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and Its Adult Readership
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The Crossover Novel  
*Contemporary Children's Fiction and Its Adult Readership*  
by Rachel Falconer
For my mother
Charlotte Elisabeth Ann Falconer
With a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner.

(Sir Philip Sidney, A Defence of Poetry, 1595)
Contents

Series Editor’s Foreword xi
Acknowledgments xiii

Introduction A Decade of Border Crossing 1
Chapter 1 Kiddults at Large 11
Chapter 2 Harry Potter, Lightness and Death 43
Chapter 3 Coming of Age in a Fantasy World: Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* 73
Chapter 4 Seeing Things Big: Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* 95
Chapter 5 Adolescence and Abjection: Geraldine McCaughrean’s *The White Darkness* 113
Chapter 6 The Search for Roots: David Almond’s *Clay* 129
Chapter 7 Rereading Childhood Books: C. S. Lewis’s *The Silver Chair* 153
Conclusion Crossing Thresholds of Time 187

Notes 191
Bibliography 237
Index 255
Series Editor’s Foreword

Dedicated to furthering original research in children’s literature and culture, the Children’s Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres, and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children’s literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

Children’s literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term ‘children’ to encompass the period of childhood up through adolescence. Owing to the fact that the notion of childhood has changed so much since the origination of children’s literature, this Routledge series is particularly concerned with transformations in children’s culture and how they have affected the representation and socialization of children. While the emphasis of the series is on children’s literature, all types of studies that deal with children’s radio, film, television, and art are included in an endeavor to grasp the aesthetics and values of children’s culture. Not only have there been momentous changes in children’s culture in the last fifty years, but there have been radical shifts in the scholarship that deals with these changes. In this regard, the goal of the Children’s Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world.

Jack Zipes
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Introduction

A Decade of Border Crossing

Nine years ago, my sister handed me a paperback she had picked up in an airport shop on her way to India. It was a gloomy-looking book, with a black and white photo of a steam train approaching through fog on the cover. Cutting across the top of the photo was a lurid strip of orange backing a half-legible title, and in the middle, an author’s name I didn’t know: J.K. Rowling. I began to read the novel and by page three, I was hooked. I had become the child-reader I once was: voracious, oblivious to time, suspended by words in an attic room of excitement, fun, friendship and bravery. It was 1998, and my sister had handed me a copy of the first adult edition of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, which came out a year after its publication for children. Across the globe other readers, children and adults, were discovering Harry Potter and becoming hooked in their own ways. In Britain and elsewhere, there followed an extraordinary period in which children’s literature exploded into the mainstream of popular and literary culture. Suddenly everyone was talking about children’s books, and not just Harry Potter, not just fantasy, but children’s fiction in all its variety and invention.

Now that the world has been saturated with Harry Potter hype, it is worth emphasising the individual reader’s moment of discovery because, however aggressive the marketing of children’s fiction has become, reading by definition is still an individual experience. Publicity can bring a book to a potential reader’s attention and it can induce the reader to buy the book, but no amount of publicity can make a book speak to individual hearts and minds. And yet, quite evidently, the Harry Potter series and many other children’s books do speak to adult readers, and this is happening on a scale that has not been seen in Britain before. The present study sets out to address the question: Why did so many adult readers turn to fiction for children over the decade or so spanning the new millennium? 1997 to 2007 is the ten-year span which saw the publication of the Harry Potter series. But exceptional as it is, Rowling’s success with
adult readers is only one example of the way new and classic children’s fiction shifted into the literary mainstream during this decade. In 2001, Philip Pullman’s *The Amber Spyglass* won the Children’s Book category of the Whitbread (now Costa) Award, then went on to win the overall prize of Book of the Year. Other writers of children’s and young adult fantasy, including Eoin Colfer, Anthony Horowitz, Garth Nix, G.P. Taylor, and the pseudonymous Lemony Snicket and Lian Hearn, became bestsellers in both children’s and adult fiction markets. Classic children’s fantasy such as Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* reappeared in new editions, some of which were tailor-made for adult readers. And throughout the decade, children’s fiction reached bigger audiences than ever before through the medium of film adaptation.

After the popular and critical successes of Rowling and Pullman, many commentators concluded that children’s fantasy fiction alone had the magic ingredient to appeal to dual-aged audiences. In 2003, however, Mark Haddon’s novel about a boy with Asperger’s syndrome proved that the appetite for crossover fiction could also cross literary genres. Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, a postmodern blend of realist autobiography, coming-of-age story and detective novel, was published simultaneously in two different editions, one for children and one for adults. It won the Best Novel (rather than Best Children’s) category of the Whitbread Award, as well as the Book of the Year Award, a win which in the eyes of many people consolidated the status of children’s literature as serious, literary fiction. But whether counted as high or popular art, realist children’s fiction continued to reach adult audiences throughout the decade, with realist novels including Sonya Hartnett’s *Thursday’s Child* and Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* receiving critical attention in the national media. Generically hybrid and experimental narratives, such as Malorie Blackman’s *Noughts and Crosses* (realism and dystopia), Meg Rosoff’s *How I Live Now* (realism and futuristic war fantasy) and the American Louis Sachar’s *Holes* (realism and fairy tale) all attracted mass adult readerships in addition to their primary young adult audience. *Holes* was selected by Liverpool City Council to be read and discussed throughout the city in 2004.1

The question as to why children’s literature became so popular amongst adults was aired periodically throughout the decade on national radio and television, in newspapers, book clubs, and specialist academic journals. The very insistence of its articulation points to some major cultural anxiety at the heart of the phenomenon. In *The Independent*, Jonathan Myerson took a low view of ‘Harry Potter and the sad grown-ups’ (14 November 2001), while Philip Hensher predicted dire consequences ‘when adults want to become children again’. (16 July 2002) Jasper Rees asked more uncertainly in *The Daily Telegraph*, ‘are we yearning for old-fashioned stories, seeking spiritual solace, or merely dumbing down?’ (15 November 2003). As these articles demonstrate, crossover novels emerged into the public arena amid a cacophonous mixture of outrage, disgust, defensiveness, and conspiratorial solidarity. The
hostility to cross-reading expressed by these and other journalists suggests a broader anxiety about the blurring of boundaries between child or youth culture and adult culture in the millennial years. In Bakhtinian terms, we might see crossover fiction as a new genre emerging as a response to a particular moment of cultural crisis and change. If nothing else, the success of crossover fiction made people acutely aware of the lack of consensus about what constituted appropriate reading for children as opposed to adults, and by extension, about the difficulty of maintaining traditional distinctions between childhood and adulthood. Just as the mixed reception of the eighteenth-century novel reflected anxieties about the then emerging literate and affluent middle class, so the charge of illegitimacy, so often lodged against 'kidult' or 'kiddult' fiction in the early twenty-first century reveals discomfort over the way child and adult cultures are clashing, intersecting and hybridising in our own time.

While many writers and publishers have been keen to claim that their books are suitable for readers of all ages, I would argue that cross-readers, like other cultural migrants, are often highly conscious of having crossed a border. Adults who declared themselves 'kiddults' were aware of transgressing the bounds of social respectability. They were often defiantly asserting a right to find delight in childish things. Perhaps, too, there was amongst adults a dialogic interaction developing with children’s culture, such as already exists amongst children in relation to adult culture. David Rudd describes children’s culture as ‘an intertextual refashioning of the adult world’, and now adults may be engaged in the same process in reverse. In any case, as the label ‘kidult’ gave way to the soberer though fuzzier term, ‘crossover’, more ambitious claims were made for children’s fiction. In praising Pullman’s His Dark Materials, adult readers could be confident that their reading tastes were serious and sophisticated. By 2007, children’s literature had ‘come of age’ and consequently could be ‘legitimately’ read by adults.

Various explanations have been put forward as to why adults began reading children’s literature in their millions over the millennial decade, but thus far, none has addressed the full complexity of the issue. The most frequently expressed opinion is that cross-reading children’s literature is a sign of adult ‘infantilisation’. Harry Potter is invariably the first example of fiction to be cited, and it almost always appears in a composite reference to ‘kiddult’ accessories (roller blades, PlayStations, etc.) deemed unworthy of thinking adults. For example, David Aaronovitch writes, ‘I don’t like to see adults reading Harry Potter when they haven’t read Nabokov, or men on shiny scooters when they should be on foot.’

But given that such commentators almost never engage with the substance of Rowling’s novels, nor indeed any other children’s book, one can only assume they are indulging in what Pierre Bayard refers to in Comment parler des livres que l’on n’a pas lus? Howard Jacobson acerbically remarked on the radio programme, Lebrecht Live, that people are choosing ‘the lowest
common denominator, which is the children’s book’, but his comments did
not suggest an intimate acquaintance with any of the books he so forcefully
decried. The decade saw the phenomenally popular success of many works
of fiction which possessed very little obvious literary merit, but this was as
true of adult popular fiction as it was of children’s. Readers of Dan Brown’s
*The Da Vinci Code* could be as easily accused of ‘dumbing down’ as read-
ers of Christopher Paolini’s Tolkien-derivative *Eragon*. But for critics of the
crossover phenomenon, it was not just fiction that was the problem; it was the
extension of youth culture into middle age in general. Thus one *Times Liter-
ary Supplement* contributor, in a fit of anticrossover pique, railed against ‘the
juvenilization of everything’.

This oft heard criticism will be considered in greater detail in the two
chapters following. But there are two general responses to the charge of adult
infantilisation that need to be made at the outset. Aside from the fact that
adult fiction has no greater a monopoly on seriousness than children’s fiction,
we should credit the fact that children’s literature is being absorbed into popu-
lar culture more deeply than ever before. As Jack Zipes has argued, books that
appeal to a mass number of people are likely to appeal to more homogenous
tastes. On the other hand, when there are so many kinds of entertainment
to choose from in the twenty-first century, maybe we should be celebrating
the deepening and broadening of interest in books and reading? The other
point is that while there is plenty of rubbish in circulation (in adult fiction
markets as well as children’s), there are today many complex, beautifully writ-
ten, thought provoking children’s novels crossing to adult readerships. The
practice of cross-reading also demonstrates how our attitudes to childhood,
adulthood, and the in-between state of adolescence are all shift-
ing, becoming
more flexible and porous, as we adapt to changing social conditions in the
developed world.

An offshoot of the infantilisation argument is that our reading tastes, like
everything else in popular culture, are increasingly being determined by
clever marketing. According to this line of argument, Rowling triggered a
fad with *Harry Potter*, and since then, publishing companies have been work-
hard to spin a profit out of the popularity of children’s literature while it
lasts. The implication of this argument is that the trend is fleeting and super-
ficial, little more than a marketing ploy to reap twice the profits from a fixed
number of products. To this argument it might be countered that publishers
changed their practices to meet a new demand amongst adult readers, but they
were not responsible for creating the demand out of nowhere. It was the new
readership that triggered the changes in marketing strategies, rather than the
other way around.

Viewing the expansion of children’s literature in a positive light, children’s
authors and publishers, critics and educationalists have all argued that adults
began paying attention to contemporary children’s fiction when they discov-
ered that these novels were addressing some of the major issues of our time:
the war of religions, the relativity of good and evil, the fragility of the natural world, and so on. And in contrast to serious ‘literary’ novelists, they were doing so in straightforward, well-crafted but accessible prose. In recent years, Philip Pullman has been one of the most outspoken apologists for children’s literature, and in typically polemical vein, he has declared, ‘there are some themes, some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children’s book’.

His argument is not only based on thematic content. For Pullman, children’s literature is also often stylistically superior to contemporary adult fiction because it returns us to the roots of narrative: the pure, undiluted drive of storytelling and listening. In The Telegraph, Pullman is quoted as saying,

Stories are vital... There is more wisdom in a story than in volumes of philosophy, and there is a hunger for stories in all of us. Children know they need them, and go for them with a passion, but all of us adults need them too. All of us, that is, except those limp and jaded people who think they are too grown up to need them.

Indeed, while the atheist Pullman himself would probably resist this view, there are children’s writers and critics for whom ‘story’ comes to represent a quasi-religious force, as will be explored in Chapter 6. Whether or not one accepts the quasi-religious explanations often advanced for strong stories and ‘pure narrative’, there do seem to be compelling psychological reasons for readers, both adults and children, to engage with chronologically ordered, accessible narrative. As Robert Musil writes in The Man Without Qualities,

when one is overburdened and dreams of simplifying one’s life, the basic law of this life, the law one yearns for, is nothing other than that of narrative order, the simple order that allows one to say: ‘First this happened and then that happened...’ It is the simple sequence of events in which the overwhelmingly manifold nature of things is represented, in a unidimensional order, as a mathematician would say, stringing all that has occurred in space and time on a single thread, which calms us; that celebrated ‘thread of story,’ which is, it seems, the thread of life itself.

For Pullman, children’s literature seems to provide, more specifically, a chance to go beyond modernist and postmodern writing. Whereas postmodern writers become trapped in the self-absorbed art of demonstrating their artistry, the children’s writer must put the interests of his reader first:

In a book for children you can’t put the plot on hold while you posture artistically for the amusement of your sophisticated readers because, thank God, your readers are not sophisticated. They have got more important things in mind than your dazzling skill.
The story is what keeps the children’s writer grounded and savagely unself-conscious. Whereas,

in adult literary fiction, stories are there on sufferance . . . Other things are felt to be more important: technique, style, literary knowingness . . . The present-day George Eliots take up their stories as if with a pair of tongs. They are embarrassed by them.\textsuperscript{16}

It is important to note, however, that Pullman elsewhere reluctantly concedes that self-consciousness is an inescapable part of contemporary life and hence, of its literature: ‘We can’t go back and regain the same innocence . . . The only way is forward; the only way is to . . . try to deal as best we can with our own self-consciousness, in life as well as in literature.’\textsuperscript{17} Indeed the very fact that storytelling was so highly prized in the early years of the new millennium as a ‘pure, unadulterated and spontaneous’ art should be taken as a measure of our distance from this idealised spontaneity. If we had not become self-conscious about stories, we would not have been discussing their vital importance; we would just have been practicing the art.

In any case, the worship of story was, in some critics’ eyes, a thing to be condemned rather than celebrated. Decrying the media-machine’s ceaseless productivity, Howard Jacobson declared, ‘We have stories crammed into us from morning till night; the last thing we need is more stories’.\textsuperscript{18} While there is undoubtedly truth in this remark, it does not follow, as he implies, that children’s literature automatically constitutes escapist or comfort storytelling for adult readers.\textsuperscript{19} Nothing could be less comforting than Lian Hearn’s Tales of the Otori, which recounts medieval atrocities of war, or Meg Rosoff’s How I Live Now, which depicts modern war scenes, including one in which a child’s face is blown off by gunshot at close range.

Quite apart from its hard-hitting content, contemporary children’s fiction can also be formally challenging. Anthony Browne, Aidan Chambers and Alan Garner, to name only a few, have written experimental or postmodern fiction for child readers. In Karen Coats’s view, the hybridity, playfulness, and indeterminacy of postmodern writing are naturally suited to children’s literature. She argues that ‘the child’s perceived delight in and celebration of the multivalence of the world his imagination presents to him makes him a perfect viewer for the postmodern aesthetic.’\textsuperscript{20} Maria Nikolajeva goes so far as to claim that ‘children’s literature today is catching up with mainstream literature in its . . . postmodern phase.’\textsuperscript{21} Whether or not one classes all of its formal innovations as postmodern, some contemporary children’s fiction is becoming much harder to distinguish from fiction for adult readers. Julia Eccleshare suggests that this group of novels—which she refers to as ‘crossover fiction’—have had a stimulating effect on the production of contemporary children’s literature in general, ‘edging it ever upwards’.\textsuperscript{22}
But clearly, it was not only (and not even primarily) postmodern or formally innovative children’s fiction that crossed to adult readerships in the late nineties and early years of the new millennium. J.K. Rowling, Eoin Colfer, Anthony Horowitz, Philip Reeve, Jonathan Stroud and G.P. Taylor are, at least *prima facie*, more easily described as traditional storytellers rather than postmodern novelists. It should be stressed from the outset, then, that crossover fiction includes both conventional and avant-garde, sophisticated and straightforward, clear-cut and morally ambivalent novels. Any consideration of the question of why children’s fiction crossed in such volume to adult readers during this decade must take account of the range and diversity of material crossing that particular threshold. One reason for the crossover which this study explores is that our reading tastes are shifting to reflect changing views of childhood, adulthood and the ambiguous spaces in between. In Britain, one must also take into account the change of political climate from Thatcherite conservatism to a youth-conscious New Labour. Blair’s reign as Prime Minister spanned exactly the same decade as Rowling’s, 1997 to 2007. Even if the shared dates are fortuitous, the promotion of youth culture under Blair can have done nothing to damage the popularity of children’s authors. Children’s literature publishing is also becoming an increasingly globalised industry. Some of the reasons for adult engagement with children’s cultures, including book reading, must therefore be addressed at an international level.23

The aspect of the ‘crossover phenomenon’ which is the focus of the present study is that of the adult reader choosing to read children’s fiction, not (or not only) for a child’s sake, but for her- or himself. But there are, of course, many other forms of cross-reading, not least of which is children reading adult literature. From the early years of the new millennium children had unprecedented access to adult reading material, and the subject matter deemed appropriate to younger readers expanded in the late twentieth century to include many topics which earlier writers, publishers and adult book buyers would have regarded as off-limits. Sex, drug abuse, torture, depression, mental illness, death, the Holocaust and genocide are all subjects treated in contemporary children’s literature, so whether or not they are consciously reading a novel ‘for adults’, today’s children are arguably cross-reading more than they have in previous generations. While this development is part of the larger story of the increasing hybridisation of child and adult cultures from the mid-nineties to the early years of the new millennium, the present study focuses on the phenomenon of adults cross-reading children’s literature, an area that raises related but different questions about our society’s changing attitudes both to reading, and to the idea of childhood. The central question addressed here is why so many adults are reading children’s fiction and discovering value in books which are not, or at least not primarily, addressed to us as adults. The answer lies partly in the texts themselves and partly in the changing tastes and habits of contemporary readers. Hence the double-barrelled focus of this study on crossover fiction and cross-reading, because in my view, one cannot
be accounted for without reference to the other. Even if my focus is on adults
cross-reading, however, it would be neither desirable nor possible to exclude
child readers from the discussion altogether, since adult engagement with this
category of fiction is always mediated through children’s reading tastes and
habits as well as our own memories of past childhood reading.

The first chapter of this study provides a wide-angle view of crossover
fiction and cross-reading as it developed in Britain over a roughly ten-year
span, 1997 to 2007. While this first chapter addresses a range of immediate
and material causes for cross-reading, some of the deeper issues at stake are
explored in the chapters that follow, with each focusing on a particular text
and a different aspect of contemporary cross-reading. Within this period,
three texts (or series) had a particularly important impact on the develop-
ment of cross-reading in Britain, so each of these three—Rowling’s Harry
Potter series, Pullman’s His Dark Materials, and Haddon’s The Curious Inci-
dent of the Dog in the Night-time—receives a chapter-length analysis of text
and immediate context of publication and reception. With Rowling, Pullman
and Haddon, I also explore three different preoccupations that are charac-
teristically found in crossover fiction: a sense of lightness and, conversely, of
mortal limit; a sense that the process of coming of age means something new
and different in our time; and a sense that the child’s eye view can reinvigo-
rate, transform and even redeem adult lives. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on two
outstanding novels published in 2005, Geraldine McCaughrean’s The White
Darkness and David Almond’s Clay; both were published for children but
were also described by reviewers as fiction for adults. In these two novels, as
I hope to demonstrate, children’s fiction becomes a medium through which
child and adult readers (re)fashion a sense of subjectivity in relation to the
extreme edges of human experience—death in The White Darkness, and birth
in Clay. The final chapter focuses on adults rereading the books they first
read as children, because this is an aspect of millennial cross-reading that has
expanded alongside the reading of contemporary children’s fiction. Indeed
the market for new children’s fiction has expanded in a symbiotic relationship
with the expansion of the market for re-edited or reissued classics, the one
market stimulating the other, and both being partly fuelled by adult nostalgia
for their own childhood books. Rereading is a major theme of C.S. Lewis’s
The Silver Chair, so this text is chosen as a means to explore adults’ relation to
their childhood books, in the broader context of the millennial expansion of
children’s fiction to adult audiences.

While particular focus is given to an individual text in chapters two to
seven, my aim with this close analysis is to illuminate different aspects of
crossover fiction and cross-reading in general. Therefore I have included many
lateral connections to other texts, as well as fairly extensive discussion of the
broader issues and ideas at stake in the reception of individual texts. Some
readers may find these lateral connections distracting, but in our age of nar-
row specialisms, I think it is important to bear in mind Primo Levi’s idea that
reading (and living) should be about building bridges and making connections. One of the bridges I am trying to build here is between children's and other fiction (and thankfully, there are and have been other scholars doing the same). While I argue that the crossover novel came into its own over the past decade or so in Britain, it is also important to see that its insights are retrospective. Contemporary cross-reading highlights how children's literature has never existed in a truly separate sphere. I have also avoided constructing any hard-edged definitions of what does and does not constitute 'crossover fiction' because an essential feature of this category of fiction is that its boundaries are unfixed. Not only are the texts themselves often generically hybrid, but readers are hybridising different readerly identities when they 'cross over' to reading a book that was intended, at least ostensibly, for someone other and elsewhere. Cross-reading is another of the ways in which we become, in Kristeva's phrase, 'strangers to ourselves'.

At the same time, cross-reading is also one of the means by which our disparate, stranger selves can converge into a multifaceted presence. Jacqueline Rose threw down a gauntlet to children's literature specialists by arguing that adult interests unconsciously predominate in children's fiction. Her provocative, illuminating study, The Case of Peter Pan, ‘instead of asking what children want, or need, from literature . . . asked what it is that adults, through literature, want or demand of the child’. In a sense, crossover fiction is simply children's fiction which is becoming conscious of and acknowledging that adult presence. But as the consciousness of a self and other within children's fiction grows, so too do the possibilities of interillumination. Crossover fiction thus invites us to rephrase Rose's question and ask: What is it that adults and children, through literature, want and demand of each other?

One of the distinctive aspects of children’s literature as a field of academic research is that it is genuinely interdisciplinary, and brings together readers from many different backgrounds, with widely differing areas of expertise. The approach adopted here is an attempt to reflect the richness and range of the dialogue that typically goes on in this field. In developing my reading of crossover fiction, I have also drawn on previously published academic criticism, newspaper and other media reviews, statistical studies, governmental and other institutional reports, Internet fan sites, published reviews and interviews with child and adult readers, the comments of Sheffield University students, and conversations with children and adults, interviewed in the course of writing this study. Harold Bloom asked about Harry Potter, 'Can 35 million readers be wrong?' and notoriously he answered, 'Yes.' But gone are the days when a famous critic's ex cathedra pronouncement could make or break a novel's reputation (if such days ever existed). What were the 35 million readers wrong about? What questions were they asking anyway? Bloom doesn't appear to be interested in finding out. On the other hand, his comment does pay Rowling the compliment of reading her writing according to a set of specifically literary, rather than sociological, criteria (though we can argue about
whether his criteria are well chosen). Although crossover fiction is interesting for cultural reasons, the fact that children’s fiction is crossing to adult readerships should also afford us the opportunity to appreciate these works for their formal attributes: their characterisation, emplotment, style, structure and all the other distinctive aspects of the ways these texts work as fictional narratives. This study will, I hope, contribute to the growing body of work which considers children’s literature as literature. The fact that the academic community devoted to the study of children’s literature is growing in strength and numbers might be understood as one more indication of the way in which a decade of crossover has transformed the shared spaces between children’s and adult’s reading of fiction.
Chapter One
Kiddults at Large

Children’s fiction has always crossed over to different age-groups in the sense that, historically, it has nearly always been written and published by adults, and purchased by adults for children. Before the invention of a distinct market for children’s literature in the mid-eighteenth century, adult texts regularly crossed to child readerships. Such crossings were often facilitated by adaptation, abridgement and illustration. Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress (1678), Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) and Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726) were adapted for children very soon after they were first published for adults, and they have retained their place amongst children’s books until the present day. Adult fiction has not ceased to cross over to child readers, and nineteenth-century realist fiction by Charles Dickens, George Eliot, the Brontës and Jane Austen, for example, can all be found shelved in the older children’s sections of bookshops and libraries today. But traffic moving in the other direction, from child to adult readers, is historically much more unusual, and the sheer scale of the flow of traffic in this direction which took place in the millennial decade is unprecedented in British publishing history.

The Ghost of Crossovers Past

This is not to say that child-to-adult crossover has no historical precedent at all, however. On the contrary, there is a strong tradition of children’s literature being adopted by adult readers in Britain. Children’s nonsense, magic and fantasy fiction, by writers such as Hilaire Belloc, Edward Lear, A.A. Milne, Beatrix Potter, Kenneth Grahame, Lewis Carroll, Roald Dahl, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, have long attracted a broad spectrum of readers, and this existing horizon of expectation has helped pave the way for the more recent, meteoric rise of the so-called crossover novel in Britain. This sense of lineage is reflected in the
frequent mentions of Dahl, Lewis and Tolkien in reviews of Rowling, Pullman and other contemporary children’s authors. But the tendency to hybridise the categories of child and adult fiction can be found much earlier than in these earlier twentieth-century classics. It is present, for instance, in British Romantic writers, themselves influenced by the theories of Locke and Rousseau concerning ideas of childhood and education. Sometimes this interest in childhood produced new kinds of writing for children, such as Charles and Mary Lamb’s stories for children; elsewhere it produced writing of or about childhood, as in William Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Experience (1789). Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin wrote both for and about children. Many Romantic writers aimed to produce a childlike language, which they defined as simple, direct and natural, as part of a broader aim to revolutionise poetic discourse.

In the Victorian period, George MacDonald’s At the Back of the North Wind (1871) and The Princess and the Goblin (1872), and Charles Kingsley’s The Water-Babies (1863) were considered to be works of serious, literary fiction, which though published for children could also be appreciated by adults. MacDonald in particular was (and still is) praised by adult readers for his luminous, visionary prose. Christina Rossetti’s sexually suggestive fable ‘Goblin Market’ (1862) was given to children to read, but published with her poems for adult readers. Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There (1871) were famously written for a real child, Alice Liddell, and her sisters, but even the dedicatory poem sounds elegiac, as if the little girl were already lost (i.e., too grown-up) for the author:

Alice! A childish story take,
And, with a gentle hand,
Lay it where Childhood’s dreams are twined
In Memory’s mystic band,

The book sold well from the first, but reviews of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland were mixed. Some found it delightfully appropriate for a young reader, others deemed it unsuitable for children, and still others commented on its crossover appeal:

It is most amusingly written, and a child, when once the tale has been commenced, will long to hear the whole of this wondrous narrative. (The Press, 1865)

We fancy that any child might be more puzzled than enchanted by this stiff, over-wrought story. (The Athenæum, 1865)

This is the book for little folks, and big folks who take it home to their little folks will find themselves reading more than they intended, and laughing more than they had any right to expect. (The Spectator, 1865)
A delightful book for children—or, for the matter of that, for grown-up people, provided they have wisdom and sympathy enough to enjoy a piece of downright hearty drollery and fanciful humour. (*The London Review*, 1865)\(^5\)

And thus began the complicated reception history of these two novels, which have haunted the space between ‘Childhood’s dreams’ and ‘Memory’s mystic band’ ever since.

Less ambiguously, Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), like Lear’s *Book of Nonsense* published thirty years earlier, appealed instantly and equally to child and adult readers. As well as producing works for ‘the nursery’ (i.e., for younger children), the Victorians also segregated books by gender and these gender-specific books tended to cross fluidly between child and adult readerships. Thus Charlotte M. Yonge’s domestic novels were read by girls and women, while adventure novels by G.A. Henty, Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson were read by boys and men. Brian Alderson argues that the ‘real secret’ of the popularity of Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1882) and other adventure novels was ‘not that boys delighted in tales meant for men, like *Robinson Crusoe*, . . . but that men, Victorian men, were eager for tales meant for boys.’ (295) Similarly, Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885), one of the many Victorian adventure novels being re-edited for twenty-first century crossover audiences, was originally dedicated ‘to all the big and little boys who read it.’ (296) In the same period, Jules Verne’s scientific fantasies were being published, serially and in translation, in *The Boy’s Own Paper*, a journal which, from its inception in 1879, attracted a readership of ‘big and little boys.’ In the late twentieth century, ‘chick lit’ novels such as Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* proved equally gender-specific but age-neutral, although (despite the labelling) ‘lad lit’ such as Nick Hornby’s *About a Boy* were less successful in excluding female readers.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* idealised a separate world of childhood adventure and magic, first in the form of a play (1904) and then revised and expanded as a novel (1928). This composite work has arguably had more influence on the subsequent history of children’s literature than any other work besides Carroll’s Alice books. But as Jacqueline Rose and other critics have shown, Neverland was always an adult projection of childhood, in whose very separateness adults were passionately invested.\(^6\) With Geraldine McCaughrean’s officially nominated sequel, *Peter Pan in Scarlet* (2006), we may measure our distance from this early twentieth-century credo, the belief in a *puer eternus* reigning princelike over a separate and eternal realm of childhood. *Peter Pan in Scarlet* begins with a strange series of scenes in which Wendy and the Lost Boys, now grown into adults, squeeze themselves into children’s clothes in order to become children again, as they were in Barrie’s play/novel. Once they have successfully metamorphosed, their task is to rescue Peter, who is slowly being destroyed by the seepage of time into Neverland. This continuation of the Peter Pan myth reveals the twenty-first century adult’s