

The Real Value of Children's Literature:

A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

Ella Wydrzynska

University of Nottingham

Abstract:

The study of children's literature has progressed rapidly throughout the 20th century, and we have now reached a point where it is not only accepted as an academic field in its own right but even taught in universities worldwide. However, there remain significant gaps in the ongoing research. Primarily, terms such as 'postmodernism' and 'metafiction' are traditionally absent in academic criticism of children's literature. As Geoffrey Moss (1990) acknowledged, perhaps this is because these concepts are considered too difficult for children to handle. Yet Robyn McCallum (1996) later identified that such experimental techniques were becoming more mainstream in contemporary fiction. This trend has certainly continued, with the vast majority of popular junior fiction (for readers aged 8-12) now drawing on these strategies with relative frequency, although the corresponding academic awareness remains comparatively underdeveloped.

This paper intends to fill this gap, taking a stylistic approach to a prime example of contemporary fiction for junior readers: Pseudonymous Bosch's *The Secret Series*. With an ostentatious, visibly creating narrator who is set against a dramatized version of the child-reader, these novels perfectly embody the most complex postmodern and metafictional strategies traditionally overlooked – even dismissed – in the academic study of children's literature. By following Patricia Waugh's (1984) list of typical features of postmodernist writing, I aim to illustrate the unprecedented levels of complexity to which children's literature can – and often does – rise, therein highlighting the true academic value of such material.

Key words: *postmodernism, metafiction, children's literature, junior fiction, Pseudonymous Bosch, Patricia Waugh*

1. Introduction

Simply put, children's literature is important. Whether stories teach morals, life-skills, socialisation, or literary competency, children are shaped by what they read. Crucially, no avid reader would have ever reached that point had they not found a book that truly exhilarated them for the first time as a child. Children's literature thus begins the reader's journey.

Perhaps that is why it is so disappointing that considerably little mainstream academic research focuses on such material. Despite ongoing – and by no means insignificant – developments in the field, the academic study of children's literature has historically been somewhat neglected. Matthew Grenby explains it particularly well when he points out that:

Another important difference between children's literature and the main body of literary studies is the condescension, even disdain, with which it has sometimes been greeted. [...] Teaching, studying and researching children's literature could be characterised as beneath the dignity of serious students and academics. It was regarded as being too easy or, perhaps worse, too much fun.

(2008: 199-200)

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

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

(1986: ix)

The prevalent opinion appears to have been that academics should refrain from looking at children's literature because it was too easy for an adult to find any intellectual value in; the only reason one would possibly consider the genre is regarding its place within a pedagogic frame of reference. However, this could not be further from the truth.

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

While the role of children's literature in education and the development of the reading process cannot be stressed enough (and is examined in a variety of works, particularly Margaret Meek's excellent *Learning To Read* (1982)), it has so much more to offer than *just* educational value. As this paper intends to prove, one can even find a plethora of complex narrative techniques that would challenge the most complicated canonical literature for adults. Primarily I shall consider the role of postmodernism and metafiction in relation to children's literature.

These terms are rarely connected to children's literature, perhaps because they are typically considered too difficult for children to handle (Moss, 1990). Indeed, both are often considered reasonably difficult for competent adult readers nowadays, which, when you bear that in mind, makes it unsurprising that these terms are traditionally absent from children's literature scholarship.

At this point, therefore, it would perhaps be useful to outline the two concepts introduced above, as they will serve as the focus for the majority of this paper. The first, *postmodernism*, remains notoriously difficult to define and steeped in confusion and elusiveness when applied in critical discourse. As a term, it is often used relatively generally 'to describe the changes, tendencies, and developments that occurred in philosophy, literature, art, architecture, and music during the last half of the 20th century' (Pantaleo, 2014: 325). Regarding literature specifically, countless lists have been created by critics over the years (i.e. Coles & Hall, 2001; Hassan, 1997; Lewis, 2001) that outline characteristics of literary postmodern style. Watson (2004), for instance, writes that postmodernist texts include:

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

(55)

For Brian McHale, one of the definitive writers on postmodernist fiction, the dominant feature of the style is *ontological* – as opposed to the prevailing epistemological themes of modernism. By contrast, postmodernist fiction:

deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like...: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there [...]?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?

(McHale, 1987: 10)

These questions frequently call on the purported reality of the text itself, highlighting the ontologies of the material and the world(s) created within. Postmodernist texts even have the potential to blur their external boundary (that between fiction and reality) by making '[f]iction's epidermis...a semipermeable membrane' (McHale, 1987: 34).

Considering this particular aspect of postmodernism, it is unsurprising that *metafiction* so commonly occurs alongside it in critical discussion. Although there is much crossover between metafiction and the wider postmodern style – such as 'narrative fragmentation and discontinuity, disorder and chaos, code mixing and absurdity' (McCallum, 1996: 400) – the definitive explanation of the term is that of fiction which 'self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality' (Waugh, 1984: 2). By foregrounding the fictionality of its characters and events, while often drawing attention to the very act of reading in the process, metafiction highlights the ontological gap between reality and fiction and thus 'challenges the expectations of the relationship between author/artists and reader/viewer' (Thacker, 2002: 148).

Much like McHale's work on postmodernism, Patricia Waugh has become one of the standout writers on metafiction, and her list of the style's typical features in relation to postmodernism (given below) shall serve as the framework for my own analysis here:

- Over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator
- Ostentatious typographic experiment
- Explicit dramatization of the reader
- Chinese-box structures
- Incantatory and absurd lists
- Over-systematized or overtly arbitrarily arranged structural devices
- Total breakdown of temporal and spatial organization of narrative
- Infinite regress
- De-humanization of character, parodic doubles, obtrusive proper names
- Self-reflexive images
- Critical discussions of the story within the story
- Continuous undermining of specific fictional conventions
- Use of popular genres
- Explicit parody of previous texts, whether literary or non-literary

(Waugh, 1984: 21-2)

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

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

This viewpoint – as unsubstantiated in reality as it may be – has certainly left its mark on the corresponding academic criticism. In fact, it was not until the early 1990s that terms such as postmodernism and metafiction were first considered in relation to children's literature, with Geoff Moss being one of the earliest critics to address the presence of metafiction in such material. He begins:

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

(1990: 50)

The above quotation exemplifies the fundamental belief that children would not be able to cope with complex postmodern techniques like metafiction and so on, a belief that has already been demonstrated as prevalent across academic criticism. Even Moss – who examines the presence of these elements in a selection of children's books so as to prove that children *can* cope with them – also comments on the 'paucity of such texts' (1990: 50). However, I would argue that this 'paucity' applies rather to the scholarship as opposed to the texts themselves. From my own experience, children's literature is rife with the kind of material Moss is considering. This is especially so in contemporary fiction, in which such devices have almost become the norm due to their prominence in mainstream children's books (Cross, 2004; McCallum, 1996).

This is only more prevalent now, with the vast majority of contemporary junior fiction (for readers aged 8-12) drawing on these strategies with relative frequency. Postmodernism and metafiction are now readily available in mainstream children's literature, but the corresponding academic awareness remains comparatively underdeveloped. In this paper, I shall therefore be examining what I believe to be a stunningly complex – although by no means rare – example of contemporary children's fiction, concentrating on some common postmodern aspects that have been noticeably absent from traditional criticism of children's literature.

2. The Secret Series

In this paper I shall be using *The Secret Series* by Pseudonymous Bosch (pen-name of Raphael Simon) as exemplar. These five books, published in the UK between 2008 and 2012, follow eleven-year-olds Cass and Max-Ernest as they join a mysterious society whose mission is to protect the secret of immortality from a group of evil alchemists. This central secret is apparently known by the author of the novels, whom we first encounter as an 'I'-narrator in the process of writing the first book in the series simply because he is unable to keep it to himself any longer. Claiming complete authenticity at all times – i.e. that everything in these books actually happened and that, by reading the text, we too will be at risk from the evil alchemists – Bosch repeatedly draws attention to the artifice of his novels. He constantly comments on his own writing and ostentatiously gives his characters fake names so we, as readers, cannot discover anything about their 'real life' counterparts. Furthermore, he frequently tells us to stop reading, thus drawing attention to our own act of reading through metafictional reference. Ultimately, the message is this: do not read these books. Even the titles of Bosch's texts highlight their inherently metafictional (and supposedly dangerous) nature: *The Name of This Book is Secret* (2008); *If You're Reading This, It's Too Late* (2009); *This Book is Not Good for You* (2010); and so on.

All of these explicitly metafictional elements are demonstrated at the books' top level of narrative, the so-called 'composition-world' in which a 'textual enactor' of Bosch is seen writing the novels we are now reading (terms from Gavins, 2013); this level is narrated entirely in the simple present through Bosch's 'I'-narrator. It is within this layer of narrative that the main story-world of Cass and Max-Ernest – instead narrated in the third person and past tense – is embedded, as shown in Figure 1. While these narrative layers are kept linguistically separate, it is worthwhile mentioning that the textual enactor of Bosch frequently intrudes from the composition-world into the main story-world to offer parenthetical asides or commentary on his own writing throughout the novels.

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

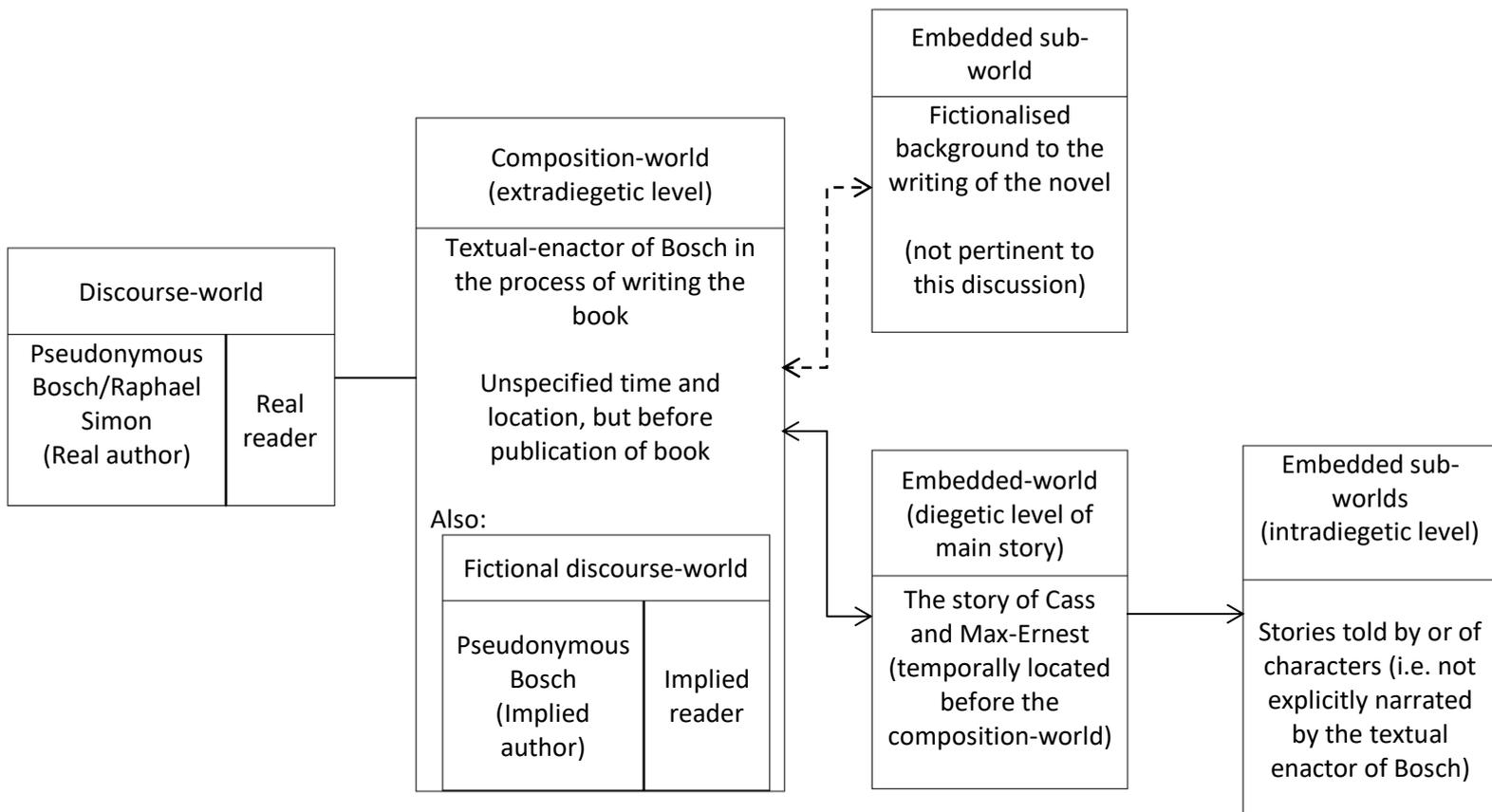


Figure 1: Narrative layers in *The Name of This Book is Secret* (2008), adapted from text-world theory models (see Gavins, 2013).

Regarding connecting lines:

- ↔ Two-way arrow: Ontological boundary can be broken (narrative swaps back and forth)
- One-way arrow: No blurring of boundaries
- Straight line: external boundary of text

3. Analysis

As stated earlier, I shall be using Patricia Waugh's list of typical features of postmodernism and metafiction to shape my analysis. Given the remit of this paper, I have picked a select few on which to focus, but shall draw attention to others when appropriate. These devices are prevalent across children's literature, but I shall concentrate here on their use in Bosch's *The Secret Series*, with all subsequent extracts taken from *The Name of This Book is Secret* and *This Isn't What It Looks Like* (hereafter Book 1 and Book 4, respectively).

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

I shall begin with what is, in my opinion, the most striking aspect of Bosch's texts: the roles of the narrator and reader. Consider the following extract, which opens Book 1:

(1)

WARNING:

DO NOT READ BEYOND THIS PAGE

!

Good.

Now I know I can trust you.

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

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

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

(Book 1: 3-5)

After moving past the warning on the opening page – a less than welcoming opening for a children's book, I'll admit – we find ourselves in a prologue narrated by 'I'. The chatty, interactive narration of 'I' typifies this narrative layer, the composition-world of the novel. It is cemented in the present tense through the temporal adverb 'now', as well as the consistent use of the simple present in verbs like 'know', 'can' and 'make'. Furthermore, the plural implied in 'let's' and corroborated by the repeated use of the second-person pronoun indicates that 'I' is addressing *someone*.

In fact, instead of identifying 'I', the main focus of the book's opening appears to be on 'you'. As readers, we do not necessarily know to whom 'you' specifically refers beyond some unidentified narratee (much as we only know that 'I' is the narrator at this point). Nevertheless, the second-person pronoun 'functions as an invitation to the reader to project [himself] into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of *you*' (McHale, 1987: 224). In this way, the real reader feels like they are being addressed directly and thus aligns themselves with 'you'. This is solidified by the narrator attributing 'you' with particular qualities at a very early stage: 'You're curious. You're brave. And you're not afraid to lead a life of crime.' It is unlikely that the real reader thinks of themselves in this

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

way, but clearly the narrator believes these qualities are necessary for a successful reading of the story. By deliberately ignoring the warning at the beginning of the book – as we are clearly intended to do, else fail in reading it altogether – the reader is thus ascribed the same characteristics as the narratee, regardless of whether they are true. In this way, the real reader is drawn into the text-world and instantly dramatized (Waugh, 1984) through conflation with the narratee. To truly solidify this alignment, Bosch further uses explicit metafictional reference to the act of reading: 'if...you insist on reading this book', a task which is fulfilled the moment the real reader casts their eyes upon that very line. Furthermore, the proximal deixis of the demonstrative 'this' signifies that the narrator and his narratee are positioned on the same ontological level. As there are no other interlocutors present with the narrator, it follows that 'you' must refer to the person reading (or at least experiencing) those words and thus we in the real world step into the role of narratee. This leads to the first instance of metalepsis in the text, as the external ontological boundary has been broken through vertical address from the narrator at the extradiegetic level to the real reader outside the fiction.

While all of this serves to illustrate Waugh's EXPLICIT DRAMATIZATION OF THE READER, it has not yet revealed much about the OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR. Let us, then, return to the 'I'-narrator introduced in the opening lines. At this early point, we do not know much about this narrator beyond his apparent appreciation for the reader's supposed willingness to live dangerously. Linguistically, however, we can infer a fair bit about the 'I'-narrator's identity. Looking again at extract (1), the metafictional reference in 'this book' brings the reader into the world of the text as it signifies the reader's deictic proximity to 'I'. Who else, then, exists on the same ontological level as the book we are reading, especially to the extent that they can use proximal deictic references? Who also has the ability to manipulate the content of the book by adding in '[their] warning'? Who has a vested interest in the specific characteristics of the reader? Why, the author himself.

This becomes clearer as the text progresses and the narrator begins to comment on his construction of the story more explicitly. Turning to Chapter One (and a half), we find:

(2)

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

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

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

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

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

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

(Book 1: 14)

Considering the linguistic elements discussed in extract (1), it is clear that (2) is still situated in the composition-world; it has first-person references to the narrator, directly addresses the reader, and is told using the simple present. More importantly, it is here that we begin to see the narrator's hand in visibly creating the story. Not only does he have the ability to control what we can or cannot read (this extract occurs directly after an entirely redacted opening, as seen in Figure 2 overleaf – a feature which might also satisfy Waugh's *TYPOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT*), but he begins to offer commentary on his own way of communicating the narrative to us. This is particularly evident when he acknowledges that he: a) 'couldn't let you read Chapter One', and b) 'shouldn't even be telling you that [he] shouldn't be telling you the story'. The first of these is clearly a metafictional device as it draws the real reader's attention to the act of reading and the fact that the printed word on the page is not fully accessible, therein highlighting the artifice of the novel and, hence, the overall fictionality of the story within. The second is actually an example of what Fludernik deems *metanarrative*, a term which refers to 'comments made by the narrator about the story, whether about making it up, formulating it in words or the ways of telling it' (Fludernik, 2009: 156). *Metafiction*, by contrast, concentrates on the fictionality of that narrative, rather than the act or process of narration itself – although Fludernik does point out that 'these terms are often treated as identical in meaning' (2009: 61). Crucially, while metanarrative statements have traditionally been interpreted as being especially intrusive on the part of the narrator, Fludernik explains that they can also be deployed to *reinforce* the illusion of reality:

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

(2009: 61)

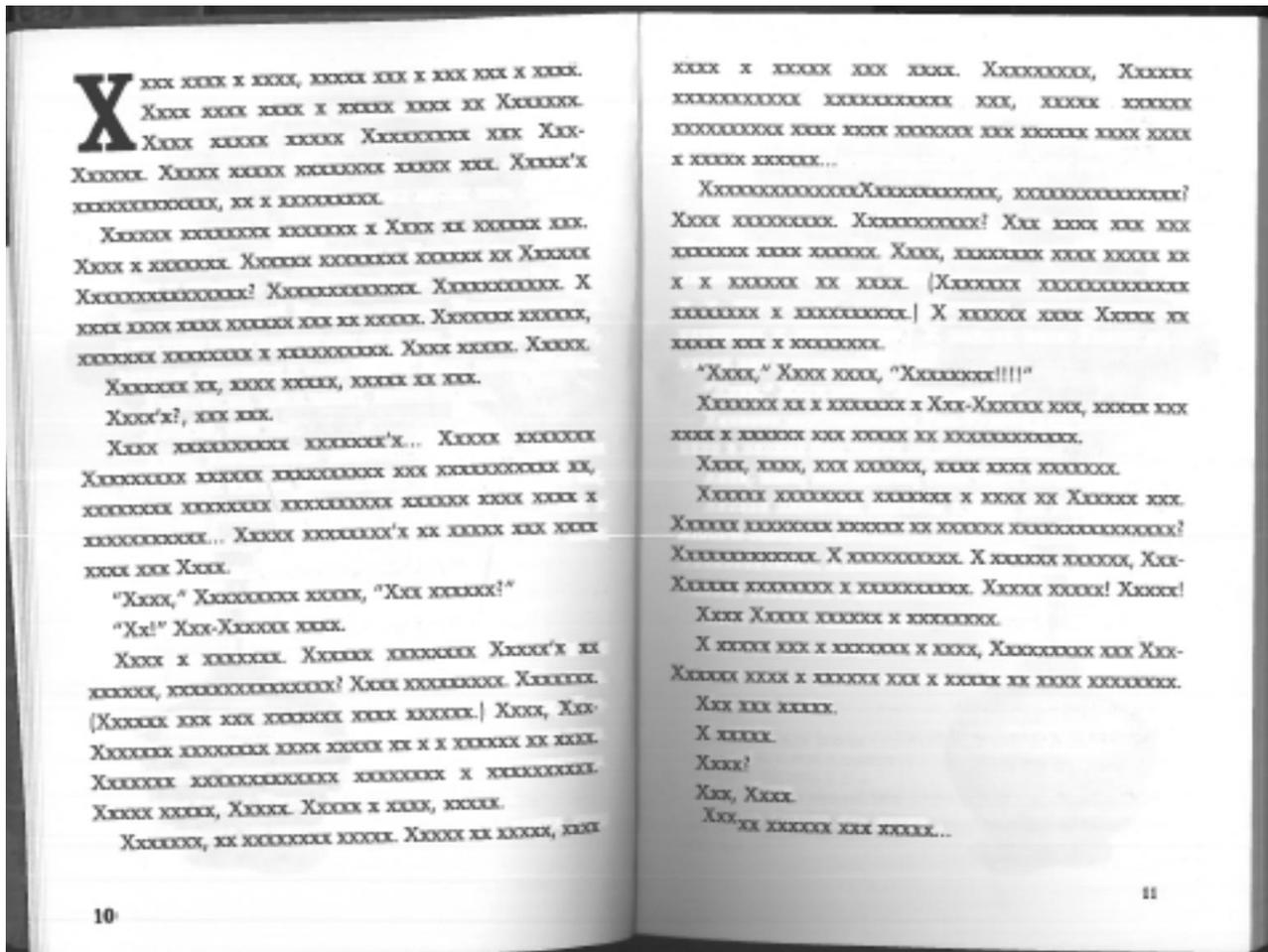


Figure 2: The redacted Chapter One (Book 1: 10-11).

Certainly, in the case of Bosch's text, a successful reading of the novel comes from accepting – even if only as a pretence – that the composition-world is true: that a version of Bosch really is sat in a dark room, writing the story of Cass and Max-Ernest, and offering commentary on his process as he does so. In the real world, we know that everything about this book is fictional, yet we are encouraged to put our awareness of its artifice aside. This is done, in part, by our direct communication with the narrator, reinforced by his frequent metanarrative comments, as Fludernik suggests. However, I would even go so far as to argue that in *The Secret Series* it is not just the metanarrative comments, but also the *metafictional* ones that are meant to reinforce the validity of the text.

Take, for instance, this passage, which occurs shortly after (2):

(3)

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

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

(Book 1: 15)

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

In addition to this, Bosch acknowledges the difficulties his readers might be facing at this early point in the novel, especially given the redacted first chapter: 'How can you follow a story if you don't know whom it's about? *Somebody* has got to be getting lost in the woods, or slaying dragons, or travelling in time, or whatever it is that happens in the story' (Book 1: 15). Considering extract (2) again, we can see that he ostentatiously lays out the conventions of fiction for his readers, just so they can identify when he breaks them. This is made apparent when he says that Chapter One was where '[y]ou would have learned all the things you usually learn at the beginning of a book' (Book 1: 14).

His use of 'usually' is particularly interesting here, deliberately calling attention to the expected who/what/where/why/when/how elements typically introduced at the start of a novel. Toolan (2001), for instance, points out that 'the establishment of an identifiable setting is a strong

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

psychological preference in most readers' (91), while Fludernik comments on how 'a detailed description of places, objects and clothing as well as of people conjures up a totality, a real world, thus creating the illusion that the novel is depicting reality' (2009: 54). If setting the scene is so important, why then does Bosch seemingly go out of his way to undermine such a crucial convention of fiction? On the one hand, much of this opening serves to highlight the fictionality of his text, thus meaning he can more easily claim that other elements of his writing are true, as discussed previously. I would, however, also suggest that Bosch's continuous subversions of literary conventions are actually insightful aims to educate his child-readers as to how literature should usually work (he also refuses to write an ending to Book 1, instead talking his readers through the process of doing it themselves).¹

At this very early point of the novel – we are still only at Chapter One and a half, after all – Bosch has already satisfied multiple points on Waugh's list: an OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR; OSTENTATIOUS TYPOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT; EXPLICIT DRAMATIZATION OF THE READER; OBTRUSIVE PROPER NAMES for his characters; and CONTINUOUS UNDERMINING OF FICTIONAL CONVENTIONS.

This, however, is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Bosch has frequently been compared to the rather more well-known Lemony Snicket and his *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (now a successful Netflix show in addition to a major motion picture). There are obvious similarities between the two, with both series capitalising on the 'do not read' ploy and exhibiting clear traits of metafiction. Similarly, both authors exist within the pages of their respective books, visibly writing the story as it goes, whilst also appearing as the published author on the cover. Furthermore, both Bosch and Snicket appear as characters within the story-worlds they have created. In the case of Snicket, his character-version occurs only in a spin-off series, *All The Wrong Questions*, which follows a younger version of himself during his career at the V.F.D.; these stories exist within the same universe as *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, but the character-version of Snicket never interacts with his main protagonists, the Baudelaire children.

Bosch, on the other hand, goes one step further.

The narrative levels illustrated in Figure 1 showed that there are three main layers to Bosch's novels: at the highest level is the composition-world (extradiegetic), embedded in which is the main story-world (diegetic), with further sub-worlds embedded within the story-world that are told by or of characters (intradiegetic). When there are multiple embedded narrative levels of this kind, they can be said to 'nest' inside each other like Chinese-boxes or Russian dolls (Fludernik, 2009; Waugh, 1984). A prime example would be the structure of *Arabian Nights* (see Ryan, 1986), in which a story

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

is told by one character, in which another story is told by another character, in which another story is told, and so on, effectively stacking narrative levels on top of each other. Bosch follows a similar approach.

For the most part, the narrative levels in Bosch's novels are kept fairly distinct. Although we are made consistently aware of the textual enactor in the composition-world, who frequently interrupts the main story-world to offer commentary on the text, this is typically done by introducing an entirely new chapter (thus breaking up the narrative rather than intruding upon it directly) or is presented parenthetically or as a footnote. Again, this means that the narrative itself is not broken up too much, and child-readers do not have to cope with sudden world-switches.

That is, until Book 4. In the first three novels, readers are highly aware of the version of Bosch that exists within the pages of the novel: the textual enactor who visibly writes the book in the composition-world. In Book 4, however, he finally appears as a character in the main story-world. But this is Pseudonymous Bosch, and even breaking *that* ontological boundary is not enough.

Consider the following extract. While visiting Cass in hospital, Max-Ernest looks through a magic monocle and sees the image of an unknown man in the mirror:

(4)

There was a man in the mirror. An old or not-so-old man (it was hard to tell). He had messy hair that stuck out in all directions and a scruffy beard the mixed black-and-white colour people describe as salt-and-pepper. He looked slightly insane.

[...]

[Max-Ernest] peered closer and saw that the man was hunched over a desk. Papers spilled out in front of him, covered with an almost-unreadable scrawl.

Max-Ernest had the odd sensation that he knew the man – something about the man's nose reminded Max-Ernest of his father – and yet Max-Ernest was certain he'd never seen him before.

(Book 4: 267-9)

Unlike previous extracts in this paper, (4) is narrated solely in the third-person using the simple past. This puts it in the main story-world rather than composition-world, although we can still attribute the narration to Bosch at the extradiegetic level. However, while Bosch is narrating this, he clearly is

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

not present to see the events unfold (at least, not that we are aware of at this point). Instead, the story is here focalized (Genette, 1980) through Max-Ernest, as illustrated by the use of perception verbs such as 'peered' and 'saw' that orient the view through his eyes. We can also infer that any evaluation in this passage should be attributed to Max-Ernest for the same reason: Max-Ernest is the one who thinks it is 'hard to tell' how old the man was; that the man has a beard that '*people describe*' as salt-and-pepper (i.e. not that Max-Ernest would necessarily choose to describe it that way himself); Max-Ernest deems the man's handwriting 'almost-unreadable' because he is the one who cannot read it; etc.

Perhaps this does not seem too out of the ordinary – that is, beyond a child having a magic monocle that shows him the image of a strange man when he looks in the mirror. However, more is revealed about this man as we read on. Not only does he look slightly insane and appears to be writing something (seemingly in some haste given that the papers 'spilled out' on the desk and were covered in his 'almost-unreadable *scrawl*'), but we then discover that the man is eating chocolate somewhat desperately. For any reader who has made it this far into the series, this is a *huge* clue as to the man's identity. Who loves chocolate so much they willingly put themselves – and their reader – at risk just so they can have one more bite (Book 1: 188-90)? Pseudonymous Bosch does.

With the seeds of suspicion sown in the reader's mind, the story breaks away from the man in the mirror quite quickly. We are left with two things: one, the (as yet unconfirmed) potential identity of the man as Bosch himself; and two, the final line in the chapter, again focalized through Max-Ernest: 'The man in the mirror was his future self' (Book 4: 271). Interestingly, the voice of the textual enactor version of Bosch is noticeably lacking during this incident. As readers, we have grown accustomed to his frequent interruptions into the main story-world, yet Bosch is conspicuously absent here. In fact, the only time the textual enactor appears to comment on this turn of events is some thirty pages later, when Max-Ernest decides to act on what he has misinterpreted as advice from his future self:

(5)

It wouldn't hurt to try talking once, the older Max-Ernest had said.

The younger Max-Ernest assumed this meant he should talk to Cass. But was talking to her supposed to wake her up? That sounded like exactly the sort of superstitious nonsense he couldn't abide. He was embarrassed that his adult self would recommend it.*

[...]

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

*I happen to know the older Max-Ernest wasn't recommending any such thing. In fact, he wasn't speaking to the younger Max-Ernest at all; he was speaking to his cat.

(Book 4: 298-9)

The italicised words refer to the direct speech of the man in the mirror that occurs when Max-Ernest first sees him through the monocle, thus the use of the past perfect in the reporting tag. The next paragraph can be attributed to the younger Max-Ernest in his present moment, with the verb 'assumed' introducing his thoughts in the interrogative and the subsequent evaluation of 'superstitious nonsense'. It is not until the footnote at the bottom of the page that the voice of the textual enactor appears. By admitting that he 'happen[s] to know' precisely what the older Max-Ernest had meant, readers are forced to question *why* and *how* Bosch could possibly know that. After all, until Book 4 we had assumed that Bosch was – while far from omniscient – simply aware of the events and characters of the story as a third party, kind of like Lemony Snicket in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. While Snicket similarly acts as an internal author of his books, and equally exists as a character within the world in which his story occurs, he never appears in his own diegetic narrative and, importantly, is most certainly not one of the three Baudelaire children that the story follows. Bosch, by contrast, not only appears as the textual enactor in the process of writing the story of Cass and Max-Ernest, but actually turns out to be the grown-up version of his own character!

This is finally confirmed at the end of the book when Max-Ernest tells Cass about what he saw in the mirror:

(6)

"I swore I wasn't going to tell you this – but I saw our names," said Max-Ernest, speaking in a rush now. "Well, they weren't really our names, but I could tell they were stand-ins for our names. Like mine was Max-Ernest instead of Xxx-Xxxxxx and yours was Cass instead of Xxxx."

(Book 4: 417)

And just like that we are thrust back to the very beginning of Book 1. No longer are there simply layered narrative levels within the novels, but rather a cyclical structure in which the highest level of narrative – the composition-world – is itself embedded within the story-world now that Max-Ernest has seen the textual enactor of Bosch as his future self in the mirror. Bosch (the published author) is writing a story in which Bosch (the 'I'-narrator in the composition-world) tells a story about his younger self (Max-Ernest) seeing an image of his future self (Bosch) writing the story in which he

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

(the 'I'-narrator) is telling a story about his younger self... and so on *ad infinitum*. This is the ultimate metalepsis and certainly stems towards INFINITE REGRESS – with a nod to CHINESE-BOX STRUCTURES, too. Although Bosch's novels satisfy every single one of the characteristics on Waugh's list, it is this element of his novels in particular that I feel best epitomises the complexity of wider postmodern narratives – even in one intended for children.

4. Conclusion

This paper aimed to illustrate that children's literature not only has the potential to be extremely complicated, but also to deploy the kinds of postmodern strategies that many adults would find difficult, let alone child-readers. The techniques outlined here, using Bosch's *The Secret Series* as exemplar, surely prove that children's literature is full of intellectual stimulation and anything but 'too easy' (Grenby, 2008: 200). Furthermore, Bosch's texts are by no means rare within children's literature. In fact, the popularity of postmodern and metafictional techniques in contemporary children's literature is indicative of the increasingly small gap between what is considered experimental and/or mainstream. Modern popular junior fiction, in particular, is rife with postmodern and metafictional techniques, especially regarding the roles of the reader and narrator – with special mention also to the use of parody, games, riddles, lists and general ludic qualities which are now commonplace.

I can only hope that this begins to be recognised more in wider scholarship. The consideration of children's literature as an academic field has developed greatly throughout the latter half of the 20th century, and we are lucky that it is now not only accepted as an area worthy of study in its own right (and not just for its pedagogic value), but is even being incorporated into various university programmes across the UK and further afield. Nevertheless, compared to other areas of literary criticism, it remains significantly underdeveloped. What has most impeded its growth in the past is the marginalised status of such books as 'just' for children. However, that opinion – once prevalent – has been consistently disproven by children's authors continuing to experiment with techniques and strategies that rival the most esteemed canonical literature. Perhaps a greater awareness of complex, postmodernist texts like Bosch's *The Secret Series* would serve to bridge this gap, therein continuing the work of those critics who first recognised such strategies in children's books (Moss, 1990; Lewis, 1994; McCallum, 1996). This traditionally experimental style of writing is now considered mainstream in children's fiction. Looks like it may be time for academia to catch up.

¹ As an interesting aside (if not a rather shameless boast) I should like to make a further comment on this particular point. I have argued here that Bosch deliberately and consciously subverts literary conventions (a characteristic that, in itself, is typical of postmodernist fiction according to Waugh) in an attempt to teach child-readers precisely what those conventions are. For instance, he acknowledges the different things this book might be about, and goes on to explain all the things we *should* have learnt in Chapter One had he not made it inaccessible. This may seem a little paradoxical – the real author is, after all, still providing us with that information, so why bother masking it behind this façade?

In response to that, I direct you to the following extract which comes from a letter sent to me by Pseudonymous Bosch – or, rather, the real life Raphael Simon. After writing my MA dissertation on the postmodern strategies displayed in *The Secret Series*, Simon reached out to me on Twitter and asked to read my essay. (Never have I taken such pains over crafting an email, especially when I realised in the moment of writing it precisely how much of my language patterns can be traced back to his books!) Fortunately for my academic reputation, and my inner fangirl, Simon seemed to enjoy my dissertation, calling it a 'wonderful, lucidly argued essay [that was] very, very moving for [him] to read.' The following passage is taken from his response, in which he draws particular attention to the point raised above:

While I wouldn't have been able to express every point as clearly as you do, it may be gratifying for you to know that all the stylistic tics and quirks that you outline were fully conscious, deliberate choices, and were intended to have exactly the effects you describe. Including some of your more counterintuitive propositions—e.g. that I try to make my stories seem more "real" by highlighting their fictionality, and that I instruct kids how to read books by pretending that they are already familiar with fictional conventions.

(Raphael Simon, 30th October 2018)

References:

Bosch, P. (2008). *The Name of This Book is Secret*. London: Usborne Publishing Ltd.

Bosch, P. (2009). *If You're Reading This, It's Too Late*. London: Usborne Publishing Ltd.

Bosch, P. (2010). *This Book is Not Good for You*. London: Usborne Publishing Ltd.

Bosch, P. (2011). *This Isn't What It Looks Like*. London: Usborne Publishing Ltd.

Bosch, P. (2012). *You Have to Stop This*. London: Usborne Publishing Ltd.

Coles, M. & Hall, C. (2001). 'Breaking The Line: New Literacies, Postmodernism and the Teaching of Printed Texts', *Reading: Literacy and Language* 35(3): 111-114.

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

Cross, J. (2004). 'The Inevitable and Inescapable Didacticism of Contemporary Popular Junior Fiction',
New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship, 10(1): 55-70.

Fludernik, M. (2009). *An Introduction to Narratology*. London: Routledge.

Gavins, J. (2013). *Reading the Absurd*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative Discourse*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Grenby, M. O. (2008). *Children's Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Hassan, I. (1997). 'Toward a Concept of Postmodernism', in P. Waugh (ed.). *Revolutions of the World: Intellectual Contexts for the Study of Modern Literature*. New York: Arnold, pp. 95-101.

Lewis, D. (1994). *The Metafictive in Picture Books: A Theoretical Analysis of the Nature and Origins of Contemporary Children's Picture Books, with Case Studies of Children Reading Picture Book Texts*. Doctoral thesis: Institute of Education, University of London.

Lewis, D. (2001). *Reading Contemporary Picture Books: Picturing Text*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

McCallum, R. (1996). 'Metafictions and Experimental Work', in P. Hunt (ed.) *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*. London: Routledge, pp. 397-409.

McHale, B. (1987). *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen.

Meek, M. (1982). *Learning to Read*. London: Bodley Head.

Moss, G. (1990). 'Metafiction and the Poetics of Children's Literature', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 15(2): 50-52.

Pantaleo, S. (2014). 'The Metafictive Nature of Postmodern Picturebooks', *The Reading Teacher* 67(5): 324-332.

Ryan, M. (1986). 'Embedded Narratives and Tellability', *Style* 20(3): 319-40.

The Real Value of Children's Literature: A Case Study in Pseudonymous Bosch

Shavit, Z. (1986). *The Poetics of Children's Literature*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.

Thacker, D. C. (2002). 'Playful Subversion', in D. C. Thacker and J. Webb (eds.) *Introducing Children's Literature: From Romanticism to Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, pp. 139-150.

Toolan, M. (2001). *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (2nd edn.). London: Routledge.

Watson, K. (2004). 'The Postmodern Picture Book in the Secondary Classroom', *English in Australia* 14(winter): 55-57.

Waugh, P. (1984). *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen.