

From Children's Literature to Co-Viewing Media: How Adaptations Reveal Differences in Adult/Child Audiences

Rebecca Rowe
University of Connecticut

The idea that children, teens, and adults would want or need different reading and viewing material is a relatively new idea, one that was solidified and commercialized in the twentieth century. Now, in the twenty-first century, those distinctions are starting to break down, leading people of all ages to read and watch across the neatly established boundaries. Scholars of literature, film, television, and media have all studied this phenomenon, leading to terms like literary studies' crossover fiction (Beckett), television studies' co-viewing, and media studies' transgenerational media (Johnson). All of these terms point to situations when readers and viewers, especially adults, do not follow the carefully crafted rules regarding age. While scholars such as Sandra Beckett and Derek Johnson have traced how the literature and media industries aim for intergenerational audiences and how those audiences, in turn, read across the grain, more scholarly analysis should look at how creators craft their stories to fit into these new trends. I posit that one of the most productive ways to do this analysis is by studying how creators adapt children's literature to film and television.

When children's literature is adapted to screens both big and small, the relationships between the child and adult characters change drastically. I argue that this adaptation process reveals differences in classic children's literature designed to uphold age boundaries and today's more intergenerational media: the former often works to empower the child reader by dismissing or belittling the adult while the latter often attempts to capture a co-viewing audience by building intergenerational relationships.

The project of many children's literature texts is seemingly to empower its child readers by ridiculing adults as a form of the carnivalesque. In carnivalesque literature, normal hierarchies are intentionally turned upside down as people of all stations intermingle and

those highest on the hierarchy are openly ridiculed. John Stephens argues that there has been a rise in such carnivalesque children's literature since the 1960s, which "expresses opposition to authoritarianism and seriousness...recogniz[ing] that adult authority *is* often arbitrary, that its exercise is often arbitrary, and that it is often merely a veneer covering radical incompetence" (121, 156). Carnivalesque children's literature in this vein ridicules adults by pointing to and exaggerating their flaws and gives children power by removing any adult barriers in texts. Adults may be absent, antagonistic, or useless, leaving only children to be heroic, empowering both the child character and the child reader through them. Roald Dahl, with his humorously cruel parents who always get their comeuppance at the hands of their stupendous children, writes in this vein, as does writers such as Lemony Snicket and, to some degree, J.K. Rowling. Aiming the story directly to children affects the portrayal of both children *and* adults within this literature by painting them as almost wholly different creatures, so different that they are unable to maintain any sort of healthy relationship.

While carnivalesque children's literature thus explicitly builds off of age divisions, children's media is much more openly understood as co-viewing, which encourages a different relationship between adults and children. Co-viewing is designed to be relational, to be enjoyed by multiple generations simultaneously and then passed down, moving through the generations. It is marketed to the connection between children and adults and their desire to view *together*, as a way to communicate between the generations. Adaptations of carnivalesque children's literature suggest that the most efficient way to draw in this particular kind of co-viewing audience might be to emulate the relationships you wish to form. In other words, if creators want children and adults to bond over their media, one way to encourage such a bond is to create bonds between adult and child characters on screen. When adaptations are based on books that ridicule adults to such a degree that children cannot form relationships with them, adaptors must find another way to make those relationships. Some adaptations, such as *Jumanji* (1995), simply create new adults with whom the child characters can bond. Other adaptations, such as Netflix's *Lemony Snicket's A*

Series of Unfortunate Events (2017-2019), more subtly refocus parts of the story so that we can see intergenerational bonds that the child characters do not always see, allowing the viewer to reevaluate the relationships without changing the story. The primary project of co-viewing media is to build intergenerational relationships in order to sustain viewing, so the media products build just such relationships.

Carnavalesque children's literature and co-viewing intergenerational media strive to achieve different projects, and both do so effectively, which is best seen when studying how one story adapts from one project to the other. Both of these projects have value in showing children how they fit into the wider world: Texts that privilege child perspectives, even to the denigration of adults, are valuable because they can empower children. On the other hand, texts that show how children and adults find connection can help both children and adults create better relationships. What it means to be a child or adult is so central to how people understand themselves, especially now as we see conceptions of childhood and adulthood change. Adaptations of children's literature can thus illuminate how constructions of children, adults, and their intergenerational relationships change from source to adaptation.

Works Cited

Beckett, Sandra. *Crossover Fiction: Global and Historical Perspectives*. Routledge, 2010.

Johnson, Derek. *Transgenerational Media: Adults, Children, and the Reproduction of Culture*.

U of Michigan P, 2019.

Stephens, John. *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*. Longman, 1992.