

**'This story starts like all good stories do':**

**Setting the scene through postmodern and metafictional techniques in the prologues of children's books**

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**Abstract:**

One particularly interesting pattern in contemporary children's literature is the frequent use of prologues in which an authorial narrator seems to talk directly to the child-reader about the very novel they are about to read. This is likely a by-product of a growing trend that has seen postmodern and metafictional techniques becoming the norm in children's literature (McCallum, 1996). However, the consideration of terms like 'postmodernism' and 'metafiction' remains noticeably absent in much of the corresponding scholarship.

This paper therefore considers a selection of example prologues in a variety of popular children's books to further examine the prevalent use of postmodern strategies in such texts, with a focus on the dialogic relationship established between author/narrator and child-reader/narratee at the start of the story. Although the use of postmodern and metafictional strategies (as identified by Waugh, 1984) could lead to these books being considered experimental, they are actually all from mainstream authors who frequently appear on best-seller lists: current Children's Laureate, Cressida Cowell; the quirky Pseudonymous Bosch; and 'celebrity' author Tom Fletcher. All three authors vary massively in the content they create, yet still deploy similar postmodern and metafictional strategies throughout their texts – with a definite focus on establishing a dialogue between the author/narrator and child-reader/narratee in their opening prologue.

By stylistically examining techniques like direct address, the prevalent use of second person pronouns, consistent metafictional reference, and the notably oral quality of such narration, I shall demonstrate firstly that terms such as 'postmodernism' and 'metafiction' ought to be more readily applied to children's literature in academic discourse. Furthermore, this paper illustrates that mainstream children's literature is capable of unprecedented levels of linguistic and narratological complexity, something which has previously been neglected in wider scholarship.

**Key words:** postmodernism, metafiction, children's literature, junior fiction, Pseudonymous Bosch, Cressida Cowell, Tom Fletcher, child reader, narrator, oral narration

## 1. Introduction

Children's literature is one of the most varied, diverse fields available to study. Material typically intended for child-readers draws on an unprecedented range of styles, genres and formats, and covers a huge array of content and plotlines: from gritty, realist fiction to magical, fantastical fairy tales, with anything and everything in between. Given the obvious breadth and depth of children's literature, it would not be far-fetched to expect the subsequent scholarship to be as equally varied.

One would, however, be wrong.

In fact, the academic study of children's literature was somewhat side-lined until surprisingly recently. As Matthew Grenby (2008) explains:

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

(199-200)

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

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

(ix)

The prevalent opinion appears to have been that academics should refrain from looking at children's literature because it was too easy for an adult to find any intellectual value in; the only reason one would possibly even consider the genre is regarding its place within a pedagogic frame of reference. However, children's fiction has so much more to offer than *just* educational value. As this paper shall demonstrate, one can even find within it a plethora of complex narrative and stylistic techniques that would challenge the most complicated canonical literature for adults.

One prominent aspect, in this regard, is the prevalent use of postmodernism and metafiction in children's literature. Geoff Moss was one of the earliest critics to consider this, beginning his 1990 essay:

'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 acknowledges the prevalent belief that children would not be able to cope with complex postmodern techniques like metafiction and so on. 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 scholarship at the time rather than to the texts themselves. From my own experience, children's literature is rife with the kind of material Moss is considering. Indeed,

[a]n increasingly noticeable phenomenon has been the appropriation of experimental and metafictional narrative techniques into mainstream children's literature, an occurrence which blurs the distinctions between experimental and non-experimental, between the mainstream and the marginal.

(McCallum, 1996: 408)

And nor is this a particularly new development. The literary field itself is full of examples

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

(Thacker, 2002: 143)

A more contemporary list could also include the likes of Lemony Snicket, Julia Golding, Geraldine McCaughrean, Chris Wooding, David Walliams and Terry Pratchett, among many others. Notably, the plethora of such authors demonstrates that children *must* be able to deal with these strategies in some way, else why has it proven so popular?

As Hunt (1991) observes, 'it may be correct to assume that child-readers will not bring to the text a complete or sophisticated system of codes, but is this any reason to deny them access to texts with a potential of rich codes?' (101). Moreover, metafictional texts can 'foster an awareness of how a story works' (Mackey, 1990: 181) and, by highlighting the act of meaning-making, 'metafictions can implicitly teach literary and cultural codes and

conventions, as well as specific interpretive strategies, and hence empower readers to read more competently' (McCallum, 1996: 398). This is never more apparent than in children's texts with a characteristically postmodern narrator, especially one who seemingly attempts to interact with the child-reader directly, or who is seen visibly creating the text as it progresses, as is the case in the three texts used in this study.

This kind of overt interaction between the postmodern narrator and the audience forces the child-reader to acknowledge and question the reality of the text they are reading as its constructedness is laid bare and the ontological world(s) within are highlighted and blurred. This is the dominant feature of postmodernism according to Brian McHale (1987) as it 'deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like...What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constructed, and how do they differ?' (10).

Considering this particular aspect of postmodernism, it is unsurprising that metafiction so commonly occurs alongside it in critical discussion; that is, 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).

In her definitive text *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Waugh (1984) provides a list of the style's typical features (see Appendix A) which I shall use to shape my analysis here, concentrating on the OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR in three example texts by contemporary children's authors: Children's Laureate Cressida Cowell, celebrity author Tom Fletcher, and Pseudonymous Bosch. In each case I shall examine extracts from the prologues of their respective books as it is there that we meet the narrator who is visibly in the process of creating the story for us.

## **2. The Narrator**

The distinction between author and narrator is crucial, especially in relation to the texts I shall be examining here. At a superficial level, we can make a distinction between narrative-making and narrative-telling (Currie, 2010), the former being the role of the real author and the latter being the purpose of the narrator in the text.

The blurring or conflation of the narrative-maker and narrative-teller roles is commonplace in postmodern fiction. Yet it is also a technique that we see time and time again in contemporary children's literature, in which the teller of the story exists within the pages of the book not as a character but as a fictional version of the *real* author. Pseudonymous Bosch, for instance, clearly does not exist (the real author's name is Raphael

Simon) and yet it is his name published on the cover of the book. Within the novel, we then see a version of Bosch in the process of writing the very story we are now reading; we seemingly witness, in real time, the linguistic creation of the book we now hold in our hands.

To distinguish these kinds of fictional, character-authors from their narrator-counterparts, I should like to introduce Gregory Currie's scheme of *internal* and *external* author/narrators. As he explains:

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

(2010: 66)

We might think of Watson as a fictional author *within* the story in which he exists, even if he is in no way the real author of the text itself. Using Currie's terminology, Watson is thus the internal author, while Conan Doyle is the external one. Returning to Pseudonymous Bosch, he conducts a similar role in the *Secret Series*, visibly appearing as a narrator in the process of writing the novel we are now reading. In this way, he can be seen as the internal author.

However, Bosch goes a step further than Watson by simultaneously appearing as the external author, too, as he is the published name seen on the cover of the book. Although he is definitely not the real author, Bosch manages to feature paradoxically as a sort of *fictional* version of the real author by taking on – at least from a publishing and marketing viewpoint – the role of the external author. Likewise, there is no reference at all to the real-life Raphael Simon within the pages of any of the novels published under Bosch's name (not even on the copyright or 'about the author' pages). In fact, it wasn't until well into the publication of the *Secret Series* that Raphael Simon began giving interviews as himself – as opposed to wearing some form of disguise to perpetuate the mysterious image of Bosch – and it was only in 2021 that Simon published his first book under his own name. In this way, it is possible to consider Bosch as the external author (that is, a *fake* version of the real author) and internal author simultaneously.

This becomes all the more important when considered in relation to children's literature. Often in such material there is some form of internal authorial persona who informally chats directly to 'you', the reader, while in the process of visibly writing or telling the story. Barbara Wall (1991) believes that the kind of oral narrative this establishes exists purely to help children when reading:

The other major characteristic of such writing down is the intrusive narrator, who, while not a first-person narrator, in the sense of being a character, or an observer

within the story, speaks directly to the narratee, spelling out what the implied author does not trust the implied reader to work out.

(17)

Her argument assumes that children will not be experienced or knowledgeable enough to navigate the text alone, and so the adult author must offer some kind of linguistic safety net in order to help the child through the reading process. This was similarly proposed by Aidan Chambers (1985) when discussing Roald Dahl:

What [Dahl] aims to achieve – and does – is a tone of voice...which sets up a sense of intimate, yet adult-controlled, relationship between his second self and his implied child reader. It is a voice often heard in children’s books of the kind deliberately written for them: it is the voice of speech rather than of interior monologue or no-holds-barred private confession. It is, in fact, the tone of a friendly adult storyteller who knows how to entertain children while at the same time keeping them in their place.

(39-40)

There is certainly some truth in this as oral narratives do provide a nice, easy way of both entertaining and engaging the child-reader without throwing them in at the deep end, so to speak. It is friendly and familiar and, furthermore, because it so obviously establishes a conversational tone between the storyteller and the audience, it means that the narrator is able to effectively guide the child through the reading experience as if talking to them directly.

However, it significantly undersells both the skills of adult authors and the abilities of most child-readers to assume that helping them through the narrative is the *only* reason for this kind of chatty, oral narration from the internal author of the text. This is reinforced with the acknowledgement that oral narratives are especially common in postmodern texts as they often ‘imitate certain aspects of spoken narrative for ideological reasons or in order to show how different they are from established literary models’ (Fludernik, 2009: 111).

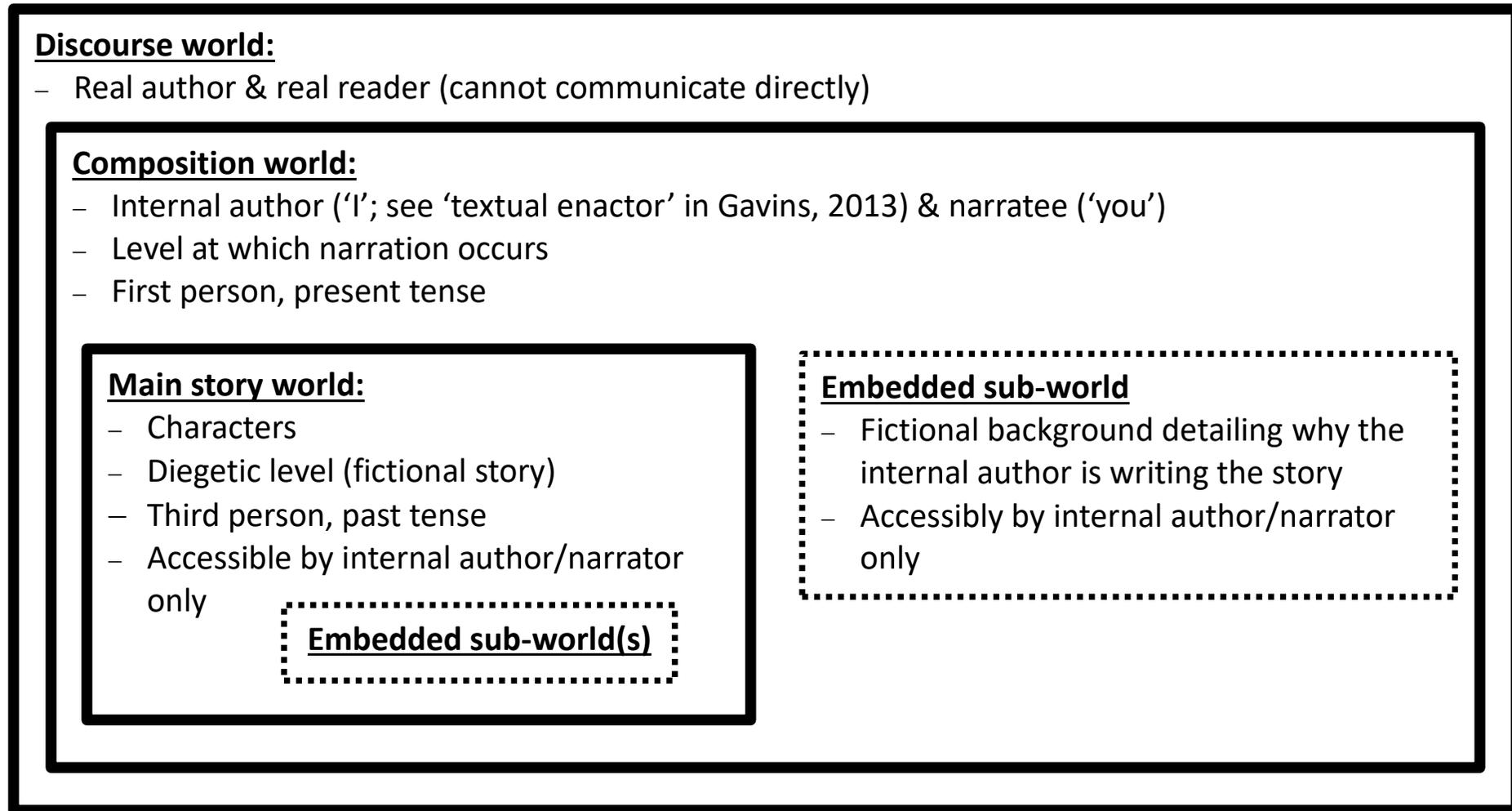
Given that the texts I am examining borrow so heavily from Waugh’s list of typical postmodern features, I am happy to attribute the overt oral narration displayed to her OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR, rather than simply a ‘friendly guide’ as Wall or Chambers would apparently advocate for.

### **3. Prologues**

Often prologues are used to explain events prior to the beginning action of the story, providing some necessary background information that will prove useful for those engaging

in the narrative. While a prologue can be nothing more than a useful introduction or preface in a literary work, in drama (along with epilogues) the convention is to address them to the audience directly. Importantly, they also typically exist outside the central narrative of the story.

The texts I am considering here all establish their respective narrators in an opening prologue. This is where we meet the figure who will be telling us the story – whether that be a seemingly more conventional narrator, as in Cowell, or an obvious internal author, as with Bosch and Fletcher – and where they, in turn, begin to address the reader directly. For this purpose, the prologue exists as part of an overarching *composition world* (Gavins, 2013) in which the internal author frames their process of writing the book that we are now reading. Because there are no other interlocutors present with the internal author in the composition world, the real reader automatically projects themselves ‘into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of *you*’ (McHale, 1987: 224) and thus establishes a dialogue between ‘I’, the internal author, and ‘you’, the reader, at the composition level. While the composition world is narrated in the first-person and present tense, the main story world of the text (in which the fiction unfolds) exists in the third-person and past tense with little or no reference to the internal author or the reader; see Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1:** Preliminary text-world structure of the chosen texts.

— Solid line – narrative boundary

..... Dotted line – embedded world not pertinent to this paper

#### 4. Cressida Cowell: 'Once there was Magic'

I shall begin this analysis with what appears to be the most ordinary – that is, to say, the least extreme – narratorial role created by the three authors I am considering: Cressida Cowell.

The following extract opens the prologue in her book *The Wizards of Once*:

(1)

Once there was Magic.

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

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

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

(Cowell, 2017: 11)

From the very beginning, we are firmly in the world of *storytelling*. The phrase 'Once there was...' is an instantly recognisable marker of fiction that will trigger the reader's schematic knowledge of fairy tales and stories; this is reinforced in the following sentence, 'It was a long, long time ago'.

The first two sentences, therefore, establish the storytelling process, but from a purely external perspective. It appears to be told in the simple past by an unidentified, possibly omniscient narrator without any reference to the reader at all. However, this all changes by the third sentence: 'Perhaps you feel that you know what a dark forest looks like'. The tone becomes much more conversational, moving into the simple present and introducing the second-person pronoun. Not only does this invite the reader to step into the discourse, fulfilling the narratee role inherently opened up by the presence of 'you', but it also indicates that 'you' must be being addressed *by* someone else.

We become more aware of the presence of the narrator in the storytelling process as things continue. They are referenced in the first-person as 'I' in the fourth sentence above. The verb 'tell' strengthens the new oral quality of the narration, indicating that the reader and narrator are involved in a shared language event, with metaleptic address occurring from the composition level within the text to the real reader outside. This is supported by the oral discourse marker 'well' in addition to the adverb 'perhaps', which allows the narrator to cast doubt on the reader's knowledge of dark forests.

This is then taken a step further through the use of the perception verb 'feel'. Prior to this moment, we may not have ever given much thought as to 'what a dark forest looks like', but suddenly we are being told that we do, in fact, *feel* as if we already have this

knowledge; we might now even take umbrage with the fact that the narrator seems to doubt us. This is all put into the reader's head by the narrator, but it forces the reader to begin thinking about what they *do* imagine a dark forest would look like... only to be told that whatever they're picturing is wrong a sentence later. As the prologue progresses, the narrator continues to describe the dark forest, but a lot of it is initially established in contrast to whatever mental image we have already been encouraged to conjure: 'These were forests darker than you would believe possible' or 'they stretched as far in every direction as you can possibly imagine' (Cowell, 2017: 11), for example. This efficiently brings the reader into the world-building and construction of the story and allows individuals' imaginations to run free, which is particularly key in children's literature (Rudd, 2010).

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

(2)

I am a character  
in this story...  
who sees everything,  
knows everything,  
I will not tell you  
who I am  
see if you can GUESS.

The story begins here.

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

(Cowell, 2017: 16)

Firstly, the internal author explicitly identifies themselves as a diegetic character in the story, thus blurring the boundary between the level of narration and fiction. Yet the proximal deixis in the demonstrative 'this' and the imperatives 'see if you can guess' and 'don't get lost' maintain direct address from the internal author to the reader, signifying that the reader is still meant to exist on the same ontological level as the narrator in the composition world, therein blurring the external boundary of the text, too. The whole

passage is narrated in the simple present and is also printed in a hand-written font (thus satisfying Waugh's TYPOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT), further cementing it at the voice of the internal author at the composition level.

Although Cowell does (fictionally) insert herself into the construction of *The Wizards of Once* in the third book when she explains that she is translating the pages of a true story (see Appendix B), the 'I'-narrator in the composition world is still meant to be seen as wholly responsible for the storytelling process within the books. However, the events of the story are presented as factual rather than fiction, as if everything we're hearing about really did happen within history and the internal author is now simply recounting the tale back to us as truthfully as possible. In this way, they also supposedly act as the narrative-maker in that they are choosing *how* to convey the story to us, hence why I am happy to refer to the level of their narration as a composition world even if they are never seen visibly *writing* the book we're now reading (as is the case with Fletcher and Bosch). Logically we know that the role of narrative-maker is Cowell's alone, and yet the contextual claim about the truthfulness of these books only serves to enforce the authentic *telling* of what happened – even when deployed alongside obvious markers of fiction that trigger the reader's schematic knowledge of fairy tales. The fact that she goes on to make herself a part of the story as a translator proves beyond doubt that, at least within the context of the story, Cowell is not the internal author telling the story to 'you'.

Although the overall effect is the same, this is one of the biggest differences between the 'I'-narrator in Cowell's texts and the 'I'-narrators created by Bosch and Fletcher, who both introduce versions of their real-life authorial counterparts into their respective texts instead.

##### **5. Tom Fletcher: 'This story starts like all good stories do'**

As a figure within this particular project, Tom Fletcher is especially interesting given that he is a *celebrity* author. This is not to undermine his status as a children's author by any means. In fact, once he turned his hand to writing, Fletcher quickly became one of the best-selling children's authors in the UK. Instead, the concept of a *celebrity* author is noteworthy here because Fletcher's prevalent use of postmodern and metafictional techniques in his books matches, if not *rivals*, more established children's authors like Cowell and Bosch. This indicates that such strategies – once considered far too complex for child-readers – have now become mainstream enough that even newer authors, who are coming to this genre without any prior experience, are deploying them readily.

His debut children's book, *The Christmasaurus*, begins like so:

(3)

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

DINOSAURS!

(Fletcher, 2016: 1)

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

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

The use of the second-person possessive further establishes the dialogic tone of the prologue, indicating that the teller of the story is aware of his audience and is addressing them directly. The prologue of *The Christmasaurus* continues to make occasional reference to 'you', often alongside metanarrative comments about the storyteller's role in communicating the story. For instance, lines such as, 'I'd like to tell you about two very special dinosaurs' (Fletcher, 2016: 2) and 'Now, I bet you're thinking that the egg was crushed instantly, right? Well – smartyclogs cleverpants – it wasn't, actually!' (Fletcher,

2016: 7) encourage a dialogue between the narrator and the reader, as well as perpetuating the oral quality of narration.

However, much like the start of Cowell's *The Wizards of Once*, the use of 'I' and 'you' becomes relatively sporadic in the prologue of *The Christmasaurus*, albeit only once the two interlocutor roles and the conversation between them has been irrefutably established. Instead, the main focus of the prologue here is introducing the backstory for the titular Christmasaurus and explaining the history of dinosaurs (which, by Fletcher's own admission, is much more exciting).

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

(4)

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

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

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

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

How's this...

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

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

(Fletcher, 2019: 1)

A lot happens here in just a few short lines. Firstly, there is the intertextual reference to the first book in the series with the use of the same opening line. That is not to mention the inherent metafictionality of even *addressing* that there is a first book in the series *to* reference. Cowell also mentions other books that she has written (Appendix B), but this is to authenticate her fictional role as translator. Fletcher, instead, is deliberately drawing the reader's attention to the equal constructedness of both of his texts, therein further highlighting the voice of the internal author who is able to control – and change – what has just been written on the page.

In addition to the consistent use of personal pronouns, the illusion of dialogue is further established through (admittedly one-sided) interrogatives, in which the narrator asks questions of the reader as if fully expecting a response. Although the reader is unable

to reply themselves, they effectively have words put into their mouth by the narrator, thus allowing for the back-and-forth that we see in extract (4). This again establishes a very conversational, oral tone in the narration. In addition to the constant direct address to ‘you’, there are also obvious uses of colloquialisms – such as ‘ginormously’ and ‘smartypants’ – and it is clearly meant to appear spontaneous as the narrator retracts what he has previously said (or, rather, *written*) and adapts the story going forward. This also links again to Waugh’s VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR. Similarly, frequent proximal deictic references – such as ‘how’s *this*’ and ‘you didn’t see *that* coming’ (the latter referring to the previous line of text that has been changed supposedly at the reader’s insistence) – also signify that the narrator and reader are communicating on the same ontological level.

Although there is not space for it within the remit of this paper, Fletcher has become increasingly adept in his use of postmodern devices, particularly in terms of blurring the lines between himself – as the real, external author – and the role of the narrator in the composition world. His novel *The Creakers* (2018), for instance, features ongoing commentary from himself as the external author before each chapter and he frequently makes reference to the fact that the internal author is the *real* Tom Fletcher in the process of writing the book: ‘by reading on, you agree to the terms and conditions that I, Tom Fletcher, the author of this book, am not responsible if you pee your pants with fright in the next chapter’ (2018: 261). While never as explicitly announced in *The Christmasaurus*, it becomes apparent that in each of his novels the internal author is none other than Fletcher himself. This is already a big step away from what we saw with Cowell earlier. It is, however, just one step closer to the narratorial role of Bosch in the *Secret Series*.

## **6. Pseudonymous Bosch: ‘This is a very dangerous book’**

Pseudonymous Bosch inspired this entire project. I grew up reading his books myself and they were my first introduction to postmodernism and metafiction – although, of course, I didn’t know those terms at the time! Although Bosch’s texts are slightly older than those of Cowell and Fletcher (the *Secret Series* originally being published in the UK from 2008-2012), I firmly believe that the devices and strategies deployed in his writing still make him a more than worthy addition to this study.

It is also particularly noteworthy to examine the ways in which Bosch’s narrator matches or supersedes what we have already seen with Cowell and Fletcher. After all, I commented earlier that I was beginning this analysis with Cowell as she was the least extreme of the three authors here. Bosch is considerably further along the scale in terms of how ‘experimental’ he might be considered and actually satisfies every single feature listed by Waugh in abundance (for a more in-depth study of the *Secret Series*, see Wydrzynska, 2021). However, much of this rests on the role of the narrator and – by extension – the reader.

Consider the following extract:

(5)

WARNING:

DO NOT READ BEYOND THIS PAGE

!

Good.

Now I know I can trust you.

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

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

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

(Bosch, 2008: 3-5)

So begins *The Name of This Book is Secret*, the first book in Bosch's series. After moving past the warning on the opening page, we find ourselves in a prologue narrated by 'I'. This narrative layer – the composition world – is typified by the chatty, interactive narration of 'I' and 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 yet to whom 'you' specifically refers other than being some unidentified narratee (much as we only know that 'I' is the narrator at this point). Nevertheless, as with both Fletcher and Cowell, the second-person pronoun aligns the real reader with the narratee and, in this way, the reader outside the text feels like they are being addressed directly through 'you'.

In this particular case, this is solidified by the narrator attributing 'you' with certain qualities: 'You're curious. You're brave. And you're not afraid to lead a life of crime.' It is unlikely that the real reader thinks of themselves in this way, but clearly the narrator believes these qualities are necessary for a successful reading of the story. By deliberately ignoring the warning at the beginning of the book – as we are clearly intended to do, despite the less than welcoming opening – the reader is thus ascribed the same characteristics as the narratee, regardless of whether or not they are true; in this way, we see Waugh's EXPLICIT DRAMATIZATION OF THE READER.

While the respective composition worlds of all three texts studied here require the reader to align themselves with the 'you' of the text, this is especially key in Bosch's *Secret Series*. The entire story stems from the fact that Bosch, unable to keep a secret, is writing this book and that the reader must not then tell anyone what they've discovered within its pages; if the real reader rejects this invitation into the book at the very beginning, the entire novel falls apart.

To combat this, Bosch introduces explicit metafictional reference to the act of reading: 'if...you insist on reading this book'. By reading that very line, the real reader is likewise fulfilling the action of 'reading this book' in the process. 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 linguistically be referring to the reader of the internal author's text, thus the real reader is aligned with the narratee and successfully brought into the composition world of the novel. This leads to the first instance of metalepsis in the text, as the external ontological boundary has been broken through upwards vertical address from the narrator in the composition world to the real reader outside the fiction.

Of course, 'you' is nothing here without 'I'. Although the identity of 'I' is kept relatively vague in the first few pages, it soon transpires that this particular storyteller is no random 'I'-narrator, but rather the internal author of the book and, as it turns out, supposedly the external one, too. We see an emergence of this in extract (5) with the metafictional reference in 'this book', as the proximally deictic demonstrative indicates the reader's theoretical proximity to 'I', and the fact that this narrator has the power to manipulate the content of the book by adding in '[their] warning'.

However, this becomes clearer as the text progresses and the narrator begins to comment on his construction of the story more explicitly, ostentatiously deciding what the reader can or cannot see on the page (for instance redacting Chapter 1 in its entirety) or announcing that he is giving his – already fictional – characters fake names so the reader cannot identify them (see Wydrzynska, 2021). Importantly, though, the composition world continually establishes Bosch himself as the internal author, showing him sat in a dark room, writing the story of 11-year-olds Cass and Max-Ernest, and offering his own authorial commentary as he does so. In the real world, the reader knows that everything about these books is fictional, from the pseudonym on the cover, to the various narrative levels within. However, we are encouraged to put our real-life awareness of its artifice aside.

Even if a particularly savvy reader should google Pseudonymous Bosch and discover the identity of the real author, Raphael Simon, Simon is still completely absent from even the extra-textual features of Bosch's books. Instead it is Bosch's own name, personality and backstory that are detailed in all of the usual author-identifying moments. For instance, in the 'about the author' section at the end of the book:

(6)

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

This is his first novel.

(Bosch, 2008: 397)

This is not too dissimilar from the ways in which Cowell and Fletcher incorporate themselves into their respective texts. Cowell is not meant to be the 'I'-narrator of *The Wizards of Once*, but she takes a level of (fictional) ownership when she introduces herself as a translator. Equally, Fletcher makes himself known as both the external and internal author in his books, although both are ultimately versions of the real Tom Fletcher.

Bosch is a complex blend between these two. Like Fletcher, he *is* the external and internal author of the book we hold in our hands, but he is still an entirely fictional being. Raphael Simon is the only version of the author who really exists; he is the real author in the real world who really sat down at his desk and wrote these books for publication. Pseudonymous Bosch doesn't exist. And yet it is a fundamental part of the *Secret Series* that Bosch is meant to be viewed as the real author – hence his name being the one on the cover and the blatant reference to the books being his creation alone. When we then encounter the 'I'-narrator within the opening pages of the book, the reader is likewise encouraged to accept that they are engaging in direct communication with the author himself as he writes the text we now read.

## **7. Conclusion**

Despite initial hesitancy from the academy, children's literature is undoubtedly worthy of academic study in its own right – and for more than just its pedagogic value, too. While it may still often be considered surprising that child-readers can (and arguably *should*) handle complex, sophisticated strategies like postmodernism and metafiction, the prevalence of such techniques in contemporary children's literature illustrates that children struggle little, if at all, when they are used.

While there may be varying levels of 'explicitness' in how these devices are utilised and displayed by the different authors examined here, all of them more than satisfy the typical features described by Waugh. Each text features an overt narrator who makes themselves known as the internal author in the composition world and ostentatiously controls what is seen on the page; a shared language event is created between 'I' and 'you'

within the composition world, effectively blurring the external boundary of the text (and sometimes internal ones too, as in the case of Cowell where the stories are narrated by a diegetic character); this results in the dramatization of the reader as they are brought into the composition world from the start of the prologue to talk directly to the internal author, who is in the process of telling us the story. That is not happening because the child-reader needs help through the reading process, as Wall and Chambers suggested. It is instead happening because the storyteller is effectively taking centre stage in the world of their creation. It is happening because these books are playfully, cleverly and sophisticatedly displaying postmodern tendencies – and they are by no means rare in doing so either.

Children's literature is rife with the kind of postmodern and metafictional strategies described in this study. David Walliams, for instance, frequently deploys INCANTATORY AND ABSURD LISTS. Lemony Snicket offers CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS OF THE STORY WITHIN THE STORY. Julia Golding exhibits EXPLICIT DRAMATIZATION OF THE READER. Chris Wooding makes excellent use of POPULAR GENRES and the TOTAL BREAKDOWN OF SPATIAL ORGANISATION. Indeed, these devices can now be considered the norm due to their prominence in mainstream children's books and child-readers cope with them just fine – metalepsis, parody, self-reflexivity and all!

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**APPENDIX A:** Patricia Waugh's list of typical postmodern features (adapted from Waugh, 1984: 21-22; see also Lewis, 1994: 24-26).

- THE OVER-OBTRUSIVE, VISIBLY INVENTING NARRATOR: when the storyteller makes themselves apparent and directly addresses the reader, often also passing comment on their own text by drawing attention to the acts of reading and narration (e.g. John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* or Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants*).
- OSTENTATIOUS TYPOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT: playing with graphological features (for instance enlarging, distorting or otherwise manipulating the print on the page) so as to foreground the constructedness of the book (e.g. Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing*).
- EXPLICIT DRAMATIZATION OF THE READER: when the reader is addressed like a character (e.g. Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*).
- CHINESE-BOX STRUCTURES: embedded stories, such as when a character tells a story within the wider narrative (consider Scheherazade in *Arabian Nights*).
- INCANTATORY AND ABSURD LISTS: over-extended or nonsensical lists undermine the illusion of reality (e.g. Donald Bartheleme's *Snow White*).
- OVER-SYSTEMATIZED OR OVERTLY ARBITRARILY ARRANGED STRUCTURAL DEVICES: as Lewis (1994: 25) says, 'the adoption of arbitrary, non-literary conventions' deliberately highlights the artifice of the text (e.g. Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*).
- TOTAL BREAKDOWN OF TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL ORGANIZATION OF NARRATIVE: the breakdown of authorial control in favour of an apparently random, even illogical structure (e.g. B. S. Johnson's *A Few Selected Sentences*).
- INFINITE REGRESS: narratives that are structured either cyclically (e.g. Julio Cortázar's *Continuity of Parks*) or that have effectively been 'stacked' beyond a certain depth of embedding (see McHale, 1987: 114-5).
- DE-HUMANIZATION OF CHARACTER, PARODIC DOUBLES, OBTRUSIVE PROPER NAMES: making characters ostentatiously more fictional than they already are further disrupts the illusion of reality (e.g. Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*).
- SELF-REFLEXIVE IMAGES: devices that call attention to themselves (for instance the acrostic in Nabokov's *The Vane Sisters*).
- CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS OF THE STORY WITHIN THE STORY: the interruption or intrusion of a different discourse into the world of the story which also passes comment on the embedded narrative it has interrupted (e.g. John Barth's *Sabbatical*).

- CONTINUOUS UNDERMINING OF SPECIFIC FICTIONAL CONVENTIONS: the deliberate and self-reflexive decision to subvert the standard or expected practices of the text (Waugh cites the ending of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as a prime example here; one could also consider the way the conventions of historical novels are subverted in Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (see McHale, 1987)).
- USE OF POPULAR GENRES: the appropriation and inclusion of language, motifs and tropes typically associated with a different genre (i.e. the use of science fiction in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*).
- EXPLICIT PARODY OF PREVIOUS TEXTS, WHETHER LITERARY OR NON-LITERARY: parody draws attention to that which has been parodied and thus emphasises a break in the usual discourse (e.g. Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* or Alan Burns' *Babel*).

**APPENDIX B:** 'Note by Cressida Cowell, Lost Language Expert'.

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

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

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

Believe the unbelievable.

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

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

*THIS was a time of MAGIC*

(Cowell, 2020: vi)

The above 'translator's note' is the only time in the entire *Wizards of Once* series that the reader has any kind of access to Cowell herself. She is present here as an 'I' figure, but one who is distinctly separate to the actual 'I'-narrator of the books (the one who narrates from the composition world and is also an unidentified diegetic character somewhere within the story). However, Cowell's role as translator of the 'I'-narrator's original story introduces another layer of narration *above* the composition level that we've become accustomed to thus far in the series, for Cowell-as-translator is ultimately deciding what words get used and how the story is presented to the reader on the page.

The translation aspect (and the anecdote about the 'Wizard books' being found in a cave) is just as fictional as the main story-world in *The Wizards of Once*, although it offers an insight into the supposed motivation and background for writing these books; Kurt Vonnegut begins *Slaughterhouse-Five* in a similar way (see Gavins, 2013 for analysis). Ultimately, it allows Cowell to suggest some form of authenticity for the story she's created. We know that everything that happens in *The Wizards of Once* is fictional: wizards, witches

and warriors are not real races of people, nor have they ever existed in Britain; there's no such thing as sprites or giants or sentient spoons. And yet by providing a fictionalised background for the story we are now reading, Cowell is able to imply some level of factuality to these events. It becomes part of the story that these characters and their adventures are a real-life segment of Britain's past and have simply been forgotten by the history books, and that the magical, fantastical elements are just as real and based in historical fact as the Romans, Tudors or Vikings.

Speaking of the Vikings, the inherently metafictional, intertextual reference here to Cowell's other well-known series, *How To Train Your Dragon*, is particularly of note. Much like *The Wizards of Once*, the main story-world of Cowell's *Dragon* series are narrated in the third-person, past tense by a seemingly omniscient narrator. They feature many of the same commonly used postmodern techniques, such as stories within stories, playfulness with typography, and – importantly – an overt 'I'-narrator at the composition level who is in control of the storytelling process. However, the 'I'-narrator of the *Dragon* series is none other than the main character, Hiccup, who is writing a 'true' memoir of his youth now that he's an adult. The truth here, of course, relies on the reader's willingness to connect the character of Hiccup with the real-life history of the Vikings, only with the addition of dragons and other mythical creatures that somehow have supposedly been forgotten from our history books.

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