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THE Crossover Novel
Contemporary Children’s Fiction and Its Adult Readership

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)
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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 autopathography, 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 ‘kidult’ 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
The Crossover Novel

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 readers 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 Literary 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 popular 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 written, 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 shifting, 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 working 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 superficial, 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 discovered 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’.11

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.12 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.13

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.14

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.15
The story is what keeps the children’s writer grounded and savingly 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.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.’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’.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.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’.20 Maria Nikolajeva goes so far as to claim that ‘children’s literature today is catching up with mainstream literature in its . . . postmodern phase.’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’.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.

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 development 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 Incident 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 characteristically 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 reinvigorate, 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 narrow 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.\textsuperscript{24} 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’.\textsuperscript{25}

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’.\textsuperscript{26} 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.’\textsuperscript{27} But gone are the days when a famous critic’s \textit{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 Athenaeum*, 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)

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. 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
investment in the idea of aging as a reversible process, and of childhood and adulthood being metamorphic, rather than fixed, states of being. But if Barrie’s strict prohibition against adults entering Neverland has been overturned, paradoxically we continue to believe in the myth of eternal childhood; the difference is that now we think that adults as well as children have right of access to this world of eternal play. McCaughrean’s novel reproduces this contemporary investment in the Peter Pan myth in order, finally, to deconstruct it. Although in a jauntily upbeat Afterword, McCaughrean describes ‘Neverland healing up just like that’, she also firmly closes the door to her kiddult protagonists. Wendy and the Lost Boys have grown into adults again, and this time they are glad to be leaving Peter and returning home. Moreover, it is only by remembering his adult training as a doctor that Curly is able to operate on Peter, and remove the mysterious splinter that had been slowing killing the eternal boy. So as it turns out, the safety of Neverland depends on adults learning to value themselves as adults.

In the 1940s, Tolkien began writing *The Lord of the Rings*, a trilogy which began as a sequel to his children’s story, *The Hobbit* (1937). By the time it was published in 1954–55, however, *The Lord of the Rings* had developed into an epic fantasy for adult readers. Within ten years of its publication, Tolkien had attracted a cult following which spanned older child and adult, male and female readers in Britain and North America. It has remained one of the most popular works of fiction produced in the twentieth century. Although somewhat dwarfed by the enduring success of *The Lord of the Rings*, Richard Adams’s *Watership Down* (1972) should not be overlooked as an important example of twentieth-century crossover fiction *avant la lettre*. Like Carroll’s tales of Alice underground and Tolkien’s tales of hobbits and goblins, *Watership Down* grew out of stories told to children, but the finished novel is an epic work that draws richly on Biblical and classical myth and literature (Exodus; Aeschylus; Virgil’s *Aeneid*; and Joseph Campbell’s study of myth, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) as well as the author’s own military experiences in the Second World War. While published as a children’s book, it was also read by millions of adults, and reputedly influenced George Lucas in developing the storyline of that colossus of crossover films, *Star Wars*. In a lighter vein, Douglas Adams’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* was first broadcast on BBC Radio 4, in 1978, and on TV, *Doctor Who* attracted another cult following, while the enormously prolific Terry Pratchett published his first Discworld novel, *The Colour of Magic*, in 1983. Such comic science fiction fantasies, like the boys’ adventure stories of a century earlier, seemed to pass effortlessly across age categories, and indeed continue to do so, to the present day. *Doctor Who* was revived both on film and in a 2005 TV series.

The first thing that distinguishes the present millennial situation from this historical context, however, is the sheer volume and diversity of children’s fiction crossing from child to adult audiences. The second major difference is that, due to the volume of traffic passing across once distinct publishing markets,
crossover fiction has helped to change the map of mainstream literary culture in Britain, altering previous boundaries not only between children’s and adult-, but also between literary and popular fiction, as well as print fiction and the film industry. Even within the popular genre of fantasy, there has been a much greater diversity of subgenres crossing to adult readers than heretofore, ranging from best-selling stories of magic crossing to adult readers than heretofore, ranging from best-selling stories of magic for younger children like Eoin Colfer’s Artemis Fowl series and Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events to high fantasy, such as Anthony Horowitz’s Alex Rider and The Power of Five, Garth Nix’s Old Kingdom, G.P. Taylor’s Shadowmancer and William Nicholson’s The Wind on Fire.

Realist fiction has a much more limited history of crossing from child to adult readerships in Britain, though again there are notable precedents, especially from the mid-twentieth century. Examples of social realist novels as well as realist dystopias for young adults that were, and are still, widely read by adults include George Orwell’s Animal Farm (1945) and 1984 (1949), J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye (1951), William Golding’s Lord of the Flies (1954) and Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird (1960). But in recent years, realist children’s fiction has begun to appear on adult best-seller lists with some regularity, with examples ranging from Mark Haddon’s Curious Incident to Markus Zusak’s The Book Thief, a novel ‘narrated by Death’ about a young girl in Nazi Germany, which became a New York Times best seller. Documentary narrative such as Bernard Hare’s Urban Grimshaw and the Shed Crew; realist fiction about street children such as Elizabeth Laird’s The Garbage King; and school and family stories such as Polly Shulman’s delightful homage to Jane Austen, Enthusiasm; Linda Newberry’s Sisterland; and Rachel Klein’s The Moth Diaries were all marketed as crossover fiction, with Klein’s most strikingly described as a novel for ‘15- to 25-year-old’ readers. Perhaps most distinctively, the hybrid fantasy/magic-realist novel crossed in large numbers from young adult to adult readerships. Amongst these generically hybrid crossover novels are Malorie Blackman’s Noughts and Crosses series, David Almond’s The Fire-Eaters and Helen Oyeyemi’s The Icarus Girl.

Hogwarts Express to Fame and Fortune

But unquestionably, what kick-started the millennial crossover phenomenon was the unforeseen popularity of J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series with adult readers. Rowling proved to publishers and retailers that children’s fiction could be big business, equally as lucrative as popular adult fiction and more so. By 2007, Rowling had broken practically every sales record in publishing history. To mention just a few of the landmarks: In 2000, Rowling’s fourth volume, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, took sales of the series to over forty million in two hundred countries, with translations into forty languages. The fifth volume, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, became an Amazon.com
bestseller six months before it was even published in June 2003. The sixth, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, broke records as the fastest selling book in history, selling nine million copies on its first day in July 2005. The final volume went even further and broke sales records on both sides of the Atlantic, selling eleven million copies in its first 24 hours. On the day of its release, 21 July 2007, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* sold 2.7 million copies in the UK and 8.3 million in the US, and was published simultaneously in more than ninety countries. The running total for Harry Potter book sales over the ten-year period from the publication of the first to the seventh volume, and before the release of the final volume, was 325 million copies, making Rowling the richest author in literary history.

Rowling is said to have awakened a new generation of children to a love of reading, and few would criticise her for this achievement. What was even more surprising was that she appeared to have won many adults back to reading as well. In Britain, the seven novels were published by Bloomsbury first as children’s books. They appeared at fairly regularly spaced intervals: 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005 and 2007. Recognising how many adults had enjoyed the first Harry Potter, Bloomsbury took the unprecedented step of issuing an ‘adult edition’, that is, the same text, but with a different cover (in this case, the black and white photo of a steam train) in 1998. This was followed by further adult versions of the next four novels, issued in 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, in each case, roughly a year after the release of the children’s edition. In 2004, a new adult edition of the series was released and from then until 2007, the child and adult editions were released simultaneously, indicating the growing importance Bloomsbury attached to Harry’s adult fans. Harry grows from an eleven-year-old child to a young man over the course of the series. And as Rowling’s original readers would also be growing up as the series progressed (indeed, growing up at twice Harry’s rate, since the later books came out every other year), there are several inbuilt reasons why the series would attract an ever greater number of adult readers. However, it remains to be proven that issuing an adult edition contributed in any substantial way to attracting new, adult readers to the Potter series. For the most part, the children’s editions sold much more strongly than their adult counterparts. It was not until the last volume, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, that sales of the adult edition of the seventh book were seen to outstrip sales of the children’s edition. By that time, Waterstone’s was estimating that 60% of Rowling’s readership was made up of teenagers and young adults, a substantial number of whom must have grown up alongside the series itself.

**Crossover Fiction Goes to Market**

It has been much debated whether the success of *Harry Potter* had a stimulating effect on the children’s publishing industry or the reverse. The answer
is probably mixed, but what is certain is that the nature of the industry changed during this period, with publishers offering huge advances to a few, potentially best-selling authors. One of the beneficiaries of the ‘Potter effect’ was Michelle Paver, a first-time author who was awarded a record 2 million-pound advance from Orion Books, for a series entitled *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* which, following the well-worn track of Jack London and Rudyard Kipling, promised to trace the adventures of a wolf-boy named Tora. Ridley Scott was also reported to have offered Paver 2.7 million for the film rights to the series. The first edition’s dust jacket of *Wolf Brother*, the first chronicle, had a simple, cave-painting design set against a muted red-brown background, which insured that, as one journalist put it, the book ‘could discreetly be read on the train by adults on their way to work.’ Some critics would argue that such inflated advances meant that children’s publishing in general became less diverse and less generous to the majority of children’s authors. But Waterstone’s claimed that sales of children’s books excluding Rowling’s novels grew at a rate of 2% per year from 1997 to 2005, and that the number of children’s titles being published increased by tenfold. If these statistics are reliable, Rowling’s effect on the industry must be considered a beneficial one, at very least in economic terms.

By 2002, ‘crossover’ had become the buzz word at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair, the leading trade fair dedicated to buying and selling rights to children’s literature. Children’s fiction had also become a major presence at the Frankfurt International Book Fair, the leading international book fair and a much vaster institution than Bologna. But it is at the Bologna Fair that one can see most clearly the emphasis on crossover emerging from within the children’s literature market. In 2002, interest in picture books, series fiction and books for younger children (six to eight years) was in decline; what was most in demand was fiction for older children with a sophistication that could appeal to adults. As Mary Tapissier, the Managing Director at Hodder Children’s, said at the time, ‘the big crossover market we’ve been talking about for years is finally with us’. Trading in fantasy fiction and edgy realism for older children was particularly strong. For example, Hodder paid a six-figure sum for UK and Commonwealth rights to David Lee Stone’s medieval fantasy trilogy, while Puffin battled to win paperback rights to three hard-hitting, teenage novels by Melvin Burgess. This was also the year in which leading publishers created new lists such as Young Picador at Macmillan and Collins Flamingo at HarperCollins that were designed to blur the distinction between adult and children’s book markets.

By 2004, publishers and agents had become even more strategic about presenting their titles in Bologna and elsewhere. Literary agents and publishers aimed to seal deals for rights in several countries at once, as well as film rights if possible. The US and UK markets had become more integrated, as Jean Feiwel, publisher and senior vice president of Scholastic in the US, indicated. ‘What we hope to do now is to cue each other to our markets, to listen to our
sister companies more’, she said. ‘With the kind of sums you have to spend, you want marketing programmes to work globally. You also have to make a bigger and bigger noise to make a book heard’.

The Managing Director at Puffin, Francesca Dow, commented that publishers were seeking distinctive one-off titles that had a potentially global appeal. Within this globalised industry, British fiction was seen to occupy a market-leading position. As Dow put it, ‘in the US especially, they look to the UK for literary, interesting fiction and regard us as an important source of individual talent’.

There had been strong interest in securing television and film rights to children’s fiction since the new millennium, but by 2005 Hollywood had become an influential and ubiquitous presence at the Bologna Fair. Representatives from Walden Media, Fox, Nickelodeon, DreamWorks and New Line were all present, seeking franchises for family feature films. ‘L.A. has woken up to Bologna’, remarked Fiona Kenshole, a former children’s publishing UK executive.

The Harry Potter films were already proving to be hugely popular, as were film adaptations of Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Incidents* and Sachar’s *Holes*, not to mention Jackson’s toweringly successful adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*. Adamson’s first *Narnia* adaptation was already in production, as was the adaptation of Colfer’s *Artemis Fowl* series. L.A. had not only woken up to Bologna; it had also woken up to the concept of the crossover film, and directors and producers descended like Nazgûl on the once peaceful backwater of children’s fiction.

**Impressing the Cultural Gatekeepers**

If it was new to the glamour of Hollywood, children’s fiction had never had any difficulty in achieving recognition as popular literature. What people were slower to recognise was that children’s fiction could have a place in ‘high’ culture. It could be fêted and fanfared and ushered in to the white-tie events with a guest pass that read Literature with a capital ‘L’.

When children’s fiction began to be read by millions of adults, its place in the literary canon was also radically altered. Evidence of this transition in cultural status can be seen in the increasing number of children’s novels that competed successfully against adult fiction to win major literary awards in the first years of the new millennium.

After the Man Booker Prize, the most prestigious national literary award for contemporary fiction in Britain is the Costa (previously Whitbread) Award. Established in 1985, the structure of the awards was changed in 1996 when the Whitbread Children’s Book of the Year was awarded as a separate category. The prize money was considerable (£10,000), but the Children’s Book of the Year was not judged against the other four adult categories. Previous to 1996, winners of the Children’s Book category included Anne Fine’s *Flour Babies* (1993) and Geraldine McCaughrean’s *Gold Dust* (1994), that is to say, works...
aimed at younger children (up to about aged 9 or 10). After 1996, when children’s books were competing for a substantial monetary prize, the Whitbread produced a different kind of award winner; David Almond’s *Skellig* (winner in 1998) went on to become crossover best seller and was successfully adapted for the national stage in London. In 1999, the Whitbread Award changed its rules again to allow books from the Children’s Literature category to be submitted for the overall prize of Book of the Year, that is, to compete directly with adult fiction. In that year, Rowling’s third novel, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* won the children’s category award and came close to unseating two venerable poet laureates, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, for the overall Book of the Year award. The following year, the children’s category award was won by another crossover novel, Jamila Gavin’s *Coram Boy*. And in 2001, Philip Pullman broke through the glass ceiling, winning both the children’s category award and the overall Book of the Year with *The Amber Spyglass*. As Boyd Tonkin wrote on the occasion of Philip Pullman’s success, ‘children’s writing has moved from being a dowdy Cinderella on the edges of the literary world to the star of the show’.

Following Pullman’s strong precedent, children’s fiction with either proven or potential crossover appeal continued to win the children’s category award throughout the decade. There was Almond’s gritty, magic realist *The Fire-Eaters* in 2003, McCaughrean’s feminist version of Noah, *Not the End of the World* in 2004, Kate Thompson’s *The New Policeman* in 2005 which succeeded against Frank Cottrell Boyce’s *Framed* and McCaughrean’s *The White Darkness*, and Linda Newberry’s *Set in Stone* in 2006, all of which were felt to have a strong crossover appeal. Moreover, in 2003 Mark Haddon confirmed how confidently children’s fiction could compete against adult literary fiction when his novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, which had been published in dual editions for children and adults, was entered in the adult fiction category, and won the award not only for this category but also the overall Book of the Year. Reviews of all these novels rather pointedly avoided any reference to the age of the intended readership of the work in question. For example, the Costa Award Web site describes the 2006 winner, *Set in Stone*, as ‘beautifully crafted,’ an ‘emotionally charged narrative’ that ‘will thrill all lovers of intelligent fiction’.

Nor will it be long before children’s fiction begins to appear amongst the winners of the Man Booker Prize. Crossover novels have already crept into the long-lists (Pullman’s *The Amber Spyglass* in 2001 and Haddon’s *Curious Incident* in 2003). And adult novels focalised through young adults, and narrated in a hybridised ‘young/old’ narrative voice, or obviously drawing on the model of children’s magic or fantasy literature, have fared even better. Thus the 2002 Man Booker Prize was won by Canadian writer Yann Martel, with his Crusoe-esque novel *Life of Pi*, depicting an Indian boy’s coming-of-age at sea, in the magic realist company of a zebra, an orangutan, a hyena and a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. The novel conflates questions of religious
belief and faith in 'magic' and childhood imagination in much the same way C.S. Lewis does in *The Silver Chair* (see Chapter Seven of the present study). Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, touted by Bloomsbury as a ‘Harry Potter for adults,’ was short-listed in 2004, while Ishiguro’s hauntingly bleak novel *Never Let Me Go*, which is narrated by a teenage clone, was short-listed in 2005.

Meanwhile, two of the most prestigious national awards specifically for children’s literature, the CILIP Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize, also strongly favoured children’s literature with adult appeal in the years spanning the millennium. The Guardian Prize aims to discover ‘innovative new children’s fiction before it is known elsewhere’ and during this period, ‘innovative’ meant tackling subjects, or more accurately, a complex attitudinal stance on the part of the narrator to certain subjects, hitherto deemed ‘off-limits’ for child readers.  

Thus Sonya Hartnett’s *Thursday’s Child*, the 2002 winner, unsentimentally depicts a family’s struggle to survive the great depression in Australia. Haddon’s *Curious Incident*, the 2003 winner, is narrated by a boy with Asperger’s syndrome. And Meg Rosoff’s *How I Live Now*, the 2004 winner, moves breezily from a ‘utopian’ opening situation, in which an anorexic New York teenager begins an affair with her underage, chain-smoking English cousin, to a dystopic fantasy of foreign invasion, flight and starvation, murder and genocide. No less eager to select fiction that transgressed the traditional boundaries of children’s fiction, the Carnegie Medal judges selected Pullman’s *Northern Lights* (first in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy) in 1995; Melvin Burgess’s *Junk* (a novel about drug addiction for teenagers, which was considered controversial for its overly ‘adult’ treatment of the subject) in 1996; Aidan Chambers’s brilliantly postmodern *Postcards from No Man’s Land* in 1999; Jennifer Donnelly’s *A Gathering Light* (a Richard and Judy show best seller, discussed below) in 2003; Frank Cottrell Boyce’s *Millions*, which was later adapted for mainstream family cinema in 2004; and Macmillan’s hot crossover novelist Meg Rosoff’s *Just in Case* in 2007.

In terms of winning critical recognition from national judges, critics and reviewers, 2003 was the crossover novel’s *annus mirabilis*. This was the year that Mark Haddon’s *Curious Incident* proved beyond doubt that the same text could work as brilliantly for a child reader as for an adult. This was also the year that the Carnegie Medal judges chose to showcase ‘writing that is as enjoyable for adults as it is for children and young people’, according to Chair of Judges Colin Brabazon. Along with American writer Jennifer Donnelly’s *A Gathering Light*, the judges short-listed *The Curious Incident*, David Almond’s *Fire-Eaters*, and Michael Morpurgo’s *Private Peaceful*, a historical novel about the young soldiers who were court-martialled and executed for cowardice during World War One. Because of the bleakness of its conclusion, *Private Peaceful* is arguably the most adult-oriented novel that this former Children’s Laureate has produced to date. *A Gathering Light*, the eventual winner, was praised by the judges for ‘the striking luminosity of its prose, its
tangible sense of place and the integrity of its vision’. (The date of Donnelly’s award is 2004, because the Carnegie is awarded to winners the following January.) The judges’ assessment was echoed by reviews of the novel in the national press. ‘If ever a novel for teenagers deserved a crossover audience, *A Gathering Light* . . . is it’, declared Adèle Geras. Geras advises us to overlook the fact that the novel is narrated by a teenager, since ‘a whole community is revealed in these pages’, conveyed with ‘unmatched authenticity’ due to the biographical connections linking Donnelly to the historical murder of Grace Brown. As she writes in her ‘Author’s Note’, Donnelly was inspired to write her novel by reading the letters of Grace Brown, a real girl who had been murdered during pregnancy in the Adirondack in 1906. Her lover was eventually convicted and executed for her murder. Donnelly’s own grandmother had been a waitress at the hotel where Grace Brown was murdered (though not at the time of the crime). For these reasons, Donnelly’s fictional rendition of Grace Brown’s history was felt by reviewers to be a ‘genuinely authentic’ account with which adult readers could engage as if it were local history.

But if the Carnegie panel thought the novel had adult appeal, they were overlooking the author’s stated intention, since Donnelly specified that she meant to address female teenagers with her novel. Growing up in a rural community in upstate New York, the protagonist Mattie Gokey is a gifted but plain-looking girl who finds herself being courted by the local golden boy, Royal Loomis, though it turns out he wants her because of a piece of land that adjoins both their fathers’ farms. As she struggles to choose between Royal and her cherished ambition to become a writer, she learns to resist the allure of romance by uncovering the tragic history of Grace Brown, murdered at the hotel where Mattie works. In interview, Donnelly insisted that contemporary teenagers needed to hear the message of Grace’s story: ‘I wanted to tell them that the world is a tough place for young women; always has been, always will be. I hoped teenagers would relate to 16-year-old Mattie and her struggle to build a life of her own choosing.’ And teenage reviews of *A Gathering Light* suggest that Donnelly succeeded in her aim. One fifteen-year-old female reviewer writes, ‘many of the things people have to deal with nowadays were the same sort of things people had to cope with back then’ while another comments ‘the main character experiences what it feels like to believe your boyfriend is too good-looking for you’. *A Gathering Light* works on several levels to validate a sense of identity and self-worth in its intended female young adult readership. In Donnelly’s revisioning of the story, Mattie exposes the murder by making public Grace’s letters, despite Grace’s request that they be destroyed; her heroine thus provides a strong and positive role model for teenage readers. But the response of the Carnegie judges demonstrated that this sense of identification could be transferred to a wider age of reader. Looking beyond the specifics of teenage pregnancy, Brabazon described *A Gathering Light* in more general terms as a ‘book about hard choices and the power of language to free us from the constraints of everyday’.
The Carnegie judges’ decision to showcase children’s fiction that was also ‘enjoyable for adults’ was not a conscious attempt to promote a new publisher’s category of fiction. Colin Brabazon said that he referred to ‘crossover novels’ in his press release because the term ‘crossover’ was in use in the trade press (The Bookseller and other publishers’ journals) at the time, and because it seemed a good way of introducing a unifying theme to the judges’ range of selected books.35 Thus, although the Carnegie panel in 2003 helped to sell the concept of the crossover novel, the judges were themselves responding to changes in the market that were already taking place. As will be explored below, this change was in part due to the greater likelihood that adult readers would identify with a young adult protagonist or narratorial voice than they might have in the past.

Cross-reading on TV

If they were moving up the ranks culturally, crossover novels also gained ground on the popular front by being featured on national television book clubs, such as the BBC’s Page Turners hosted by Jeremy Vine, and Channel 4’s Richard and Judy Book Club, both of which emulated the huge success of the USA’s Oprah Winfrey, whose television book club was initiated in 1996. In 2005, Page Turners featured several children’s books on its list, which was predominantly aimed at an adult televisual audience. These included McCaughrean’s Not the End of the World, Oyeyemi’s The Icarus Girl and Shriver’s We Need to Talk About Kevin. Similarly, Donnelly’s A Gathering Light, which had appeared as a young adult novel in the USA, under the title, A Northern Light, was published by Bloomsbury in two editions, a children’s hardback and an adult paperback. The adult edition was selected by Richard and Judy for their first Summer Reads programme. The husband-and-wife duo’s Summer Reads included six novels which offered adult readers ‘an eclectic mix of perfect escapist holiday reads’ including a ‘murderous coming-of-age tale’; ‘a compelling family saga; comic and tragic revelations about life, love and friendship’; ‘a political thriller/love story set in Chile’; ‘the scariest serial killer in years’; and ‘a romantic comedy.’36 Although an eclectic mix of genres, all six books focused strongly on family and romantic relationships. Five of the six writers featured were women (including one mother-daughter writing duo), and the one novel by a male writer was a love story. The cover of Bloomsbury’s adult edition of A Gathering Light bears the photograph of a tranquil, royal blue lake, and an extract from a Sunday Telegraph review running across the top of the page: ‘if George Clooney had walked into the room I would have told him to come back later when I’d finished it.’ All of these paratextual signifiers, including its place on a mostly female-authored, summer reading list, steered this novel toward an adult female reader looking for light, but not too light, holiday reading.37 The adult paperback edition made a natural choice, then, for Richard and Judy’s list of recommended Summer Reads. And there is no
question but that the selection helped the novel reach a much wider base of adult readers; a glance at the sales figures confirms just how valuable a mention on Richard and Judy’s show could be. Before its selection, the adult paperback edition of *A Gathering Light* was selling about a thousand copies a week in the UK. The novel featured on the Richard and Judy show on 9 June, and by two days later, sales had leapt to nearly 12,000; and from 19 June to the end of the summer, sales remained at about 15,000 copies per week.\(^{38}\)

Given that she had so explicitly addressed teenage female readers, Donnelly expressed some surprise that her novel had attracted such a wide adult readership in the UK. But after her Carnegie win, she defended the adult reader’s interest, arguing that it showed a respect for children and the issues they faced: ‘what is so important about the crossover novel is not what it says about adults, but what it says to children—that the stories which matter to them matter to us as well’. (‘Paperback Writer’) Since we encourage children to learn about adulthood through the medium of literature, ‘why shouldn’t we repay the courtesy with a visit back to the realms of childhood and adolescence?’ As sound as this argument is, it was not the argument that Richard and Judy were using to sell the book to their readers. Like Geras, Richard and Judy praised the novel for its ‘atmospheric’ setting in the Adirondack Mountains and its ‘tremendous authenticity’ in relating ‘the true story of a murder that took place in the Adirondacks at the time; a story that rocked America, and that is so captivating itself, that it has already inspired one other novel and the film *A Place in the Sun*, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift.’ With this nod to film history, Richard and Judy guarantee their readers a great story—that is, a gripping fictional narrative, and at the same time, an ‘authentic’ account of a historical community. There are aspects of the novel which strike me as egregiously inauthentic, for example, the characterisation of Mattie’s friend Weaver, ‘the only black boy in North Woods,’ who almost magically surmounts every racial obstacle to win a scholarship to a New York City college. But it seems to have been the mixture of apparent authenticity and compelling fiction, as well as a young but exceptionally articulate narrator with whom an adult reader could identify, which provided the magic formula to cross over to a mainstream adult audience.

**Competing to be ‘Best Loved’**

Another aspect of the magic formula, however, was the competitive element which Channel 4 introduced into the book club format. Each of the six chosen novels on the Richard and Judy programme was talked up by a guest celebrity, after which viewers were invited to vote for their favourite novel (in this case, choosing Donnelly’s over the other five entries). An indication, perhaps, of the decline of original writing for popular television, competitions of every conceivable kind flourished on the four main television channels in Britain
over the millennial decade. The BBC exploited this competitive structure to maximum effect in its 2003 Big Read competition, which invited celebrities to champion a favourite book as part of a television campaign to discover the ‘nation’s best loved book.’ Three quarters of a million votes were collected from televisual audiences, and a list of the top one hundred books compiled. Unsurprisingly, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* came in first (it had done so in a similar national poll conducted in 1997). In fact, it came in well ahead of the runner-up, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, despite Professor John Carey, one of the illustrious critics invited to participate in the closing ceremonies at the Royal Opera House, dismissing the trilogy as silly. Perhaps more surprising, but confirming the importance of children’s literature to a majority of adult readers, was the fact that over fifty percent of the top one hundred best loved books turned out to be children’s and young adult fiction. Many of these were classics, but some were contemporary children’s novels that had recently crossed to adult readerships. Amongst the former were: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (which came sixth), *Winnie-the-Pooh* (7), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (8), *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (9), *Catch-22* (11), *Wuthering Heights* (12), *The Catcher in the Rye* (15), *The Wind in the Willows* (16), *Little Women* (18), *The Hobbit* (25), *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (30), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (35) *Treasure Island* (36), *Anne of Green Gables* (41), *Watership Down* (42), *The Count of Monte Cristo* (44), *Animal Farm* (46), *A Christmas Carol* (47), *The Secret Garden* (51), *The BFG* (56), *Swallows and Amazons* (57), *Black Beauty* (58), *The Magic Faraway Tree* (66), *Matilda* (74), *The Twits* (81), *I Capture the Castle* (82) and *Gormenghast* (84). Amongst the works of contemporary children’s fiction in the top one hundred novels were: Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* (3), Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (5), *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (22), *Harry Potter and the Chamber Of Secrets* (23), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner Of Azkaban* (24), Wilson’s *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (31), Colfer’s *Artemis Fowl* (59), Blackman’s *Noughts And Crosses* (61) and Sachar’s *Holes* (83). Of course one can question how meaningful such lists are. Some might dismiss as unreliable any list which ranked Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* just below *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* and just above *Gone with the Wind* (although, it should be borne in mind that the object was to discover the nation’s best loved book, not the best). It is also questionable whether any television programme could accurately reflect the nation’s tastes in reading, because the most dedicated book addicts would presumably be reading, not watching television at all. But the Big Read competition was also an invaluable exercise in demonstrating how thoroughly book reading had been assimilated into popular culture. Indeed, even the fact that a competition about reading could attract millions of viewers is an indication that fiction, particularly children’s fiction, can easily hold its own against other forms of popular entertainment in the twenty-first century. Another virtue of the competition was that it provided a talking point for readers across the country to exchange their views about their own favourite books. Although reading is often a solitary
experience, it is also a very difficult experience to keep to oneself. Like any other passion, reading asks to be shared and argued over and made present through conversation. As Proust remarked, it is one of those rare activities that bridge the solitary and the communal. The Big Read programme raised awareness of how fiction can contribute to social cohesion, not necessarily by producing a homogeneity of opinion, but by bringing dissenting views into a dialogic frame. And the very high percentage of children's books figuring amongst the top one hundred is a further indication of the heightened adult interest in childhood culture and experience, both present and remembered, in the millennial decade.

All Dolled Up: Dust Jackets for Dual Editions

Whether or not it actually led to an actual increase in sales to adult readers, Bloomsbury’s idea of publishing Harry Potter in a dual edition, one for children and another for adults, soon caught on with other publishers. The ‘dual edition,’ that is, a single text published separately for adults and children, and generally distinguishable from each other only by their differing dust jackets, remains to this day the most visible sign of the historical oddity that is crossover fiction. Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* was the first novel to be published simultaneously in dual editions, the adult edition by Jonathan Cape, and the children’s edition by David Fickling, in 2003. Haddon’s was an unusual case, as we shall see in Chapter 4, but generally speaking, the demand for two editions seems to have arisen from the practical difficulties of knowing where physically to place a book that was being marketed for a mixed age audience. Dual editions circumvented the problem booksellers faced in deciding where to place a children’s book that might also attract adult readers; they could simply be shelved in two sections of the shop, as two different books (although there was nothing except convention preventing booksellers from shelving a book with a child-oriented cover in the general fiction section). On the other hand, many people now shop for books by Internet, where shelving is not an issue. And in any case, many of the new dual edition dust jackets fail to make a clear distinction between child and adult cover designs. Jonathan Cape’s dust jacket for *The Curious Incident* is not more noticeably ‘adult’ than Fickling’s. Both feature a stylised outline of a dead dog. Cape’s is upside-down and has a pitchfork sticking out of it, while Fickling’s has only the bloody marks left by the fork (and the image of the dog is offset by that of a toy car). Both covers are minimalist, using a limited pallet of colours, which could be said to appeal to children’s tastes, or to modernist adult ones. Lian Hearn’s *Tales of the Otori* series (2002–2007) was published in Britain both by Picador and Young Picador, respectively the adult and young adult lists of Pan Macmillan. The adult and child dust jackets of the 2003/2004 editions of the first book, *Across the Nightingale Floor*, are identical in every
The Crossover Novel
detail except colour, one being blue, and the other, red. Hearn’s medieval Japanese fantasy has since been translated and published in thirty-six countries, each edition bearing a distinctly different cover appealing to a diverse range of age-groups. The Pan Macmillan website advertises the series as ‘an epic story for readers young and old.’ With or without the alternative dust jackets, it seems likely that in the climate of millennial crossover, the books would have sold successfully to a mixed age adult readership.42

Dual editions were not the only design innovation that publishers introduced to promote crossover fiction. A more successful route, in the long run, was to be to find a single cover design that would work for both child and adult readers. At the 2002 Bologna Children’s Book Fair, Judith Elliott, publisher at Orion Children’s Books, commented on the meticulous attention being paid to a striking cover design. ‘Children’s covers have got very exciting’, she said. ‘There used to be boundaries but these have now crashed down’.43 The boundaries in question were those that were previously thought to exclude adult readers, so what the designers set themselves to find were images that would continue to attract children, while newly appealing to a potential secondary readership of adults. At Puffin, the children’s literature branch of Penguin, there was a clear decision to market Meg Rosoff’s How I Live Now as a crossover novel, in a single edition that would also attract adult readers. Rebecca McNally of Puffin recalls that she and her colleagues, all in their thirties, had ‘a strong emotional response’ to the novel which convinced them of its crossover potential. They also felt that Rosoff’s cataclysmic vision of Britain at war was particularly timely, given recent terrorist bombings in Madrid. Convinced that they had a special, dual-audience book to sell, they aimed to place the novel at front of store, thus obviating the need to decide between child and adult sections. The dust jacket cleverly combined lighthearted ‘girl’s diary’ images (flowers and butterflies) with darker notes (thorns and wire), thus ambivalently addressing a sophisticated young adult and/or faux-naïf adult reader. And directly under the title was a line from a review by Haddon, the reigning crossover star, declaring the novel to possess ‘a magical and utterly faultless voice,’ a description that might equally entice child and adult readers. The first reviewers of How I Live Now confirmed the response of the editors at Puffin. Geraldine Bedell’s review in The Observer began: ‘a novel ostensibly written for children. Adults should read it too’.45 In any event, both children and adults did read the novel in their millions. It became a crossover best seller, followed two years later by the equally successful Just in Case, again published by Puffin, the children’s list, with a similarly ambivalent dust jacket design.

So What Is Crossover Fiction?

Geraldine Bedell’s byline nicely encapsulates the working definition of crossover fiction as it emerged in usage by publishers and reviewers in the early
years of the new millennium: A crossover novel is one ‘ostensibly written for children’ which ‘adults should read too’. But if one is hoping to define crossover fiction as a distinct genre, with a set of shared characteristics, this pragmatic definition becomes immediately problematic. There simply are no stable set of traits, no themes or motifs or modes of address or narrative dynamics, which are common to all—or even, most of—the fiction ‘ostensibly written for children’ which has recently been taken up by adult readers. ‘Crossover fiction’ represents too varied a group of novels to be identified as a distinct genre or class of fiction. The assumptions behind the phrase ‘ostensibly written for children’ is a minefield in itself, as Jacqueline Rose has shown with her deconstruction of the idea of writing ‘for’ in The Case of Peter Pan. Beyond this, the hortatory element, illustrated by Bedell’s appended sentence ‘adults should read it too’, raises another host of problems. If crossover fiction is not limited to books that have crossed to adult readers, but also includes children’s books that, in the opinion of the reviewer, author, publisher, critic or general reader, should be read by adults, how on earth could one set the limits for this category of novel? The label ‘crossover’ is at least a neutral one, unlike the despised earlier term ‘kiddult,’ but it is also so open to interpretation that it does little to distinguish and define this group of texts as a distinct literary genre.

This is all to the good, however, since the inconclusiveness of the term accurately reflects the amorphous nature of the corpus of literature which we have in view. In fact, there seems to be no limit to the number of children’s books that could potentially be reinvented as crossover fiction. It is not simply that, as Nikolajeva suggests, contemporary children’s fiction is more sophisticated than children’s fiction in the past and thus can appeal to adult tastes, because classic children’s fiction is also being reread and read for the first time by adult readers. Enid Blyton, J.M. Barrie, Rider Haggard, George Henty—all those books one might previously have assumed were ‘for children’ or ‘for boys’ or ‘for girls’ are being re-edited and reissued for a mainstream readership, including adults and children of both genders.

So is there such a thing as ‘crossover fiction’? One answer would be: ‘Yes, potentially everywhere’. In such a case, it seems more productive to rephrase the question to ask, not what is crossover fiction, but what does it do? In my view, crossover fiction excels at increasing a reader’s awareness of the areas of overlap as well as the differences between children’s and adult fiction. It prompts a reader to interrogate everything that happens in these in-between territories, invites us to measure our difference from the recent past and the speed with which we are hurtling towards new concepts of self, of childhood, of aging and dying. Crossover fiction is fiction that calls into question the boundaries which used to define children’s fiction by prescribing what it should contain or exclude. In 1976, Myles McDowell compiled a list of ‘essential’ features of children’s literature, nearly all of which would require revision in the light of recent children’s fiction that has crossed to adult readers. According to McDowell, ‘children’s books are generally shorter’ than adult fiction, whereas
Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy is over 1200 pages long, and the last four Potter novels are over 600 pages each. Traditionally, children’s books ‘favour dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection’, but very little actually happens in David Almond’s *Clay*, the introspective narrator of McCaughrean’s *The White Darkness* talks mostly to a figment of her imagination, and Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* is opulently studded with epic similes, extended metaphors and set-piece descriptions. Children’s books are said to ‘develop a clear moral schematism which much adult fiction ignores’ but there is no overt moralising in Haddon’s *Curious Incident*, and Almond and Pullman invite their readers to challenge orthodox Christian morality. McDowell continues, children’s ‘plots are of a distinct order, probability is often disregarded, and one could go on endlessly talking of magic, and fantasy, and simplicity and adventure’, an odd assortment of characteristics to which crossover fiction could provide many counterexamples. In Haddon’s *Curious Incident*, fifteen-year-old Christopher Boone is scathing of adults who find comfort in fantasy, magic and religion. Rowling’s *Half-Blood Prince* and *Deathly Hallows* could hardly be described as having simple plots, though there is no lack of magic and adventure. As David Rudd points out, McDowell ‘measures children’s literature according to adult literature, which collapses difference into sameness’ because implicitly both categories are being measured against one standard, which is that of adult literature.\(^49\) Clearly, the binaries are not reversible, or we would be able to define adult literature as: longer than children’s books, full of introspection and long descriptions, focalised through adults, morally ambivalent, fact-based, realistic, complex, depressing, with adult-oriented language and chaotic or minimalist plots. Such a definition would strike anyone as weirdly prescriptive, and yet it is no more so than previous definitions of children’s literature that are still widely accepted today. Crossover fiction helps to heighten the reader’s consciousness of the constructedness of both categories, children’s and adult fiction.

Cross-reading reveals the limitations and presuppositions inherent even in less formally prescriptive definitions of children’s fiction. For example, in *The Narrator’s Voice*, Barbara Wall defined children’s fiction by its mode of narratorial address, which could be one of three types: ‘single address’ to a child reader alone, ‘double address’ to a child reader and an additional adult reader ‘over the child’s head’, and, most infrequently but least condescendingly, ‘dual address’ to two equal, but separate readers, a child and an adult.\(^50\) This approach, while much more defensible than McDowell’s, is again called into question by contemporary crossover fiction. Wall’s thesis would suggest that in a novel like Pullman’s *Northern Lights*, the narrative could be divided into layers or levels of difficulty, with a simple level (the adventure plot) aimed at child readers, and a morally sophisticated level (the questioning of institutional religion) aimed at adult readers. But judging from the reviews posted by children on Internet discussion boards, young readers are equally interested in the book’s complex themes. They are as, if not more, likely to ponder questions such as the
existence of God and the ethical limits of science as adult readers of the novel are. There may be differences between child and adult responses to the novel, but these are not as easy to codify into different levels of address as we might suppose. Cross-reading calls attention to the fact that narrative communication flows in two directions, and levels of address are determined not only by addressers but also by addressees. Regardless of the mode of address of author, implied author or narrator, a book can be read in many ways, on any number of levels, by an actual reader. As an adult reader, one can read ‘as if’ one were any number of things or people one is not: a child, a nonagenarian, a dog, a tree, or a house. A child reader can exercise exactly the same freedoms. Reading draws us into Rosalind’s magic circle at the end of *As You Like It*, where obstacles can vanish on the breath of an ‘if’. Crossover fiction makes us especially aware of these freedoms, precisely because we retain a sense of transgression, of crossing a threshold from somewhere that feels like home, to somewhere that feels strange and at least a little alienating. Janice Alberghene rightly argues that ‘children’s books help create childhood for us’ But crossover fiction helps create both states while making us aware that they are provisional and subject to constant change. As David Rudd writes of children’s literature, ‘there is always difference, but it is never complete; it is always in process, for notions of children change across time, gender, race and class. Also, each child changes over time, playing at adulthood in various guises.’ (‘Shirley, the Bathwater, and Definitions’, 93) So too does an adult change over time, playing at, and with, and against all the phases of childhood and adolescence.

Thus I would disagree with those who argue that crossover fiction augurs the end of children’s literature, whether this argument is framed as something positive or negative. In a lecture delivered to the Royal Society of Literature, Philip Pullman pokes fun at those who object to adults reading children’s literature, caricaturing them as ‘fierce and stern’ border guards:

They strut up and down with a fine contempt, curling their lips and consulting their clipboards and snapping out orders ... But when we step away from the border post, when we go round the back of the guards ... we see ... people are happily walking across this border in both directions. You’d think there wasn’t a border there at all. Adults are happily reading children’s books; and what’s more, children are reading adults’ books.

For some readers, this description might suggest that we are approaching a situation in which there will only be one universal literature ‘for all’. But to me, what is striking about this description (and indeed, our present situation) is that it represents the border between states as something permeable, which allows free access from both sides. There still are such things as ‘children’s books’ and ‘adults’ books’ in this imagined scenario. The real change is that more people are crossing the threshold to try out fiction they
might not have bothered with before. So Pullman is not advocating a ‘One Ring to rule them all’ view of literature here. Elsewhere, too, he insists there are crucial differences between childhood and adulthood identities, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

But why should a permeable and flexible border between children’s and adult fiction be preferable to the more clear-cut distinctions that have prevailed in the past? Because if there is no dialogic encounter, no impersonations of adulthood by children, of childhood by adults, especially in an era in which the contours of child- and adulthood are changing so rapidly, then we may well become mutually incomprehensible to each other.57 Before coming on to discuss these social changes, it might be worth considering an example of the alternative view, one which insists on a complete separation between childhood and adulthood, and the fiction read by each. Jonathan Myerson encapsulates this view when he argues that children’s books ‘address the problems and questions of childhood, enact the hopes and dreams of childhood’ which, he argues, are ‘a completely different set of questions from those that mesmerise us in adult life’.58 As adults,

we deal with the constantly muddled nature of good and evil, we take on things like the constraints and longevity of love, we carry a responsibility for the safety of others, we crave success and fear failure, we confront the reality of dreams. And this is why different books are written for these two tribes: there is barely any genuine or useful crossover between the agendas. When I read a novel, I look to it to tell me some truths about human life—the truths that nonfiction cannot reach. These might be moral, sexual, political or psychological truths and I expect my life to be enlarged, however slightly, by the experience of reading something fictional. I cannot hope to come closer to any of these truths through a children’s novel, where nice clean white lines are painted between the good guys and the evil ones, where magic exists, and where there are adults on hand to delineate rules. Adult fiction is about a world without rules.

But it is hard to see how any life could be ‘enlarged’ while it rests on such an absolute distinction between thinking adulthood and mechanically minded childhood. It seems that this adult consciousness would always end up drawing nice clean white lines between a self and an other, if not a child, then some other mythically unknowable ‘tribe’ whose very existence endangered the present self. Or to put it in plainer terms, as Jennifer Donnelly argues,

the idea that books for and about children can only be of interest to children is not just absurd, it’s offensive. It’s like telling a reader not to bother with Beloved unless she’s black or Trainspotting unless he uses heroin. Books are not gated communities; they’re open cities where we
can all come and go at will, freely sampling other lives and times, other cultures and realities.

And it is even less tenable to argue that adults and children are completely unrelated tribes, since every adult has been a child once, and \textit{pace} Peter Pan, most children hope to become adults.\textsuperscript{59}

A more unexpected source of support for the idea that adult readers should not engage with children's fiction comes from children's literature specialists themselves. Such critics perceive adult interest in children's culture, including fiction, as potentially predatory and invasive.\textsuperscript{60} If adults colonise children's fiction, there will be nothing left for children to call their own.\textsuperscript{61} A nuanced version of this position is voiced by Deborah Thacker, who writes:

The recent example of Bloomsbury’s project to publish the hugely successful children’s novel by J.K. Rowling, \textit{Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone} . . . in two editions, one for adults and the other for children . . . indicates the complex positioning of the texts of children’s literature within the ‘white noise’ of numerous adult voices. Such a phenomenon, suggesting the extent to which adult forces seek to subjugate children as readers, but also to colonize and contain childhood itself, demand further investigation through an understanding of children’s literature’s place within a larger, inclusive map of readership.\textsuperscript{62}

but literature is always positioned within a ‘white noise’ or static of other voices; to shut off that noise would be to silence literature itself. It is true that there is an imbalance of power between child readers and adult writers within the field of children’s literature (although see below, on the new generation of child writers), but this does not necessarily mean that the relation will be one of ‘subjugation’ and ‘colonisation’. It does mean that we need to reconceive how children’s literature operates within the ‘larger, inclusive map of readership’ as Thacker suggests. Crossover fiction provides a spotlight on these areas of intersection between the child’s interests, and the adult’s. And cross-reading increases our consciousness of difference, even as we traverse and retrace the boundary lines that once divided us more strictly. But whether one is ‘for’ or ‘against’ it, it is worth stressing is that ‘crossover fiction’ can really only be defined by what it does, rather than what it is.

\textbf{Kiddults and Cool Britannia}

So far, we have considered the rise of crossover fiction and cross-reading in literary and popular culture in Britain from around 1997 to 2007. But while dual editions and publicity campaigns, awards and increased media coverage can help to explain the increasing visibility of children’s literature in mainstream,
adult literary culture, it cannot really account for the sea change that made this change in status and visibility possible. Although many contemporary children’s novels are rich, complex and beautifully written, the shift in status of children’s fiction from the marginal to the mainstream of fiction publishing cannot convincingly be explained by a sudden rise in the quality of children’s fiction alone. Some have described the recent expansion of children’s literature as a new Renaissance or Golden Age, but if so, it differs markedly from the first ‘Golden Age’ (around 1865–1910), in which critics often discern a shift from an earlier didactic mode towards an emphasis on pleasing and entertaining the child reader (the turn of the century pleasuremongers are said to include Carroll, Barrie, Grahame, MacDonald, Nesbit, Stevenson, Kipling and Burnett, amongst others). What characterises the present phenomenon is the hybridisation of child and adult perspectives within contemporary children’s fiction, which reflects and responds to a more pervasive hybridisation of child and adult cultures, one indication of which is the expanded reception of children’s fiction in Britain (and indeed, elsewhere in the developed world). To explain the shift in reception, as well as the more complex commingling of perspectives in contemporary children’s fiction, there are many broader issues that need to be considered, including changes in Britain’s political climate, as well as developments in science and technology.

In May 1997, Tony Blair’s New Labour was voted into government in a historic, landslide victory over the Conservatives, who had been in power for eighteen years. Labour’s majority (66% in the House of Commons) was unprecedented and unexpectedly decisive; they had gained 146 seats, while the Conservatives had lost 178. Whether or not Britain ‘deserved better’ as the slogan went, 1997 seemed like a political new dawn. New Labour lost no opportunity to associate itself with new youth, as illustrated by the occasion on which Peter Mandelson appeared on a children’s programme Pass the Mic, having declared himself unavailable for interview on BBC Newsnight. It was a time when it was extremely fashionable not just to be young, but to be overtly childish. The older the mutton, the more extravagantly it should parade itself as lamb.

A cult of ‘the inner child’ or the ‘kiddult’ was permeating adult cultural life on many levels in the late 1990s, which not coincidentally was when Rowling’s early ‘childish’ Potter novels became popular with adults. Possibly the earliest use of the term ‘kidult’ was by Peter Martin in an article in The New York Times in 1985, and it was used to describe not just fiction but any form of entertainment that would be likely to appeal to a mixed age audience. A few years later, the noun ‘kid(d)ult’ had become the term for an adult who trespasses into children’s culture, and the sense of breaking a taboo was paramount. Thus Ben Summerskill describes a typical kiddult as a single, professional male in his thirties: ‘He wears Caterpillar boots and Levis. He rides a motor scooter, with a pavement model for warm weather. When he gets home, he watches It’s a Knockout before turning on his Sony PlayStation. However,
he’s not 15. He’s 35’. In 2000, it was estimated that ten thousand people a week in Britain were buying Sony PlayStations, that the sale of small scooters went up by 31% and large scooters and motorbikes by 47%, and that the consumers of these products were aged anywhere from 18 to 40. As kiddult fashion took hold, with a proliferation of ‘Babe’ T-shirts, Reeboks and Adidas trainers, the Spice Girl singer Emma Bunton became a cultural icon in her role as Baby Spice, following in the tracks of teenager Britney Spears who topped the charts with an unexpected hit single in 1999. Elspeth Gibson modelled one season’s collection on Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, while Gucci modelled another on baby-doll dresses, and the ‘Lolita look’ became a global fashion trend. High fashion, as ever, impacted on the High Street. In 2001, *The Guardian*’s Weekend section featured four full-page spreads on male fashion, in which the models were posed in scenes from children’s books such as Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and fairy tales such as Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding Hood and Goldilocks. The oddness of this cultural trend is perhaps best exemplified in 2001, with a CD by American actor/singer Mandy Patinkin released to rave reviews in the UK. Entitled *Kidults*, it bizarrely mixes Broadway musical songs for children together with sentimental songs for adults about childhood.

Even at the height of its popularity, the kiddult craze attracted fierce criticism in the national press. Philip Hensher blames the sexualisation of young children on the kiddulterous behaviour of adults, maintaining—contentiously—that ‘there is a direct connection between something like School Disco and the shops that enable five-year-olds to dress like King’s Cross prostitutes’. Meanwhile Will Self describes the reality TV programme *Big Brother* as ‘a voyeuristic “kidult” soap opera’, standing as a ‘ghastly synecdoche of the truly loathsome society we have become’. And, rather more persuasively, Gareth McLean criticises what he sees as the ageism of contemporary British culture. Praising a BBC 1 documentary, *Through the Eyes of the Old*, for its attention to such an unfashionable subject as old age, he berates Britons for being ‘youth obsessed’, arguing ‘you have to stop being a kidult sometime’.

**Kiddult Politicians: A Return to Mordor?**

It must be said, though, that in many quarters the media response to the kiddult craze was positive, as it represented a welcome shaking up of entrenched social attitudes, and outmoded Tory tastes. Thus one *Times* journalist commented approvingly on the hybridisation of child and adult clothes fashions: ‘The risqué nature of today’s adult fashions and the consumer power of the under-teens is resulting in some seriously hot tots, shopping like “It Girls” and dressed to kill’. Others, however, associated the hybridity of the kiddult with New Labour’s brave new world of spin, orchestrated by the archillusionist, Peter Mandelson. Thus Catherine Bennett commented acerbically in *The Guardian*
that since there are “kidults”, those unwieldy, 35-ish, Harry Potter-reading, Stuart Little-watching, trainer-wearing scooter riders who feel no shame in sharing a hobby with Po from the Teletubbies, then perhaps there are kidult voters, too, who want kidult politicians who understand about PlayStations.74

And as Britain’s role in global politics changed after 9/11, many became distinctly uncomfortable with the cult of new, or rather borrowed, youth. It was hardly the fault of the film producers, but the first instalment of Peter Jackson’s epic adaptation of Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings was released just as British troops invaded Afghanistan as part of an allied response to the terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City. The Afghan war was begun in October 2001, and Jackson’s film version of The Fellowship of the Ring was released just two months later. The year that was crossover fiction’s annus mirabilis, 2003, was also the year that George W. Bush and Tony Blair took Britain and America to war against Iraq. This rapidly deteriorating political climate helped to polarise opinion over the phenomenon of adults reading children’s literature, and fuelled the argument that adults were dangerously ‘dumbing down’ when they chose to watch or read about fantasy wars at a time when real wars were being waged against international law. In an article surmounted by a photograph of two adults sticking their tongues out at each other, Timothy Garton Ash excoriated the ‘three main British exports of 2001—Harry Potter, Frodo Baggins and Tony Blair’, all of whom concealed under high-tech packaging a dangerous and ‘remarkably traditional Englishness’. One ingredient in this traditional English package is the courageous but reluctant hero, a role undertaken by Prime Minister Blair. Thus, ‘Britain must be Gryffindor among the houses of Europe, and Harry Blair—Sir Frodo of the Shire—will lead us there’.75

It would, however, be equally possible to interpret the adult turn to children’s fiction in positive terms, as a reaction against the polarisation of global politics into a Western ‘us’ versus an Eastern ‘them.’ The epic wars that unfold in Lian Hearn’s Tales of the Otori and Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials are morally ambivalent, and force their readers to rethink the genre of fantasy’s traditional distinctions between good and evil. One might go so far as to argue that children’s fiction was deconstructing the whole notion of epic imperialism, just at the point where political leaders in Britain and the US were succumbing to the most simplistic forms of militaristic rhetoric (‘we need to smoke the enemy out of their holes’, as Bush said, prior to the attack on Afghanistan). Another role that children’s fiction might have played for adult readers in this increasingly bellicose environment was to provide a ground for rethinking and reasserting personal values at a time when public opinion became divided over the British and American governments’ response to the threat of global terrorism. But however one interprets the politics of reading children’s literature during this period, the masquerading of politicians as kiddults effectively came to an end in Britain when, in 2007, the Labour Party ousted Tony Blair as
Prime Minister and replaced him with the unmistakably grown-up, cautious and dour-seeming Gordon Brown.

I, Bratz-doll

With the benefit of just a few years’ hindsight, it already seems strange that Britain once fetishised its politicians for seeming childlike. But to understand this phase in Labour’s, and indeed the nation’s, political history, one has to recall the broader social and economic context out of which the kiddult craze emerged. Reasons for the rise in youth culture, and with it the expansion of children’s fiction into mainstream, adult markets, must be understood in the light of developments in science, technology and economics, both globally and in Atlantic societies in particular. Western scientists are much more able to intervene in the processes of reproduction and aging than they have been in previous generations. Prolonged youth has become an achievable aspiration for the wealthy, given advances in cosmetic surgery. And, to judge by the extensive coverage that Botox, ‘nipping and tucking’ and so on, receive on TV and in the print media, the general public is fascinated by tales of the rich and famous ‘enhancing’ themselves by surgical means. Also, due to advances in fertility treatment, women can now choose to become mothers much later in life, leaving a longer period in which to pursue their own adolescent or kiddult interests. Interestingly, as it becomes a technical possibility, old-age motherhood has attracted a weight of social stigma (which old-age fatherhood seems to have escaped), as was evident in the storm of controversy that broke out over news that a 62-year-old woman was receiving IVF treatment. But that so many people should even want to look, feel and act younger than might be expected of their biological age is an indication of how highly the idea of ‘youthfulness’ has come to be valued both culturally and economically.

In a special issue of The Economist devoted to youth in developed nations, Chris Anderson points out that the Internet ‘triggered the first industrial revolution in history to be led by the young’. He cites Don Tapscott who argues in Growing Up Digital that for the first time, children are more knowledgeable than their parents about an innovation central to society. Yvonne Fritzche, a researcher in a German market research institute, agrees: ‘Technology is one of the reasons that the relationship between the young and old is becoming a dialogue, rather than a lesson.’ A rapidly evolving technology is the ‘defining event’ of the current generation of young people, much as economic depression or wars were for a previous generation, Anderson argues (‘Bright Young Things’). Not only the Internet, but also mobile phones and personal stereo systems have transformed the lives of teenagers in Western, developed nations, and left some adults struggling to keep pace with the waves of technological change. Anderson argues that since the restructurings of Western business corporations in the 1980–90s, the workplace has been tailored for
young or ‘youthful’ employees who are rewarded not, as previously, for length of service, but for meeting short-term goals and challenges. ‘Flitting from job to job, once a trait of fickle youth,’ he writes, ‘is now an admired sign of ambition and initiative.’ (‘Bright Young Things’ 5)

But on an individual level, the freedom to extend childhood or adolescence indefinitely can induce anxiety in the would-be (or rather, would-not-be) kid-dult. In her memoir, Confessions of a Failed Grown-Up, Stephanie Calman represents herself as an adult who wants to grow up but no longer knows how it is done (‘surely, by the time you get lines on your face the teenage angst should start to recede’). Growing up seems to have become an infinitely reversible process: ‘Just as computers have internal modems, I have an internal Tardis which shoots me around in time’. In a song released in April 2007 with his new band, Grinderman, Nick Cave has a baffled and aging protagonist sing, ‘we’re free and we’re lost’. That a fifty-year-old singer should be writing and performing hard-edged rock songs about an ‘elderly man in crisis’ is in itself a sign of our strange, crossover times. The freedom to be whatever you want, to act whatever age you feel, can induce a sense of vertigo which ironically leaves you unable to act at all.

Moreover, if adults are feeling slightly queasy about the limitless possibilities of ‘growing down’, children are feeling the pressure of growing up very quickly as they become more thoroughly absorbed into the networked global economy than ever before. For ‘teenagers’ (children acting like teenagers), there are positive and negative aspects to participating in the economy on a par with adults. On the one hand, children’s voices are more often heard alongside adults’ in public debates about politics, education and the environment. And they are also increasingly taking leading roles in the arts, from acting to writing and directing their own work. When Jacqueline Rose described children’s literature as an ‘impossibility’, she based her argument on the assumption that the literature so-termed was always produced by adults, for children but with adult interests in mind. But there is nothing impossible, in the sense she meant, about young adult literature that is written by and for young adults. Still less does she consider the possibility that these novels would cross to adult readerships. Christopher Paolini published Eragon first privately and then with Knopf in 2003. By the age of nineteen, he had become a best-selling New York Times author. A successful feature film followed in 2006, and was released on DVD in 2007. By 2007, Eragon and its sequel in the Inheritance trilogy, Eldest, had sold over eight million copies. Other children and young adults who successfully published novels in the UK that crossed to adult readerships include the Nigerian writer Helen Oyeyemi, who wrote The Icarus Girl at the age of nineteen, and two Scottish writers, Emma Maree Urquhart (Dragon Tamers, written aged thirteen) and Robert King (Apple of Doom, written aged fifteen) both of whom have sold thousands of copies with Aultbea Publishing in Inverness. And, calling into question the critical view that sees the relation between child and...
adult as comparable to that between colonised and coloniser, are the coequal child-adult writing partnerships that have emerged in recent years. The best-seller *Lionboy* was written by ‘Zizou Corder’, an alias for Louisa Young and her daughter Isabel Adomakoh Young, and the *Corydon* trilogy was written by ‘Tobias Druitt’, a pseudonym for Diane Purkiss and her son Michael Dowling. ‘P.J. Tracy’, the author of a series of murder mysteries, is an alias for another writing pair, P.J. Lambrecht and her daughter Traci Lambrecht. In the States, the documentary film director Chaille Patrick Stovall was just twelve when he released his first feature length film, *Party Animals, or How to Get to the White House in 5 Easy Steps* (2001). Stovall’s camera and sound crew were also children. *Party Animals* featured interviews with President Bush, Vice President Al Gore and former presidents Clinton and Carter; it won a national award and was critically acclaimed internationally. Such artistic highfliers show the possibilities that are open to children and young adults in a social economy where youth and youthfulness are so highly valued and respected.

On the other hand, this can also place an unrealistic burden of expectation on children who have no wish to enter a public arena at such a young age. There is also a great deal of evidence to suggest that children and young adults are much more exposed to commercial interests than in previous generations. According to a government report, ‘The Commercialisation of Childhood,’ the child-oriented market in the UK was said to be worth about £30 billion in the early 2000s. In 2001, a BBC 2 documentary, *Little Women: A Day in the Life of a Tweenager*, documented the lives of a group of seven- to twelve-year-old girls from southern England who shopped at Harrods, watched wrestling on Sky Sports, discussed rape, and dressed like their favourite pop idols. In a 2006 report, 78% of children interviewed said they ‘enjoy shopping’. These children, aged ten or younger, were found to have ‘internalised 300 to 400 brands—perhaps 20 times the number of birds in the wild that they could name.’ The report concluded that British children were among the most materialistic in the world, ahead of American children.

In *Toxic Childhood*, Sue Palmer argues that living ‘at electric speed’ benefits adults more than children, and that children are being cheated of the ‘slow time’ development in which empathy for others, the ability to sustain focus, and the capacity to defer gratification all emerge as ingrained habits and values. Technology is replacing parenting and ordinary playtime adventures, as children are kept entertained indoors with electronic games. Palmer cites research indicating that children under the age of eleven or twelve (who in the US, UK and Australia are exposed to between 20,000 and 40,000 advertisements a year) lack a critical framework for understanding marketing messages, ‘and by this age many have been effectively brainwashed.’ In *Sticks and Stones*, Jack Zipes too argues that children are dangerously exposed to financial exploitation: ‘everything we do to, with, and for children is influenced by capitalist market conditions and the hegemonic interests of ruling
corporate elites’. However unwittingly, we are ‘turning [children] into commodities’. (xi)

Meanwhile, if owning a Bratz doll accessorised with spray-on glitter jeans and champagne glasses is the aspiration of middle-class ten- to twelve year olds, very poor children in the UK are living in increasingly distressing conditions, as a recent report by Shelter spells out in detail. A 2007 UNICEF report on child poverty concluded that British children are amongst the worst off of all children in economically advanced nations. According to a 2007 study by researchers at Cambridge University, primary school children, especially from economically depressed areas, feel anxious, stressed, and unsafe playing outside. Reflecting on the government’s ‘zero-tolerance’ policy towards child criminality and the public’s extreme reaction to the James Bulger case, Mary Riddle concludes that ‘a generation which observes fluid rules about its own evolution is curiously inflexible about the changing patterns of children’s lives’. In other words, contrary to what one might expect, kiddults may be the least likely adults to sympathise with children who transgress the law.

Moreover, if young children are growing up faster, and adults are growing down, twenty-first century Britain seems to offer little space or motivation for teenagers to progress from adolescence to adulthood. John Coleman, a psychiatry lecturer at the Royal London Hospital, and Director of the Trust for the Study of Adolescence, believes that ‘the transition to adulthood in western societies has become problematic during the last few decades’. In his view, getting into the labour market is much more difficult now than it was during the latter half of the twentieth century. Coleman points out that from 1984–99, the number of young adults (16–24) entering the British labour market shrank by 35% (60). Family structures are also becoming more fluid, with more single parents raising children and teenagers. British teenagers are more sexually active than in previous generations, and Britain currently has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy amongst European Union countries (67). As a group, young adults are also often stressed, and according to a 2000 study, more than 10% may suffer from mental health problems such as depression, eating disorders, conduct disorders, drug addiction and suicidal tendencies. Government reports have also shown that young people, especially those growing up in ‘high deprivation’ areas, are increasingly involved in crime, either as victims or offenders. The film Kidulthood (where in a rare usage, ‘kiddult’ is applied to teenagers) depicts this young adult experience of violence on city estates. The experience of adolescence, for these individuals, may be nothing like the beautiful youth to which aging kiddults aspire.

So British children and young adults have a very mixed reputation to live up to. Adults may see them as materialistic consumers or cutting-edge innovators, as victims of crime or criminals, as free agents and free thinkers, or as vulnerable and innocent, in need of adult protection. This contradictory picture of young people might be summed up in the juxtaposition of two half-hour documentaries, broadcast one after another on the same evening.
In the first, Simon Cox investigated the rise of knife and gang cultures in British cities, concluding that ‘being a teenager has become a potentially deadly business’. In the course of the investigation, he interviewed one seventeen-year-old Glaswegian teenager who had been jailed 32 times. Immediately following this programme, however, came an upbeat business report from Peter Day, which presented 14- to 18-year-olds as the most powerful, sophisticated, flexible and media savvy of all age groups, and the ‘grail’ of marketing companies across the country. But perhaps it is adults who are pursuing the ‘grail’ of a mythically idealised adolescence, while real adolescents and children struggle to cope with the conflicting expectations that contemporary society places on their shoulders.

The Kiddult as Soft Capitalist

The value that society places on youth and youth culture, which was particularly apparent in the late nineties and early 2000s, can be explained, too, as part of a general shift from a ‘hard’ to a ‘soft’ capitalist ideology. In Costea, Crump and Holm’s analysis, this shift took place in Atlantic societies during the 1980s–90s, as a Protestant work ethic of ‘salvation through self-abnegation’ gave way to a new ‘ethics of “self-work”’ and the ‘cultivation of an “authentic self”’. In soft capitalist corporations, the employee ceases to observe a rigid distinction between work and leisure, but sees both as opportunities to express the self creatively. Corporate management has taken a ‘Dionysian turn’ towards ‘a spirit of playful transgression and destruction of boundaries, a new bond between economic grammars of production and consumption, and cultural grammars of the modern self’. (‘Dionysus at Work?’ 141)

The model for this new ‘grammar of the self’ is the child at play because whereas adult play is often ‘too focused on a specific goal, too competitive’ and focussed ‘too much on the rules of the game’, child’s play ‘is less conscious, more in touch with the “inner self”’. (143) By emulating the child’s more instinctive play, the adult can paradoxically rise above ‘playing games, . . . getting back in touch with forgotten powers within’. (143)

Thus soft capitalism reverses the configurations of value and power which previously characterised the relation between adult and child in a Protestant-based, modern work environment. Costea, Crump and Holm argue that, for the last two centuries, children were those who were not adults from an ethical standpoint: they were urged to become adults by internalising adult values and overcoming the imperfections of childhood. In the 21st century, the vectors of self-action have been reversed: adults are encouraged to find and preserve the ‘inner child’, to give up adult reserve and treat life as continuous play as the most important opportunity for free self-expression. (148)
This emphasis on the right—and indeed the duty—to express one’s authentic self emerges out of what Charles Taylor describes as the twentieth century’s emphasis on the ‘affirmation of ordinary life’.\textsuperscript{98} If at first this ideology stressed the need for individual emancipation, now in a ‘postliberational culture’ where (theoretically) individual freedoms are protected by legislation, it has mutated into ‘a mythology of worldly self-assertion and of everyone’s right and responsibility to be happy’. (146) We are thus seeing a revolt against the Apollonian rationalism which underpinned industrial capitalism, and the emergence of a freer expression of the Dionysian, irrational ‘will to power’, which Nietzsche so polemically advocated. (146)

It might seem odd that one of the signifiers of this new mythology should be the child at play, since real children are generally the last in society to be able to express a Nietzschean ‘will to power.’ But the child is a second-order signifier in this myth system, as mythmaking was understood by Roland Barthes in \textit{Mythologies}. The myth of the adult’s ‘inner child’ is the product of a signifier which has been emptied of historical content, i.e., has ceased to refer to an actual child.\textsuperscript{99} We see this in the paradoxical situation discussed above, in which ‘youthfulness’ is something to which increasing numbers of adults aspire while at the same time, real children and young adults remain trapped in poverty or oppressed by a ‘toxic’ weight of advertising. Moreover, if the ideological goal of soft capitalism is not only to be free, but to be permanently ‘well’ and ‘happy’, then clearly aging and death impose natural limits on this aspiration. By reversing these temporal vectors, so that aging becomes a matter of growing down rather than up, soft capitalists are able to set themselves a goal of attaining a state of permanent innocence and ‘continuous happiness’. (148)

Costea, Crump and Holm are ambivalent in their judgement as to whether ‘this spirit of play’ in the corporate environment is to be welcomed or not. On one hand, the more flexible conception of ‘playful work and playful leisure’ might encourage the emergence of new and hybrid subjectivities (149). On the other hand, the relentless pursuit of happiness leads to the suppression of any ‘tragic dimension of existence’. (148) But surely a more fundamental problem is the vision of endless economic expansion to which this idea of ‘limitless play’ contributes. Ecologically, we no longer think of the planet as having limitless resources which we can ‘exploit’ at will; there is, rather, an increasing awareness of the necessity to manage resources sustainably, to find a system that is balanced rather than endlessly expansive. Of necessity, the capitalist drive for limitless growth must, at very least, mutate into new forms. The cult of the ‘inner child’ may have been one of the forms of its metamorphosis. But the kiddult entrepreneur is a cultural icon with as short a shelf life as the kiddult politician. As the public demand for ethical business management grows, the emphasis on work as creative playtime will change. Indeed, it would seem that from the States we are importing a new personal rhetoric of ‘making a
difference’ which appears to be at odds with the kiddult focus on self-expression.

The emergence of children’s literature into the cultural mainstream must be assessed in the light of all these cultural and economic changes, not all of which have necessarily been positive. But it would be erroneous to conclude that the children’s fiction written and read during this period is merely reflecting the soft capitalist mythology of self-discovery through play/work. While some novels do reproduce this mythology rather uncritically, there are many others which subject these capitalist myths of childhood and youthfulness to the most stringent critique. Indeed it is in children’s fiction—particularly fiction which addresses the theme of adolescent crossing from childhood to adulthood, that we can discover the most careful and sustained scrutiny of contemporary myths of limitless youth. And while there is a myriad of reasons why adults read children’s literature—sometimes it may be to escape or to find solace in the known and familiar—one of the reasons we do is to remind ourselves how to live in a timely way, rather than in the vain hope of transcending time altogether. Contemporary children’s fiction is of particular consequence to adult readers because in many cases, it is discovering ways to give consecution, consequence, and depth to the unreality of a suspended adolescence which troubles adults, no less than children, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.