

'That's great, Mr Narrator': Exploring metalepsis in the works of Tom Fletcher

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Abstract

Tom Fletcher is not only one of the UK's best-selling authors for children, he's also a master of metalepsis: the deliberate disturbing, breaking or blurring of narrative boundaries. Whether that be conversational asides from the narrator of the text to the real reader outside the fiction, an author-figure directly communicating with their own fictional characters, or the complete conflation of narrative levels so that characters, narrators and (occasionally) authors are seen to exist on the same ontological plane, metalepsis significantly increases narrative complexity by obscuring or collapsing the boundaries between reality and fiction. It is especially related to postmodernism (McHale, 1987) with typical examples of metalepsis almost exclusively cited from 'highbrow' works of literature from the likes of Pirandello, Fowles, Flaubert and so on.

Less commonly mentioned in relation to metalepsis are the works of children's literature, with popular opinion often deeming such techniques far too sophisticated for child-readers. However, as authors such as Tom Fletcher make apparent, these devices are not only prevalent in contemporary children's fiction, but are also greatly enjoyed (and capably understood) by the target readership.

This paper therefore concentrates on metaleptic transgressions in Tom Fletcher's writing, considering the distinction between rhetorical and ontological metalepsis (Ryan, 2004; Pantaleo, 2019) and the ways in which these are often deployed to engage child-readers in the fiction directly, especially regarding the prevalent use of the second-person, notably oral narration and playfulness with narrative structure. I shall illustrate how the blurring of narrative boundaries contributes to the inherently metafictional nature of Fletcher's books and, in doing so, I shall place this paper within the wider context of scholarship regarding postmodernism and metafiction for children.

Keywords: *Metalepsis, postmodernism, metafiction, children's literature, junior fiction, Tom Fletcher, child-reader, narrator-author.*

1. Introduction

First identified by Gerard Genette (1983 [1972]), metalepsis is a term used to identify transgressions between narrative boundaries. It refers to ‘any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse’ (Genette, 1983: 234-235). As such, it is commonly associated with laying bare and disrupting ontological boundaries within a text. Given this particular element, it is unsurprising that metalepsis ‘has become one of the favourite toys of postmodern culture’ (Ryan, 2004: 439). After all, postmodernist style is inherently playful, eclectic and – crucially – emphasises the breaking of boundaries by drawing explicit attention to the ontological layers and world(s) created within a text (see Coles & Hall, 2001; Hassan, 1997; Lewis, 2001; McHale, 1987; Watson, 2004).

Metalepsis goes hand-in-hand with postmodernism for this reason and, while by no means exclusive to this style of writing, it is a term that is still very much associated with postmodern fiction nonetheless. It is, by contrast, less commonly associated with children’s literature. At a superficial level, that makes perfect sense. Metalepsis – as with so many other postmodern elements – is narratologically complex and requires a degree of sophistication and experience from the reader to navigate successfully. However, metalepsis – *again* just as with so many other postmodern elements – is also rife in children’s literature. Furthermore, there is a plethora of evidence showing that child-readers are not only capable of understanding but also appear to thoroughly *enjoy* metalepsis.

Sylvia Pantaleo, for instance, has conducted numerous empirical studies with school children to investigate the prevalence of metalepsis in contemporary picture books and pupils’ own writing (see Pantaleo 2009, 2011, 2016, 2018). A particularly noteworthy study from 2019 focused on Julie Falatko’s *Snapsy the Alligator (Did Not Ask to be in This Book)* and asked students to identify whenever narrative boundaries had been breached in the text. As she explains:

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

(Pantaleo, 2019: 20)

These findings are fascinating for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the fact that these Grade 4 students (aged 9-10 years) were able to competently identify and then accurately write about metalepsis is clear evidence that children *can* cope with the kind of postmodern strategies that have traditionally been considered far too complex and sophisticated for such a target audience (Hunt, 1991; Mackey, 1990; McCallum, 1996). Moreover, the plethora of metaleptic transgressions available to identify in *Snappy the Alligator* in the first place further demonstrates just how sophisticated contemporary children's literature can be. *Snappy the Alligator* is a picture book for younger readers and yet it abounds with sophisticated postmodern strategies like metalepsis.

My own research considers similar strategies in fiction for slightly older readers (typically aged 8-12 years), but there is a clear ongoing trend showing the 'appropriation of experimental and metafictional narrative techniques into mainstream children's literature' (McCallum, 1996: 408). Indeed, this paper concentrates on the use of one such technique – metalepsis – in the works of one of Britain's most successful children's authors at the moment: Tom Fletcher.

Interestingly, Tom Fletcher is technically a so-called *celebrity* author, having risen to fame as part of the British band McFly. However, that 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 most popular children's authors in the UK and his first novel, *The Christmasaurus*, was the best-selling middle grade debut in 2016. Instead, the concept of a *celebrity* author is noteworthy here because Fletcher's prevalent use of postmodern and metafictional techniques matches, if not *rivals*, more established children's authors (my current research compares Fletcher's writing with the works of Cressida Cowell and Pseudonymous Bosch; see Wydrzynska, 2021a, 2021b). That Fletcher is so competently deploying these complex strategies in his books further illustrates how such techniques have fully entered the mainstream to the extent that even newer authors are now accepting them as the norm.

Certainly, Fletcher's books feature some of the most ostentatious uses of postmodern and metafictional devices that I personally have seen in *any* children's texts. This is particularly key in relation to metalepsis, of which I would argue Tom Fletcher is an absolute master. This paper will therefore examine Fletcher's use of metalepsis, drawing on two of his recent books as examples. From this, I shall question whether the way these transgressions are deployed pushes the limits of existing terminology. I shall therefore begin by outlining some of the traditional terms relating to metalepsis (as proposed by Ryan, 2004) before addressing how one might adapt the existing model to satisfy the discrepancies highlighted by my chosen children's texts.

2. Metalepsis

Since Genette's original definition, narratologists have devised numerous typologies of metalepsis (for example, Bell & Alber, 2012; Fludernik, 2003; Pier, 2009). For the purposes of this paper, I shall concentrate on the terms introduced by Marie-Laure Ryan (2004). She distinguishes between *rhetorical* and *ontological* metalepsis. The former is the type described by Genette where a narrator or character communicates briefly across a narrative boundary; the latter is the type cited by Brian McHale (1987) in conjunction with postmodern narratives. As Ryan explains:

Rhetorical metalepsis interrupts the representation of the current level through a voice that originates in or addresses a lower level, but without popping the top level from the stack. [...] An aside to the audience in drama would constitute a rhetorical metalepsis looking in the other direction: from the fictional world toward the real one. Rhetorical metalepsis opens a small window that allows a quick glance across levels, but the window closes after a few sentences, and the operation ends up reasserting the existence of boundaries. This temporary breach of illusion does not threaten the basic structure of the narrative universe.

(Ryan, 2004: 441)

I appreciate Ryan's window analogy here. By her definition, rhetorical metalepsis occurs when that window opens between narrative levels and the participants on either side can briefly communicate – *briefly* being the key word. As soon as the window shuts, everything continues as normal without disrupting the plot or overall narrative in any way. Crucially, the participants who interacted while the window was open still remain within their respective narrative levels; they do not lean through the window and, seemingly, continue as if the window were not even there once it has closed.

This makes sense given that ontological metalepses, on the other hand, are 'physically impossible and some are also logically impossible' (Bell & Alber, 2012: 186). After all, none of the figures affected by metaleptic transgressions – not readers, authors, narrators, or characters – can *really* swap or move about between ontological domains, 'which would involve, for example, authors physically entering their own texts, characters speaking to readers, or heterodiegetic narrators interacting with the characters to which they have no ontological association' (Bell & Alber, 2012: 169). Yet this is precisely what seems to occur in ontological metalepsis. As Ryan proceeds to explain:

Whereas rhetorical metalepsis maintains the levels of the stack distinct from each other, ontological metalepsis opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration,

or mutual contamination. These levels, needless to say, must be separated by the type of boundary that I call ontological: a switch between two radically distinct worlds, such as 'the real' and 'the imaginary', or the world of 'normal' (or lucid) mental activity from the worlds of dream [or] hallucination. [...] In a narrative work, ontological levels will become entangled when an existent belongs to two or more levels at the same time, or when an existent migrates from one level to the next, causing two separate environments to blend.

[...]

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

(Ryan, 2004: 442)

Here Ryan swaps her window analogy with that of an internal tissue growth. While not the most pleasant imagery, this distinction can be visually represented as such:

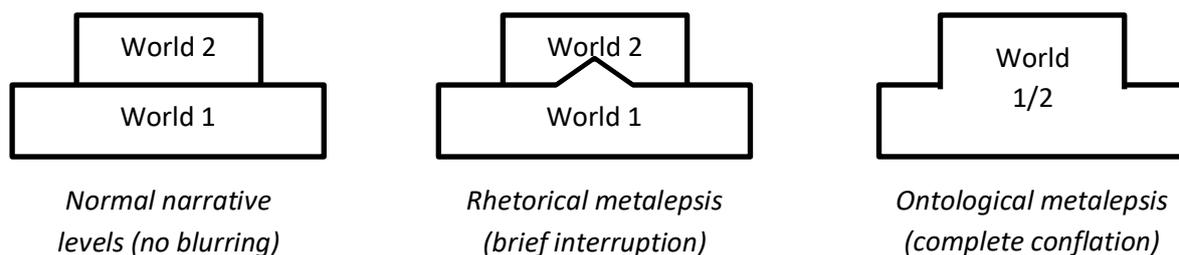


Figure 1: Metaleptic transgressions across boundaries in three narrative situations (adapted from Ryan, 2004: 441-442).

As Figure 1 shows, the 'normal' version keeps all involved worlds completely separate, with no blurring of the narrative boundaries that exist between them. Rhetorical metalepsis allows for small, temporary intrusions from one world to the other but still keeps the overall ontological boundaries between those worlds in place; as Ryan says, the brief interruption may even *reinforce* participants' awareness of those very boundaries. Ontological metalepsis, on the other hand, effectively removes those boundaries altogether and creates a blended world that combines elements from both worlds, such as the people, language, tense and so on.

A prime example of ontological metalepsis is the moment in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* when the narrator – a figure assumed by many to be a version of the real life Fowles (Lambrou, 2021) – joins his fictional character Charles in a train carriage at the diegetic level of the story. This completely conflates the previously established narrative level (world 1) with the main story level (world 2) and thus, when the two begin communicating directly, they subsequently share a space that constitutes both worlds (1/2 as Figure 1 shows). Had Fowles' narrator simply spoken down to Charles at the diegetic level but without making that full ontological jump himself, then it would instead be a case of descending rhetorical metalepsis, following Ryan's distinction.

Overall, I find this useful terminology and will use it to shape my analysis here. The primary metaleptic transgressions used in Fletcher's writing are his frequent narratorial asides to the reader (*ascending* metalepsis from the world of the text upwards to the real world) or to diegetic characters (*descending* metalepsis from the level of narrative discourse to the diegetic story level). Following Ryan's definitions, these would constitute rhetorical metaleptic transgressions as they open that small metaphorical window between narrative boundaries to allow for direct communication, but no participants make a full ontological jump to a different narrative level. Furthermore, it was precisely these kinds of transgressions that were most commonly identified by the students in Pantaleo's (2019) study of *Snappy the Alligator*. Perhaps this suggests that rhetorical metalepsis is an easier or more accessible form for child-readers to cope with, presumably because it involves fewer complete ontological shifts and the overarching narrative boundaries remain in place throughout.

Nevertheless, as this paper will demonstrate, there are moments when Fletcher's use of metalepsis pushes the boundaries of Ryan's terminology or, rather, proves that is not always easy to separate metalepsis into such clean cut *either/or* categories. For this reason, I shall use Ryan's classifications as the base for my analysis, but ultimately will suggest a possible modification that better suits the issues discussed in the next section of this study.

3. Analysis

I shall be considering extracts from two of Tom Fletcher's novels in this analysis. Both are best-selling middle grade books, therein signifying at least a commercial success with the target readership. One, *The Christmasaurus and the Winter Witch* (2019), is the sequel to Fletcher's debut novel and revisits the character of William Trundle on his magical adventures with Santa's festive dinosaur, the titular Christmasaurus. The second is a standalone book called *The Creakers* (2018) which centres on Lucy

Dungston, a child who ventures into the scary world underneath her bed when all the adults disappear from her hometown.

Importantly, all of Fletcher's books follow a similar narratological structure. They begin with an opening prologue that establishes a composition world (Gavins, 2013) in which an overt, chatty 'I'-narrator is seen in the very visible role of telling the story to 'you'. In each book it then quickly becomes clear that that 'I'-narrator is meant to be a (fictional) version of Fletcher himself in the process of writing the book as we read it (see Wydrzynska, 2021b). This narrative level, in which 'I' and 'you' communicate directly, is told in the present tense; by contrast, the main story level (following William and Lucy, respectively) triggers a switch to third-person narration in the past tense. These linguistic cues make it easy for child-readers to navigate between different narrative levels although, as the switches back and forth become more frequent, Fletcher does begin to introduce additional graphological clues to assist. Initially, however, these moments of metaleptic address are much more blended, as can be seen in the following extract from *The Christmasaurus and the Winter Witch*:

(1)

Have you ever made a wish?

Of course you have! Silly me.

OK, but have you ever *seen* a wish?

No, I didn't think so!

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

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

Well, I'm glad you asked.

This is a wish: [drawing of a dandelion-shaped item]

(Fletcher, 2019: 63)

The chatty, oral tone established here is characteristic of Fletcher's texts and signifies that we are positioned ontologically at the composition level of the book. The use of interrogatives followed immediately by an assumed answer that effectively puts words into the reader's mouth is typical of this composition level as it builds the illusion of spontaneous dialogue between two interlocutors,

despite neither actually being able to communicate directly or leave their respective narrative spheres. Extract (1) is therefore a clear example of ascending rhetorical metalepsis from the narrator at the composition level to the real reader outside the fiction. The reader, of course, is encouraged to 'project [themselves] into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of *you*' (McHale, 1987: 224) and aligns themselves with the narratee, thus solidifying this metaleptic transgression as the reader feels that they are being addressed by the narrator directly.

Still, the narrative boundaries between the reader in the real world and the 'I'-narrator within the text are simultaneously reinforced through explicit metanarrative reference to the storytelling process itself. For instance, 'I' – when putting words into the real reader's head – refers to himself as 'Mr Narrator', therein drawing attention to the role of the narrator in the storytelling process and highlighting his authorial control over the story. This is a common element in this kind of contemporary junior fiction, where a very chatty, overt 'I'-narrator exists at a composition level and frequently asks plot-related questions to the child-reader. Recent UK Children's Laureate, Cressida Cowell, for example, uses a similar technique to introduce necessary information and description *on behalf* of the reader: 'I don't know if you have ever seen a sprite, so I'd better describe these ones to you' (Cowell, 2017: 25). That Fletcher is replicating this technique in his own writing and seemingly placing a *request* for descriptive information – which logically would follow imminently regardless – onto the reader's shoulders further illustrates the prevalence of this narrative style and the use of rhetorical metalepsis in contemporary children's literature. By drawing attention to the role of the narrator within the storytelling process, Fletcher strengthens the inherent metafictional qualities of his books by highlighting the construction of the text itself. After all, metafiction 'self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality' (Waugh, 1984: 2).

That same constructedness is also displayed through the inclusion of a drawing. For the purposes of Fletcher's novel, a wish apparently looks like an upside down dandelion, with wings attached at the base and an overall magical sparkle. No linguistic description is given for what a wish looks like so the illustration on the page is the only thing readers can draw from when building a mental image. The fact that the narrator is evidently aware of this to the extent that he deliberately points our attention towards the drawing – introduced via the proximally deictic, 'This is a wish' – not only shows the construction of the physical book and the authorial control that the visibly inventing narrator (Waugh, 1984) has over it, but it also triggers another metaleptic transgression.

The narrator has chosen to include a physical image at the composition level within the text, knowing that it will be viewed and accessed by the real reader in the real world. Combining this with

the proximal deictic reference, however, implies that the reader is meant to be fictionally sharing the same space as the narrator (through alignment with the 'you'-narratee) and thus it could be argued that there is a more significant blurring of the narrative boundaries separating the real world and composition level at this point. Of course, even though the reader is able to access the image at the composition level, logically none of the respective participants ever leave their existing ontological level and so, following Ryan's definition, this would still be an example of rhetorical metalepsis.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of self-reflexive images within the text combined with the implication of a shared communicative space through proximal deixis perhaps moves this particular transgression a step away from being *purely* rhetorical. Furthermore, this is not the only occasion that narrative boundaries are crossed in this way. A similar effect occurs just a few pages earlier in *The Christmasaurus and the Winter Witch* when Fletcher comments:

(2)

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

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

Here you go: [drawing of a candy cane]

OK, this is just a drawing, so it's probably best you don't eat it – but its magic is no less powerful.

(2019: 49-50)

As with (1), this extract sees the 'I'-narrator deliberately pointing the reader's attention towards a 2D drawing on the page. This time, however, he acknowledges that it is 'just a drawing', highlighting the artifice and construction of the image, albeit while simultaneously claiming that it is still a magical item that is presumably based on something real (at least within the context of the story). When Fletcher advises us not to eat the hand-drawn candy cane, there is a clear metaleptic transgression that goes further than just the usual rhetorical metaleptic dialogue between the narrator and reader. Not only does it reinforce the multiple narrative levels between the real world and the text, it also emphasises the *physical* image that exists only on the page of the *physical* book held in the hands of the real reader.

What is noteworthy here is that this 'Cosmos-Converting Candy Cane' has apparently been given to Tom Fletcher (the narrator) by Santa (a diegetic character in the book, albeit one that triggers the reader's own schematic knowledge of Father Christmas). The candy cane is thus a story-level item that has been given to the narrator by a diegetic character, and the narrator at the composition level is now acting as an intermediary to pass the item to the reader outside the text. Of course, that final step is a logical impossibility and so the candy cane is replaced with a drawing instead, something that the narrator acknowledges through proximal deictic reference as he points the illustration out to the reader.

Overall, this is a much starker transgression than the image of the wish in extract (1). While the previous drawing was provided to help the reader imagine what a key story element looked like, extract (2) relies on a purely fictional element reaching out from the diegesis towards the reader in the real world. Following Ryan's classification, it still does not fully disrupt the narrative and the metaleptic transgression in which the candy cane appears is brief, and thus it would likely be considered rhetorical in nature. If anything, having the drawing on the page instead of the real candy cane further reminds the reader of the logical narrative boundaries within the text.

However, there is something about it that *feels* more ontological. By no means is this a full ontological conflation like we see in Fowles, in which the narrator and character levels are blurred beyond distinction, but it still feels like another step away from being a purely rhetorical metaleptic transgression as Ryan defines it. For this reason, I should like to propose a slight amendment to Ryan's initial terminology. The distinction between rhetorical and ontological metalepsis is still crucial and, I will say, incredibly helpful as an easy way to identify superficial transgressions between narrative levels. My personal preference would be to consider these two terms less of an *either/or* and instead propose that they exist as opposite ends of a sliding scale or cline.

If such transgressions were considered as a spectrum, for instance, then extract (2) could sit further towards the ontological end of the scale than extract (1), while both remaining on the dominant rhetorical side following Ryan's terminology. This would also help to classify *ongoing* metaleptic transgressions, such as that displayed in another of Fletcher's texts: *The Creakers* (2018).

In *The Christmasaurus and the Winter Witch*, there is a prominent composition level in which an 'I'-narrator is seen visibly telling (and even *inventing*) the story as it goes; it is narrated in the first-person using the simple present, and that is where 'I' speaks directly to 'you'. The majority of the novel nevertheless focuses on the diegetic level following William Trundle and his adventures with Santa (which is told in the third-person and the past tense) with the composition level typically

intruding either parenthetically or briefly at the start of chapters to set up key information. *The Creakers* operates in a similar way regarding the main story of Lucy Dungston (third-person, past tense narrative), but chapters are regularly divided by switches to the composition level in which the narrator speaks directly to the reader about how the novel is progressing as *he* writes it and as *we* read it in real time. For instance:

(3)

How are you getting on? Sorry I've not spoken to you for a while – I've been busy writing this story, and I guessed you'd be busy reading it. It's all getting a bit topsy-turvy, isn't it? All this upside down, backwards stuff! In fact, if you turn this book upside down and read this page backwards, it tells a nice story about fluffy kittens.

[written upside down at the bottom of the page]

... Only joking. Just wanted to see if you'd turn the book upside down.

(Fletcher, 2018: 229)

As before, (3) is cemented within the composition level, satisfying all the linguistic cues in terms of tense, person and style. Unlike (1) and (2), this extract is also graphologically distinct from the main story level as all of these narratorial interludes in *The Creakers* are printed in italics on an entirely new page, with the background also coloured grey (as opposed to the plain white page of the main fiction). This primarily allows for an easy world-switch that requires very little effort on the part of child-readers as it is both linguistically and visually signposted that we are changing narrative levels. In the case of (3), of course, we are jumping from the diegetic level back up to the composition level, whereupon there is blatant ascending rhetorical metalepsis from the narrator to the reader.

Firstly, the narrator addresses the reader directly with the opening interrogative, 'How are you getting on?' Although this doesn't require – or even give space for – a response, it establishes the shared communicative setting between the real reader and narrator. Rather than putting words into the reader's mouth as we have seen before, instead Fletcher apologises for his prolonged absence. This refers specifically to a lack of these conversational interludes between chapters; logically he has *always* been present as the narrator telling the story we're reading but, as he admits himself in the next clause, 'I've been busy writing this story, and I guessed you'd be busy reading it.'

This shows a meta-awareness of the storytelling process, acknowledging the respective teller and receptor roles as we progress through the novel. Furthermore, by laying claim to the writing process, it is again indicated that the narrator is a (fictional) version of the real-life Tom Fletcher, who is of course the published name on the front cover of the novel and who, logically, *is* the one writing the book. Despite the implication that the reader is following Fletcher's writing process in real time and then communicating simultaneously and spontaneously via the composition level in the simple present, we of course know that all of these chatty moments already exist and that the composition level is temporally located some time prior to the publication of the novel. The ascending rhetorical metalepsis, however, encourages the reader to put this knowledge aside and engage with the narrator as if communicating directly.

This also allows for moments of playful comedy such as we see at the end of (3). Fletcher jokingly suggests that 'if you turn this book upside down and read this page backwards, it tells a nice story about fluffy kittens.' Firstly, the continued proximal deictic references to 'this book' and 'this page' signify the supposed closeness between the narrator and reader, further cementing the illusion of a shared conversation space at the composition level of the text. Although implausible, this makes us feel that we are being told the story at the same time as it is being written, therein giving the overt 'I'-narrator the power to play around with the text that we are engaging with on the page.

Furthermore, the playful nature of this is perfectly captured when it is jokingly suggested that reading the page backwards will reveal 'a *nice* story about fluffy kittens' rather than the darker, scarier story that the reader will have to engage with should they carry on as normal. This inverts the usual cultural reference to 'backmasking': 'the encoding of audio materials (such as words conveying a secret message) on a recording in such a way that they can only be heard and understood when the recording is played backwards' (Merriam-Webster.com, n.d.). Within the popular psyche, backmasking is commonly associated with Christian groups claiming that prominent rock artists were using the technique to hide Satanic messages in their songs – a claim that remains unsurprisingly unfounded. For Fletcher to suggest that reading this particular text upside down and backwards in order to have a *nicer* experience not only conveys how potentially unpleasant the existing story is should we continue reading, it also jokingly turns the usual cultural reference on its head (literally in this case).

Although it is the reader's choice to turn the book upside down – albeit likely without really expecting it to reveal a story about fluffy kittens – the idea is placed in their mind solely by the narrator. When one does, inevitably, turn the book around it is revealed to be a practical joke or

'gotcha' on the part of the narrator: 'Only joking. Just wanted to see if you'd turn the book upside down.' In some ways this might make the reader feel gullible, after all how could we fall for such a silly trick? However, it also reveals a lot about the relationship that has been established between the reader and narrator at this point in the book. We clearly feel close enough to the narrator – and trust him equally – so that when he makes a comment about something relating to 'this page' we expect him to follow through on it, which he does. It also signifies an element of playful interactivity where the real reader must engage with the physical text in some way beyond just reading the written words on the page – especially when we then witness Fletcher poking fun at us, as if he has literally just seen us turn the book upside down.

By Ryan's terminology, this is ascending rhetorical metalepsis as it consists of the narrator talking directly to the reader again. However, the explicit dramatization of the reader (Waugh, 1984) in the real world makes this interaction move away from being purely rhetorical in nature. By getting the real reader to turn the book upside down, the narrator within the text has been able to force the reader's hand in the real world – admittedly through a practical joke to test our gullibility. This implies an added level of authorial control that transcends the external boundary of the fiction and pushes the real reader to move and engage with the physical book we hold in our hands. Thus, as before, while this technically is rhetorical metalepsis as it is a brief interlude and doesn't fully disrupt the text's narrative boundaries or trigger a full ontological swap, it still feels like something more because there is a fictional element within the text that is reaching (at least contextually) beyond the novel's limits.

That particular sense of *more* is prevalent throughout *The Creakers*. I must say, Fletcher is evidently a metalepsis enthusiast and uses a variety of transgressions readily throughout his novels, particularly with his ever-present, chatty, *skaz* narration (Banfield, 2005) at the composition level, as I have illustrated so far. All three extracts used above have been examples of *ascending* metalepsis in which the narrator – or some element within the fiction – extends upwards or outwards to the reader in the (hierarchically superior) real world. However, in addition to the frequent interludes from the composition level to the reader between chapters in *The Creakers*, it is in this novel that Fletcher also begins experimenting more and first addresses his own fictional characters through *descending* metalepsis, too. The following extract, for example, sees Fletcher communicating with his own protagonist:

(4)

(a) *I don't fancy going down there!* she thought.

(b) *Good idea, Lucy!* (c) *(Although what Lucy didn't know was that in a few chapters she would be going much deeper into the Woleb.)*

(d) *What?* thought Lucy.

(e) *OH, NOTHING! Carry on – you were about to escape!*

(f) *Oh right!* thought Lucy.

(Fletcher, 2018: 107)

I have marked the lines here for ease of reference. The above extract begins firmly in the main story-world with reference to Lucy, the protagonist, in the third-person and past tense: 'she thought'. The opening line (a) shows her direct thought, typographically highlighted in italics alongside the reporting clause. However, while (b) is presented in exactly the same way, this is instead connected to the narrator who is intruding upon the diegesis from the composition level as he speaks somewhat telepathically to Lucy. Perhaps we might even consider (b) as free direct *speech* given that it relates more to what the narrator is *saying* to Lucy than what he himself is thinking. Indeed, (c) offers a better insight into the narrator's present thought process through a parenthetical aside to the reader – suddenly triggering *ascending* rhetorical metalepsis – that metafictionally draws attention to the construction of the novel by talking about what will happen to Lucy 'in a few chapters'.

The brackets around (c) indicate that this is for the reader's attention only, but Lucy overhears it nonetheless and, in (d), queries what the narrator has just said. Panicking slightly, the narrator responds in all capitals in (e) and instructs Lucy to get on with her escape, as if the outcome isn't already known by him. After all, not only is the narrator already confessing what's going to happen in a few chapters, but the real reader is also holding the physical book and so knows exactly how far into the story we are at this point. As illogical as this supposedly simultaneous conversation is, the illusion must remain that Lucy has free will over her actions at the diegetic level, and so she accepts the narrator's instruction and carries on with her adventure.

Again, by Ryan's definition, these various transgressions are examples of rhetorical metalepsis because each of the participants involved remain in their respective narrative levels without ever fully conflating the boundaries between them. However, there is one element that

potentially takes this a step further than traditional rhetorical metalepsis: the narrator is responding to Lucy's *thoughts*, and vice versa.

When the narrator responds to Lucy in (b), he does so to provide validation for something she thought internally in (a). Of course, this raises questions about the omniscience of this particular narrator and how he is able to access his characters' inner thoughts and feelings anyway. Accepting a degree of authorial control goes some way to explaining that aspect, but it fails to clarify entirely how Lucy – a diegetic character – is able to hear the narrator's ascending metaleptic address to the reader, something which is displayed parenthetically and so is graphologically entirely separate from the discourse involving Lucy. Furthermore, this kind of telepathic conversation between the narrator and Lucy happens frequently throughout *The Creakers* – albeit not as often as the prevalent ascending metalepsis to the reader between chapters, such as in extract (3) – and so the ongoing dominance of the composition level perhaps feeds into this overall sense that this is *more* than just rhetorical.

It is true that none of the extracts examined here have been complete ontological transgressions, particularly following the definitions outlined by Ryan. The introduction of the candy cane in extract (2) as a fictional item that is being passed to the real reader by the narrator perhaps comes the closest to creating a combined world and conflating the narrative levels as it (fictionally) reaches out of the text, but the interaction passes quickly and Ryan's metaphorical window soon shuts. By the same logic, the omnipresence of the composition level in *The Creakers* creates such frequent metaleptic transgressions between the narrator and the reader (and the diegetic level of characters, too) that, while technically rhetorical in nature, the reader is never able to escape the knowledge that the narrator is right there and waiting to speak to them again. While each participant remains firmly in their own narrative sphere, I am tempted to argue that the prevalence of the composition level creates an ongoing shared language space – at least within the context of the novel – that essentially serves as a combined world between the reader and narrator, in which the diegesis is then embedded.

With this in mind, perhaps Ryan's window analogy needs to be replaced with a curtain. When a rhetorical metaleptic transgression occurs, that curtain is pulled back and briefly removes the tangible boundary between narrative levels. The communication between participants proceeds as Ryan suggests – without anyone physically crossing that ontological boundary – and eventually the curtain is shut again. A curtain, however, is less substantial than a window: a sudden breeze might knock it astray, opening a chink that reveals the other side; noise might creep through the material; it can be pulled open at any moment and with more speed, surprise and (perhaps) panache

than opening a window. Importantly, a curtain better reflects the flimsy nature of a narrative boundary that has already been crossed. If the narrator has spoken to the reader once, it's likely that it will happen again and the reader waits with bated breath for that direct communication to start once more.

This is clear in Fletcher's novels where there is either a consistent meta-awareness of diegetic elements being able to reach out to the reader in the real world or, as in *The Creakers*, such a prevalent composition level that it feels as if the main story-world is embedded within a (fictional) shared communicative space. The narrator keeps pulling back the curtain between narrative levels and revealing himself as the true mastermind and creator as the story progresses. Even when the curtain is drawn, the reader is aware of both the narrator *and* the curtain's presence, thus these metalepses cannot be purely rhetorical in nature as it is more than a '*temporary breach of illusion*' (Ryan, 2004: 441; emphasis added) and ultimately does '[cause] two separate environments to blend' (Ryan, 2004: 442) even if the basic structure of the overarching narrative universe remains intact.

4. Conclusion

From the examples analysed here, it is difficult to consider Ryan's *rhetorical* and *ontological* categories of metalepsis as a clear cut *either/or* situation. Fletcher's texts illustrate that even when a transgression is technically rhetorical in nature, it can still feel like something *more*. This suggests that treating Ryan's terms as opposite ends of a sliding scale might be a better way to approach categorising metalepsis as one could position a particular transgression somewhere within the two main spheres, but closer to one than the other. Rather than being an *either/or* situation, a rhetorical transgression could be a few steps towards the ontological end of the scale, for example.

Alternatively, slightly adapting the core facet of what constitutes rhetorical metalepsis – that is, swapping Ryan's metaphorical window for a more insubstantial curtain – would perhaps achieve a similar result. It should be noted that while a rhetorical transgression may be brief in nature and does not fully disrupt narrative boundaries, its very existence makes the reader aware of the ongoing possibility of metalepsis. Rather than shutting a window and then continuing as normal, participants on either side of that narrative boundary are aware of what might be happening through the glass and often, as can be seen in Fletcher's writing, overhear and (fictionally) engage with each other, too. Metalepsis opens up a passage between narrative levels and it is over simplistic to pretend that this disappears completely even when that metaphorical window has been

closed. A curtain, to my mind, better reflects participants' ongoing awareness of what could be happening on the other side, and also creates a more flexible boundary between them.

Of course, that it is a selection of *children's* books that should be used to showcase this distinction is noteworthy. Despite the prevalence of sophisticated postmodern and metafictional strategies in contemporary children's literature, there is still an element of surprise when adults, in particular, realise just what child-readers are capable of understanding and enjoying. While scholars like Pantaleo have used empirical evidence to demonstrate students' capabilities in relation to handling complex narratological devices like metalepsis, the fact that such techniques are now mainstream enough to be confidently deployed in newer, *celebrity* fiction like that of Tom Fletcher is fascinating. His commercial success as an author further indicates child-readers' competency with and appreciation for these devices.

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