there were far fewer examples of such transgressions to identify in the first place.

Indeed, Pantaleo (2019: 21) cites only two: *mise-en-abyme* (identified by one student) and the narrator becoming a character in the fictional world (identified by five students). The former example, *mise-en-abyme*, constitutes ascending ontological metalepsis in which a visual or verbal text is ‘embedded within another text as its miniature replica’ (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001: 226; see also Cohn, 2012). In the case of *Snappsy*, the front cover of the book features an image of the titular character holding a copy of the very same book that the reader is interacting with:

Snappsy’s book, the one he is holding, is simultaneously being held/read by readers who inhabit the actual world. Indeed, the three examples of *mise-en-abyme* (on the dust jacket, the front cover, and the title page) in the picturebook foreground how readers seem to be sharing the same spatiotemporal world with Snappsy[.]

(Pantaleo, 2019: 22)

The simultaneous presence of the physical book in both the real world and within the pages of the text itself clearly breaks a distinct ontological boundary between fiction and reality, and thus ‘the world of the reader and the world of the book collapse into each other’ (Ryan, 2004: 443). Perhaps this complete conflation was harder for the children involved in Pantaleo’s study to articulate, with only one student offering it as an example:

Lev: My third example is on the front page when all of the animals are looking at the book that Snappsy is holding. He is holding the same book we are reading.

(Pantaleo, 2019: 23)

This is far more extreme than any of the rhetorical metaleptic transgressions discussed previously in this chapter. It feels more playful, more experimental, more *postmodern*, particularly in the way it draws metafictional attention to the construction and inherent artifice of the book the reader is holding. It is also something that does not occur quite as explicitly in any of my chosen texts.

An obvious explanation is that *Snappsy* is a picturebook and so – as discussed in Chapter 3 (section 3.3) – many of its postmodern qualities derive from the way it is illustrated on the page. *Snappsy* is able to visually address readers from the diegetic level himself, changing his facial expressions and gestures to convey his reactions to what happens around him. By comparison, the middle grade texts examined in this thesis from Cowell, Fletcher and Bosch do not have this option available to them in the same way and instead must rely more on wordplay or fun experiments with graphology and typography to achieve the same kind of metafictional and metaleptic blurring of boundaries. They undoubtedly do this in abundance, but it tends to fall on the overarching rhetorical side of the metaleptic scale instead, as demonstrated above.

Nevertheless, there is at least one particularly impressive example of ontological metalepsis in my chosen texts and it occurs in the fourth book in Bosch's *Secret Series*, aptly titled *This Isn't What It Looks Like*. While visiting Cass in hospital, Max-Ernest stands in front of a mirror and looks through a magic monocle. Rather than seeing his own reflection, he instead sees a stranger:

**(6.xi)**

There was a man in the mirror. An old or not-so-old man (it was hard to tell). He had messy hair that stuck out in all directions and a scruffy beard the mixed black-and-white colour people describe as salt-and-pepper. He looked slightly insane.

[...]

[Max-Ernest] peered closer and saw that the man was hunched over a desk. Papers spilled out in front of him, covered with an almost-unreadable scrawl.

Max-Ernest had the odd sensation that he knew the man – something about the man's nose reminded Max-Ernest of his father – and yet Max-Ernest was certain he'd never seen him before.

(Bosch, 2011: 267-269)

Unlike the previous extracts examined in this chapter, (6.xi) is narrated solely in the third-person using the simple past. This puts it in the main story-world rather than the composition-world, although the narration can still be attributed to the internal author version of Bosch. However, while Bosch is narrating this, he clearly is not present to see the events unfold (at least, not that readers are aware of at this point). Instead, the story is focalised through Max-Ernest, as illustrated by the use of perception verbs such as ‘peered’ and ‘saw’ that orient the view through his eyes. Furthermore, any evaluation in this passage should be attributed to Max-Ernest for the same reason: Max-Ernest is the one who thinks it’s ‘hard to tell’ how old the man was; that the man has a beard that ‘*people* describe’ as salt-and-pepper (i.e. not that Max-Ernest would necessarily choose to describe it that way himself); Max-Ernest deems the man’s handwriting ‘almost-unreadable’ because he is the one who cannot read it.

Perhaps this does not seem too out of the ordinary – that is, beyond a child having a magic monocle that shows him the image of a strange man when he looks in the mirror. However, more is revealed about this man as the audience reads on. Not only does he look slightly insane and appears to be writing something (seemingly in some haste too given that the papers ‘spilled out’ on the desk and were covered in his ‘almost-unreadable *scrawl*’), but it is then revealed that the man is eating chocolate somewhat desperately. For any reader who has made it this far through the series, this is a huge clue as to the man’s identity. Who loves chocolate so much they willingly put themselves – and their reader – at risk just so they can have one more bite (section 6.3.2)? Why, Pseudonymous Bosch!

With the seeds of suspicion sown in the reader’s mind, the story breaks away from the man in the mirror quite quickly. Readers are left with two things: one, the (as yet unconfirmed) potential identity of the man as Bosch himself; and two, the final line in the chapter, again focalised through Max-Ernest: ‘The man in the mirror was his future self’ (Bosch, 2011: 271).

Interestingly, the voice of the internal author is noticeably lacking during this incident. By this point in the *Secret Series*, readers will have grown accustomed to Bosch's frequent interruptions into the main story-world, yet here he is conspicuously absent as an overtly personalised, intrusive narrating figure. In fact, the only time the internal author ever appears to comment on this turn of events (that is until his true identity is finally revealed) is some thirty pages later, when Max-Ernest decides to act on what he has misinterpreted as advice from his future self:

**(6.xii)**

*It wouldn't hurt to try talking once*, the older Max-Ernest had said.

The younger Max-Ernest assumed this meant he should talk to Cass. But was talking to her supposed to wake her up? That sounded like exactly the sort of superstitious nonsense he couldn't abide. He was embarrassed that his adult self would recommend it.\*

[...]

\*I HAPPEN TO KNOW THE OLDER MAX-ERNEST WASN'T RECOMMENDING ANY SUCH THING. IN FACT, HE WASN'T SPEAKING TO THE YOUNGER MAX-ERNEST AT ALL; HE WAS SPEAKING TO HIS CAT.

(Bosch, 2011: 298-299)

The italicised words at the start of (6.xii) refer to the direct speech of the man in the mirror that occurred when Max-Ernest first saw him through the monocle, hence the use of the past perfect in the reporting clause. The next paragraph can then be attributed to the younger Max-Ernest in his present moment, with the verb 'assumed' introducing his thoughts in the interrogative and the subsequent evaluation of 'superstitious nonsense'. As Max-Ernest believes his future self to be talking to him directly, this is potentially a rhetorical metaleptic transgression from an entirely separate narrative sphere to Max-Ernest's present situation.



However, the more noteworthy element here is the moment the internal author reappears in the footnote at the bottom of the page. By admitting that he ‘happen[s] to know’ precisely what the older Max-Ernest had meant, readers are forced to question why and how Bosch could possibly possess that knowledge. After all, prior to this book it had been assumed that Bosch was – while far from omniscient – simply aware of the events and characters of the story as a third party, kind of like Lemony Snicket in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. While Snicket similarly acts as an internal author of his books and equally exists as a character within the world in which his story occurs (albeit only in an entirely separate spin-off series located temporally prior to his most famous books), he never appears in the primary diegetic narrative of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and, importantly, is definitely not one of the three Baudelaire children that the story follows. Bosch, by contrast, not only appears as an internal author narrating the story of Cass and Max-Ernest, but actually turns out to be the grown-up version of his own diegetic character!

This is finally confirmed at the end of the book when Max-Ernest tells Cass about what he saw in the mirror:

**(6.xiii)**

‘I’m not sure. It looked like a novel. But it sounded more like the ravings of a lunatic.’

‘So you could read it – through the mirror?’

‘Just a little bit.’

‘Well...?’

Max-Ernest shook his head.

‘Come on. You have to tell me. You tell me everything.’

‘The only words I remember are, “*I can’t keep a secret. Never could...*”’

Cass laughed. ‘Well, that’s true!’

‘And then – wait, promise me you won’t get upset.’

‘How can I promise that?’

‘I swore I wasn’t going to tell you this – but I saw our names,’ said Max-Ernest, speaking in a rush now. ‘Well, they weren’t really our names, but I could tell they were stand-ins for our names. Like mine was Max-Ernest instead of Xxx-Xxxxxx and yours was Cass instead of Xxxx.’

(Bosch, 2011: 416-417)

Instantaneously, the reader is transported back to the beginning of the very first book in the *Secret Series*. When Max-Ernest quotes directly from ‘Chapter One (and a half)’ in *The Name of This Book is Secret* it allows a diegetic character access to the internal author’s composition-world, something that previously has been kept completely distinct. While Bosch himself could intrude upon the story-world, the transgressions did not go the opposite way and there is no evidence – prior to the moment outlined in (6.xiii) – that his characters are aware of the overarching narration in any way.

While Max-Ernest does not physically leave his existing narrative level at any point and, in fact, only views Bosch’s composition-world through a mirror (an item that in many ways could stand in for Ryan’s metaphorical window directly), the existence of the physical words from *The Name of This Book is Secret* at the diegetic level of the text make this an ontological transgression. It verbally – rather than visually – simulates the same mise-en-abyme displayed in *Snappy* as the existence of the physical novel (from the real world) is represented within the story-world, focalised through a character’s eyes.

Furthermore, the fact that the person writing those very words is a grown-up version of the character viewing them results in further blurring of ontological boundaries. Readers are suddenly confronted by the cyclical nature of the books themselves as they are forced to acknowledge a series of embedded narrative levels

that stem towards Waugh's INFINITE REGRESS (even if the maintained third-person narration of the story-world serves to distance the internal author, Bosch, from Max-Ernest, despite his identity having now been revealed). Readers must accept that Bosch (external/implied author) has published the story that Bosch (internal author) has written in which Bosch (narrator) recounts the moment when Bosch as a child (Max-Ernest/character) saw his future self (Bosch in the process of writing this very story). This is the ultimate conflation of Booth's (1991) teller roles, blurring the ontological boundary between fiction and reality beyond recognition and epitomising the complexity of postmodern narratives. Indeed, returning to Hofstadter's (1980) strange loop phenomenon, we very literally 'find ourselves right back where we started' (10).

Consider again Ryan's definition of ontological metalepsis:

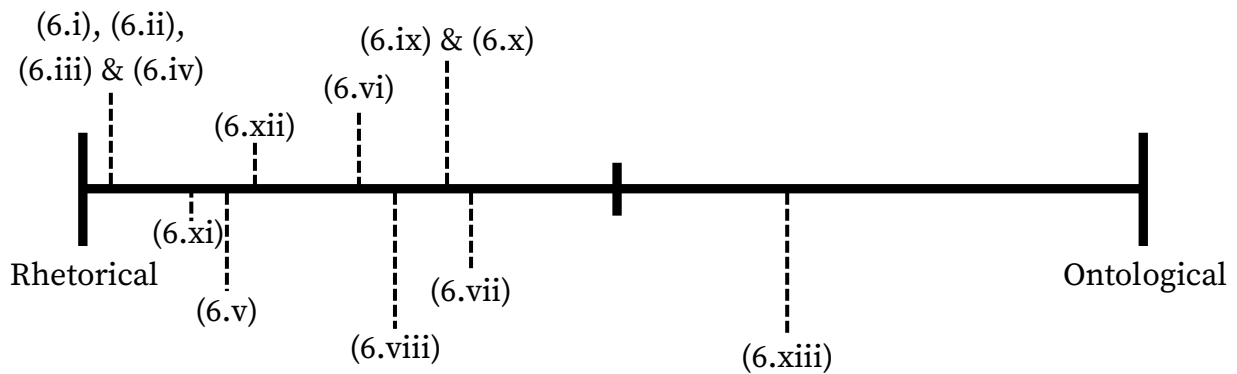
In a narrative work, ontological levels will become entangled when an existent belongs to two or more levels at the same time, or when an existent migrates from one level to the next, causing two separate environments to blend.

(2004: 442)

This is certainly what happens with Bosch at this point in the novel. As an authorial figure, he exists simultaneously at various narrative levels both within and outside the boundary of the fictional text, so more than satisfies the first part of Ryan's comment here. The fact that the version of Bosch in the process of writing the book in the composition-world is then also made visible to Max-Ernest, or a younger Bosch, at the diegetic level suitably fulfils the second part of Ryan's description too, as one version of Bosch 'migrates from one level to the next'.

Thus (6.xiii) can be positioned firmly on the ontological side of the metaleptic spectrum. As shown in Figure 6.5, I have still placed (6.xiii) closer to the centre to denote that while the overall situation established in the above extract does trigger an ontological transgression by completely conflating the narrative boundaries of the *Secret Series* and stemming towards infinite regress, the initial transgression is

superficially rhetorical. Put simply, a diegetic character briefly views – through a literal pane of glass – a different narrative level which quickly becomes inaccessible to him. That that same diegetic character exists simultaneously as the author of the very text he inhabits and that he has witnessed the composition level of an already published book that exists in the real world (and with which the reader has previously engaged) is what makes (6.xiii) a case of ontological metalepsis.



**Figure 6.5:** *Metaleptic spectrum with (6.x), (6.xi) and (6.xii) added to the rhetorical side of the scale and (6.xiii) on the ontological side.*

The presence of Bosch outside the composition-world – but, more specifically, at the diegetic level of his characters – also accounts for the kind of descending ontological metalepsis identified by more of Pantaleo’s students. This particular transgression involves ‘a fictional entity crossing or violating spatiotemporal world boundaries and relocating to a lower diegetic level’ (Pantaleo, 2019: 22) and is most commonly seen when a narrator physically appears alongside their diegetic characters. In the case of *Snappsy*, the narrator leaves the narrative discourse and enters the story-world to attend *Snappsy*’s party, as identified by the students in Pantaleo’s study.

Soraya: Finally, my last example is when near the end of the book *Snappsy* finally gives in and throws a party for all the animals and the narrator

actually *becomes* part of the story. This is important to the story because the narrator is happy at the end because Snappsy did what the narrator wanted.

Geona: My last example is on opening 13 where the chicken appears. This is important because the narrator is now a character. This changes the story because now there is no narrator and it changes how the Chicken describes Snappsy.

(Pantaleo, 2019: 22)

On the one hand, these examples are perhaps even more explicit as the narrator appears in pictorial form alongside his characters at Snappsy's party and engages in conversation with them at the diegetic level of the text. By comparison, Bosch is somewhat preserved as an inaccessible figure in the mirror seen only by Max-Ernest without any direct communication. Of course, there is a caveat here that Bosch – the adult version of his own protagonist – *does* appear alongside his characters, just not in a way that makes the distinction between his narrating-self and the diegetic character as explicit as in *Snappsy*.

It is this more blatant situation – i.e. where a narrator physically appears alongside his characters – that is more commonly seen in cases of ontological metalepsis. A particularly famous example from classic literature occurs in Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, when the author-narrator 'introduces himself into the fictive action of the narrative' (Genette, 1988: 88; see also Lambrou, 2021) and suddenly appears in the story-world alongside his own diegetic character. The book's protagonist, Charles, is in a train carriage when he views an unknown man 'of forty or so' with 'a massively bearded face' (Fowles, 2021: 406) who sits down opposite him. The reader's view of this man is focalised through Charles until he falls asleep; at this point, the perspective switches to the stranger who is revealed to be the narrator himself, suddenly present at the diegetic level of the text, who passes judgement on the character sat across from him.

The narration moves from third-person to first, and the narrator begins addressing the reader directly through ascending rhetorical metalepsis: 'You may

one day come under a similar gaze. And you may – in the less reserved context of our own century – be aware of it’ (Fowles, 2021: 408). The rapid shift in narrative levels is jarring – perhaps even unsettling – as readers realise that the narrator has abandoned his previous level of narrative discourse and now exists as part of the diegetic story-world, while still having authorial control and awareness:

Now the question I am asking, as I stare at Charles is...what the devil am I going to do with you? I have already thought of ending Charles’s career here and now; of leaving him for eternity on his way to London. But the conventions of Victorian fiction allow, allowed no place for the open, the inconclusive ending; and I preached earlier of the freedom characters must be given. My problem is simple – what Charles wants is clear? It is indeed. But what the protagonist wants is not so clear; and I am not at all sure where she is at the moment. Of course if these two were two fragments of real life, instead of two figments of my imagination, the issue to the dilemma is obvious: the one want combats the other want, and fails or succeeds, as the actuality may be. Fiction usually pretends to conform to reality: the writer puts the conflicting wants in the ring and then describes the fight – but in fact fixes the fight, letting that want he himself favours win.

(Fowles, 2021: 408-409)

This extract is brilliantly meta and fascinatingly sophisticated. It shows overt awareness of the writing process; there’s continual acknowledgment of fiction’s artifice and the expected conventions of Victorian literature; plus, once he wakes up, the viewpoint switches back to Charles and it is he who notices that ‘[t]he bearded man has disappeared in the throng’ (Fowles, 2021: 410), thus painting the story-world version of the narrator as an unknown stranger once more. It also displays multiple metaleptic transgressions, especially when one considers the (relatively accepted) assumption that

the narrator is John Fowles, who was born in 1926 and would have been about forty-three years of age at the time *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* was

first published. Fowles also sported a massive beard, just like the unnamed character[.]

(Lambrou, 2021: 36)

It is, in fact, precisely what people expect from postmodern writing. Yet, at a base level, it is not remarkably different from the children's texts used in my own project. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is, after all, 'a work of fiction that is being constructed at the point of its telling' (Lambrou, 2021: 36), much like my chosen novels.

Fowles exists as both the external and internal authors simultaneously, being the published name on the cover of his book while also visibly narrating the contents within. Bosch, Fletcher and Cowell do the same. Fowles blurs the external boundary of the text by having his narrator speak directly to the reader through the frequent use of the second-person. This is likewise seen in abundance through the metaleptic transgressions described in this chapter alone, in addition to the explicit dramatisation of a fictive reader in Chapter 5. Fowles exhibits authorial control by acknowledging his own role in the writing process and spontaneously playing with the contents of the book. Again, so do the three authors used in this thesis. Fowles consistently makes metafictional and metanarrative comments that draw the reader's attention to the artifice and construction of the physical book. He makes comical asides that undermine the veracity of the story. He highlights the implausibility and illogicality of the narrative. He addresses and subverts the conventions of fiction, poking fun at the supposedly omniscient role of the narrator. He physically moves himself from the level of narrative discourse to the main story-world to interact with his own fictional character, and completely conflates the ontological boundaries of the narrative in doing so.

Now where have we seen that before?

True, the ways in which these strategies are deployed in my chosen children's texts are perhaps more carefully executed, better allowing for child-readers who need a helping hand in addressing sudden world-switches or who take

reassurance in having a friendly storyteller talking to them directly to explain the reading and writing processes. However, the fundamental complexities and playful subversions are still the same, as is also illustrated by Pantaleo's study regarding picturebooks for even younger readers.

## **6.5) Conclusion**

Metaleptic transgressions, perhaps more than any other device or strategy examined in this thesis, bring to attention the sophisticated manner in which my chosen texts all play around with narrative structure, particularly regarding 'the nature of boundaries between narrative levels within conventional conceptualisations of the ontological structure of fiction' (Macrae, 2020: 153). This chapter has examined a variety of metaleptic transgressions and considered the different kinds of narrative disruptions that each causes. It has also demonstrated how these contemporary children's texts problematise accepted classifications of metalepsis, particularly regarding Ryan's binary distinction between ontological and rhetorical transgressions.

From the examples analysed here, it is evident that Ryan's categories are not always as clear cut as one might hope. Rather than treating these terms as an either/or option, I propose placing them at opposite ends of a sliding scale. This better accounts for transgressions that are technically rhetorical in nature, but that still feel like something more, such as when addressing the omnipresence of an overarching composition level or when diegetic story-world elements are able to (fictionally) migrate across narrative boundaries towards the reader in the real world.

Alternatively, swapping Ryan's metaphorical window for a more insubstantial curtain analogy perhaps achieves a similar result, especially in relation to the narrator's overt presence at the composition level and the way in which that narrative space is contextually used as a shared language event between



a storyteller, 'I', and their audience, 'you'. While a rhetorical transgression may be brief in nature and does not fully disrupt narrative boundaries, its very existence makes the reader aware of the ongoing possibility of metalepsis. Once a window has been opened, it is difficult to shut it completely or pretend that it is no longer there. Indeed, figures may want to peek through the metaphorical glass to see what is happening on the other side and they cannot escape the knowledge that the window is in view and ripe to be opened again. After all, metalepsis opens up a passage between narrative levels and it is over simplistic to pretend that this vanishes completely once that window has been closed. A curtain, to my mind, better reflects participants' ongoing awareness of what *could* be happening on the other side, and also creates a more flexible boundary between worlds.

That a selection of *children's* books can be used to showcase this distinction is noteworthy. Despite the prevalence of sophisticated postmodern and metafictional strategies in contemporary children's literature, there is still an element of surprise when adults, in particular, realise just what child-readers are capable of understanding and enjoying. The devices discussed in this chapter and identified by the students in Pantaleo's (2019) study all require child-readers to engage in sophisticated meaning-making processes in order to navigate the continued blurring of narrative boundaries that frequently result in the positions of the reader, narrator and character(s) being questioned, disrupted and turned completely upside down. Indeed, the 'generally comic or realistic effects [associated with metalepses] are also accompanied by the structural demand for a more complex model of reading' (Nelles, 2002: 351). When engaging with metaleptic texts, readers of any age must 'adopt interrogative and participatory roles, be able to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity, and engage in significant inferential and associative processing' (Pantaleo, 2019: 23).

The fact that children are expected to do this not only demonstrates that understanding metalepsis (and other postmodern devices) is well within the capabilities of most child-readers, it also helps to make them more aware of how

stories are created which is key to metafiction, too (Mackey, 1990). As Pantaleo explains in relation to her empirical study:

Teaching students about the concept of metalepsis can contribute to the development of their literary understanding as they expand their knowledge about the processes that can be used to create narratives in print, visual, and digital texts. The intentional work with the picturebooks afforded the students opportunities to experience how incorporating metaleptic devices in a narrative representation can concurrently complicate and elaborate, and enrich and enhance its discursive presentation[.] Data indicated the students' schemata for texts was extended by learning how metaleptic devices can be vehicles of innovation in narrative representations. [...] Thus I believe the students' narrative competence was extended as a result of reading, discussing, and writing about the picturebooks featured in the study and designing their own narrative representations.

(Pantaleo, 2019: 23-24)

While the texts I have chosen to analyse in this thesis prioritise written narratives (rather than the visual cues employed by the picturebooks used in Pantaleo's study), they similarly challenge child-readers and inherently increase readers' narrative competence by making the construction of narrative clear. In particular, the use of metaleptic address from the internal author within the composition-world to the reader outside the text encourages interactivity and engagement by inviting the real reader to step into the discourse and take an active role in the storytelling process. That this is achieved through such a conceptually challenging technique as metalepsis, which ultimately requires readers to navigate sophisticated narrative structures and world boundaries, is fascinating. The fact that metalepsis is also now mainstream enough to be deployed consistently and confidently by commercially successful children's authors further indicates child-readers' appreciation for and capable understanding of such devices.

## 7) Conclusion

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I began this thesis with a quotation from Martin Amis in which he damningly dismissed children's literature as beneath his writing abilities. My subsequent examination of a selection of popular middle grade texts aimed to illustrate why his statement was so misguided, highlighting the stylistic, narrative and linguistic complexities of such material to prove that it is anything but simple. Still, the central idea of 'simplicity' encoded in Amis' dismissal of children's books remains frustratingly pervasive even today. Tweeting at the start of March 2023, author S.F. Said remarked:

Children's literature is often dismissed as a lesser form, not even literature at all. But the books we love when we're young are the ones that shape us and stay with us forever, in the deepest parts of our inner lives. That's why I think they're the most important books of all!

As this thesis should have made apparent, this is a sentiment with which I wholeheartedly concur. It seems a relatively safe bet to say that the majority of, if not *all*, adult scholars now working in the fields of English Literature and Language enjoyed reading when they themselves were young. Why else would someone pursue a career in analysing and understanding any kind of (literary) text in such depth had they not already garnered a lifelong appreciation and skill for reading? Where else would that love of reading have likely come from if not from their own childhood? I include myself in this, of course, and have already explained that my ongoing interest in the very material examined in this thesis came from spotting one of Bosch's texts in a bookshop as a young child-reader myself many years ago.

For so many critics to then dismiss children's literature as a field of scholarship in its own right, with academic studies of such material originally being treated with suspicion and disdain, is not only frustrating but also overwhelmingly damaging. This critical dismissal has not only hindered the development of children's literature scholarship, but has also perpetuated wider societal views

about children's literature being 'a lesser form', as Said commented, because it is seen as inherently simple or easy.

Not only is this far from true, with children's literature for all ages – from picturebooks to Young Adult fiction – displaying high levels of stylistic and narrative sophistication that belie assumptions of simplicity, it also does child-readers themselves a disservice. Adult academics who read prolifically as children will likely still be able to wax lyrical about their favourite books, often pinpointing precise moments or characters that have stayed with them to this day. For those same academics to somehow flip and begin assuming that the texts they once loved are too easy to be worthy of critical study unjustly negates the artistic, aesthetic and academic value of children's literature. Furthermore, it perpetuates the lack of space for children's literature within the academy beyond purely pedagogic applications.

Of course, the use of children's literature for educational purposes cannot be overstated. Although the analysis presented here has prioritised the stylistic consideration of popular children's books – rather than approaching such material from a pedagogic frame of reference – it has been a central tenet of this thesis that metafictional texts 'foster an awareness of how a story works' (Mackey, 1990: 181) and 'implicitly teach literary and cultural codes and conventions, as well as specific interpretive strategies, and hence empower readers to read more competently' (McCallum, 1996: 398). What is this if not a convenient way of teaching child-readers about meaning-making, narrative construction and the overall reading process?

Although outside the remit of this current study, the next logical step to further this research will be to develop an empirical study that tests the above claims with real-life child-readers. Through a combination of stylistic analysis *and* pedagogy, I hope to examine how metafictional and postmodern children's literature might be used to engage child-readers in the classroom, especially regarding lower-attaining, developing, unmotivated or so-called 'reluctant' readers (see Baker &

Wigfield, 1999; Botzakis & Hall, 2010; Ciani, 1981; Gambrell & Marinak, 2009; Graff, 2018; Hall et al., 2010; O'Brien et al., 2009; Quigley, 2020; Ramsey, 2002; Rasinski, 2014; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). These are child-readers who tend to 'demonstrate persistent difficulties with reading in academic settings' and 'are disengaged from both the act of reading and the particular texts they are asked or required to read' (Graff, 2018: 38). As Farr (1981) observes:

Most educators would agree that a child is reluctant to read for one of two reasons: either the child is unable to read and unwilling to try because of a history of unsuccessful attempts or is able to read but not motivated to do so. This explanation leads to two questions more difficult to answer: Why is a child unable to learn to read? How can a child be motivated to read?

(3)

While the above quotation demonstrates that reluctant readers are in no way a new phenomenon, contemporary educationalists have dedicated immense research space to questioning reading motivation in school-aged children. For instance, a national survey in America (Donahue et al., 2005) found that a large majority of 4<sup>th</sup> graders (aged 9-10) did not read frequently for enjoyment and declined to list reading amongst their favourite activities. This is a worryingly ongoing trend as, in the UK, the National Literacy Trust's latest 'Annual Literacy Survey' revealed that:

Just over 2 in 5 (43.3%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023. This is the lowest level of reading enjoyment we have recorded since we began asking children and young people this question in 2005.

(Clark, Picton & Galway, 2023: 3)

The findings of this survey indicate a visible downward trend in reading enjoyment and frequency which the National Literacy Trust implores should be addressed urgently. It is especially concerning that children appear so unmotivated to read even when able to select their own material at home, an element that further

highlights the formidable challenge faced by many teachers in trying to get children to engage with reading in the classroom (Brozo & Flynt, 2008).

In Chapter 2, I referenced Lesnik-Oberstein's (2004: 5) claim that the 'final goal of children's literature criticism itself [is] knowing how to choose the right book for the child'. While I do not put the same weight in this being the 'final goal' of children's literature scholarship overall, I do accept that studies such as my own platform and prioritise texts that critics believe are 'good' for child-readers in some way. Within this thesis, my analytical claims rest on child-readers navigating, comprehending and enjoying sophisticated postmodern and metafictional strategies that many adult readers would deem overly highbrow or absurd – and certainly above the preconceived capabilities of most child-readers. Even with the caveat of such devices being readily deployed in children's books with an increased element of play, rather than to be deliberately fragmentary or jarring, these texts still ask a lot of their readers. That these complex techniques are so prevalent in mainstream contemporary children's literature across the board does, however, signify their success and popularity with the target readership. As such, I do not think I would be overstepping some metaphorical mark when I say that these texts might at least fall under the umbrella of being 'the right book for the child'.

With this in mind, I should like to test how the ostentatious use of metafictional and postmodern devices in popular children's literature might impact or enhance the reading process for disengaged or reluctant child-readers. The techniques examined in this thesis – primarily the metaleptic blurring of fiction and reality (discussed in Chapter 6) through explicit dramatisation of the real reader as fictive reader alongside the internal author in the composition-world (Chapters 4 and 5) – effectively allow child-readers to keep one foot in the real world and one in the fiction as they engage with the novel, successfully navigating highly sophisticated postmodern strategies with implied support from the internal author's guiding hand as they progress through the story.

This differs slightly from the usual view, or even preference *for*, readerly immersion that relates to readers getting ‘lost in a book’:

‘Absorbed’ or ‘ludic’ reading...is virtually a trance state where readers willingly become oblivious to the world around them. Normal consciousness is put on hold and the print seems to guide the ‘inner newsreel’s’ production of highly personalised images. Thus the reader ‘merges’ with the characters and events of the work.

(Crago, 1996: 639; see also Nell, 1988)

The kind of immersion described by Crago in the above quotation is typical in the types of middle grade texts that have thus far received (very) limited acknowledgement in relation to metafiction – as opposed to the more popular scholarly field of picturebooks (see Chapter 3) – in which fictional protagonists are themselves involved in the reading process, either as existing bookworms or reluctant readers who are converted as the story goes on. As evidenced by critics like Bhadury (2013) and Hermansson (2019), real readers are encouraged to ‘merge’ with these book-loving characters and likewise affirm their own interest in reading. While this does trigger a metaleptic conflation of the real reader and diegetic reading character, these books are not usually linguistically or experimentally metafictional, and the immersion felt by the reader in such situations is only achieved if they use their own imagination to align themselves with the diegetic reading character (for there are no additional linguistic cues to encourage this).

However, it is this kind of readerly immersion that often acts as a hurdle for developing readers. For instance, self-proclaimed reluctant reader Logan Labelle (2020: 19) wrote in an opinion piece for *Canadian Children’s Book News* that:

I never enjoyed a book. EVER. Reading was boring because I thought I had a bad imagination. I’d stare at the piece of paper with words on it, and half the time, I had no idea what was happening. [...] Reading books felt like I was wearing a huge pair of cement shoes and I’d just been told to jump in a lake.

It was only when he discovered graphic novels that things began to improve: ‘There aren’t a million words on every page, like some books. The picture describes the story, which helps if you don’t have the best imagination’ (19). Thus, he found graphic novels easier to navigate because there were visual prompts on the page that helped him engage with and follow the story. Once he gained reading confidence, Labelle began to enjoy some more prose-heavy middle grade fiction (such as Susin Nielsen’s *No Fixed Address*) because ‘there was enough inappropriate humour to keep [him] interested’ (19).

The graphic novels that Labelle found so helpful removed the (somewhat self-inflicted) barrier of his perceived ‘bad imagination’. He struggled to construct the world of the fiction singlehandedly and so found himself stuck outside the text, unable to achieve the readerly absorption described by Crago. As such, it is unlikely that the thematically metafictional texts discussed by Bhadury and Hermansson would have provided an equally effective stepping stone in Labelle’s reading journey.

By contrast, texts that are more overtly and radically postmodern (at least in terms of the specific stylistic and textual devices used) in many ways remove the opportunity for child-readers to align themselves with a diegetic character altogether, instead pushing them towards the fictive reader within the composition-world. This is the case in my chosen texts, as evidenced throughout this thesis. Although the conflation of Booth’s (1991) receptor roles and the invitation for the real reader to step into the world of the fiction may be seen as superficially similar to Crago’s absorbed reading, the constant reminder of the reading process and the overt artifice of the text with which the reader is engaging effectively breaks the illusion of absorption. As Gavins (2013) explains in relation to acclaimed postmodern literature, this often makes the reader feel like they have been ostracised or ‘pushed out’ of a text.

However, I would contend that the simultaneous presence of the real reader in both the real world (reading the physical text) and the composition-world



(reading the same text but engaging in supposedly direct, spontaneous conversation with the internal author) creates a safe reading space in which readers are guided through a highly sophisticated narrative structure, while still being encouraged to remember their existence in the real world. On the one hand, this creates an ongoing metaleptic transgression (that I would personally place towards the ontological side of the scale introduced in Chapter 6) in which the narrator in the composition-world and the real reader are purportedly able to communicate directly. It also circumvents some of the issues raised by Labelle in relation to reluctant readers by deliberately and pervasively reminding the real reader that they are 'the reader of the text'. Far from encouraging complete absorption and fully merging readers with diegetic characters, the overt presence of a fictive reader at the composition-world provides a convenient stepping stone for real-life readers to enter the fictional discourse and become an active participant in meaning-making and narrative construction, while also accounting for those who simply cannot imagine themselves being anything other than the real reader (as with Labelle).

Given the visible downward trends in reading enjoyment and frequency raised by organisations such as the National Literacy Trust, further study of such metaleptic blurring as a way of navigating the difficulties of traditional absorbed reading feels especially pertinent. Consequently, I hope to pursue this line of research in the future, particularly regarding whether metafictional children's books might be better for inexperienced, unmotivated or reluctant readers *because* they do not have to be fully absorbed in the text. This is, of course, in addition to the sophisticated ways in which postmodern and metafictional texts clearly 'teach literary and cultural codes and conventions...and hence empower readers to read more competently' (McCallum, 1996: 398), as has been illustrated in this thesis.

The focus on metafiction and postmodernism ought not to be forgotten here either. In my attempt to counter the unsubstantiated yet pervasive view of children's literature being inherently simplistic to accommodate the target audience, I also hope to have demonstrated that such material deserves to be more

widely studied and appreciated – not just by the target readership within the education system to increase the engagement of reluctant readers, but also by adult scholars within the academy. Although the sustained critical study of children’s literature has progressed in leaps and bounds since it first entered the academy in the 1960s, there remain some notable gaps that this thesis aimed to fill. The first is the introduction of stylistics as a critical approach. ‘Looking back over the past 60 years, it can be said that stylistic research into children’s literature has been rare’ (Burke & Coats, 2022: 4) and yet this thesis has illustrated what an effective methodology it is for elucidating textual readings, addressing the *why*, *how* and *what* of interpretations, and accounting for readers’ responses by evaluating a text’s affective power over readers. Recent studies from the likes of Jeffries (2009), Nikolajeva (2014), Trites (2014) and Giovanelli (2018, 2023) all corroborate the value of stylistically studying children’s literature, and my own thesis likewise illustrates the importance of considering such material in this way to place it ‘on an equal footing with mainstream literature and to point out the complexity of the modern children’s book and the exciting questions this complexity raises’ (Nikolajeva, 1996: 10-11).

Ultimately, this has been the driving point of this thesis: to highlight the artistic, aesthetic and academic value of children’s literature by examining many of the obvious complexities that have thus far been overlooked within the academy. Countering prevalent opinions like those expressed by Amis, this study has argued in favour of analysing children’s texts primarily in relation to the stylistic, linguistic and narrative strategies commonly utilised by mainstream contemporary children’s authors and therein proving that children’s literature ought to be ‘a legitimate field of research in the academic world’ (Shavit, 1986: ix). Not only has this allowed me to push the limits of traditional narratological terminology by showing how popular middle grade fiction problematises the typical classification of narrators (Chapter 4) and metalepsis (Chapter 6), it has also proved that children’s texts, children’s authors and child-readers themselves deserve far more appreciation than they are often given.

My decision to focus on traditionally ‘avant-garde’ and ‘difficult’ literary concepts such as postmodernism and metafiction – both of which are clearly displayed in abundance in this kind of material – further highlights the academic and artistic sophistication of children’s literature, and the complicated literary codes and conventions with which child-readers must interact in order to read such novels. That these devices have now become so normalised in contemporary children’s literature that they can be considered mainstream (as evidenced by their competent use in the works of newer, celebrity authors like Tom Fletcher) is of note. After all, not only are child-readers able to cope just fine with them, contrary to adults’ preconceptions, but they actively seem to enjoy the playful, interactive, ludic qualities these devices introduce to their reading material too (Pantaleo, 2019).

Thus, I have satisfactorily achieved the primary research aims established at the beginning of this thesis. First, the analytical chapters have proved beyond doubt that there are a plethora of linguistic, narrative and structural complexities within my chosen texts that sufficiently evidence the prominence of postmodernism and metafiction in mainstream contemporary children’s literature. While I have examined only three authors, each of these display increasing levels of narrative sophistication in terms of the involvement of the real/external author and real reader within the fiction and the subsequent metaleptic transgressions that then occur as a by-product of this interactivity. Furthermore, these examples are by no means rare in the wider field of children’s literature. Chapter 3 listed a number of other authors – both classic and contemporary – who utilise similar techniques, and there is definitely scope for future research in this regard to incorporate even more textual examples. This, again, demonstrates the ‘appropriation of experimental and metafictional techniques into mainstream children’s literature, an occurrence which blurs the distinctions between experimental and non-experimental, between the mainstream and the marginal’ (McCallum, 1996: 408).

The prevalence of such devices indicates their popularity amongst the target readership, therein proving that child-readers not only enjoy postmodern and metafictional strategies, but capably understand them too. This connects to my

second research aim concerning the use of traditionally sophisticated techniques to actively engage child-readers in the reading process and, in doing so, increase readerly engagement and interactivity. The explicit dramatisation of the real reader explored in Chapter 5 perhaps offers the strongest evidence in this regard, highlighting the involvement of the child-reader as a clear participant in the reading process and, at times, as the internal author's collaborator in meaning-making and narrative construction, too. As a whole, however, the analysis presented in this thesis has demonstrated that the overtly playful and interactive metafictional techniques exhibited in my chosen texts definitely 'foster an awareness of how a story works' (Mackey, 1990: 181) and thus implicitly teach child-readers how to understand, construct and read narratives in a fun, engaging and accessible way.

Consequently, children's literature is not only worthy of academic study for both its aesthetic and pedagogic value, it is vitally important that such material continues to be championed both within the academy and outside. For too long, children's literature has been relegated or side-lined as some minor category of academic study *and* of commercial publishing, sometimes being dismissed altogether. This thesis has proved how unjust this is and outlined numerous opportunities for further research that consider not only children's literature within the traditional frame of pedagogy, but also as literature in its own right that is just as deserving of academic and stylistic study as any other literary field. Perhaps then we might finally put to bed the idea that children's literature is easy or simple because, as this thesis has proved, it is anything but.

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