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A Neverending Reading: Metalepsis, the Act of Reading, and Adolescent Growth in Contemporary Young Adult Fantasy

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Abstract

Metalepsis the transgression of ontological boundaries between narrative levels has attracted considerable scholarly attention, yet its particular uses within Young Adult (YA) fantasy fiction remain largely unexamined. This article argues that when metalepsis is realised through the diegetic act of reading, it enables YA novels to do something conventional literary criticism has long asserted but rarely demonstrated: to show, in the structure of the narrative itself, how reading assists adolescent growth. Working across three canonical YA fantasies Michael Ende's The Neverending Story (1983), Cornelia Funke's Inkheart (2003), and John Connolly's The Book of Lost Things (2006) and drawing on Klimek's tripartite distinction between descending, ascending, and complex metalepsis, the article develops a model in which the metaleptic transgression of narrative boundaries serves as a structural externalisation of the adolescent protagonist's internal developmental process. Each novel's child protagonist enters the act of reading carrying a specific unresolved confusion concerning identity, power, and emotional loss respectively and the metaleptic mechanism literalises that confusion within an alternative diegetic world, compelling the protagonist to confront and work through it. A further argument concerns the recursive, Möbius-strip structure shared across all three metaleptic forms: this structure mirrors adolescence as a developmental condition transitional, boundary-dissolving, and constitutively unfinished. Taken together, the three analyses suggest that metalepsis, reading, and growing up are not simply thematically aligned in these texts but structurally unified, and that this unity gives narrative form to what reader-response theory has long claimed but left largely abstract.

Keywords:

Metalepsis; narrative theory; Young Adult fiction; adolescent development; reader-response; diegetic levels; Möbius-strip narrative; fantasy fiction.

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted within children's literature scholarship and reading education that fiction assists children in growing up. From Appleyard's (1994) account of how readers develop their relationship with literature across the lifespan to Spufford's (2002) memoir of the formative power of childhood reading, the claim appears across very different kinds of writing: engaging with fiction is not merely recreational but developmental. Yet the mechanism by which this happens remains, in most accounts, frustratingly vague. How exactly does reading translate into growth? Through what pathway does a child's engagement with a fictional world alter their orientation towards the real one?

This article proposes that a group of contemporary YA fantasies has found a structural answer to that question. By deploying metalepsis the narrative technique by which ontological boundaries between diegetic levels are violated or collapsed (Genette, 1980) these novels do not merely assert the growth-through-reading thesis; they enact it. The transgression of narrative levels, realised through the diegetic protagonist's act of reading, makes visible in narrative structure a process that in lived experience is entirely invisible: the inward, individually processed work of the reader's developing self.

Metalepsis, etymologically a "grabbing gesture that reaches across levels and ignores boundaries" (Ryan, 2004, p. 441), has attracted considerable scholarly attention since Genette's (1980) foundational account. More recently, the device has been taken up in studies of film, comics, gaming, and digital media (Wolf et al., 2009, 2011), and its formal description has been progressively extended (Klimek, 2011; Bell & Alber, 2012). Unnatural narratology has revisited it as a challenge to readers' cognitive defaults about how stories work (Alber, 2016). Children's and YA literature, however, has remained largely on the margins of this conversation somewhat surprisingly, given that the genre has generated some of the most inventive deployments of the device in contemporary fiction.

This study addresses that gap by reading three YA fantasies through Klimek's (2011) account of metaleptic forms. In Ende's *The Neverending Story* (1983), descending metalepsis externalises an adolescent's identity confusion and allows him to inhabit an idealised self before returning to form a stable one. In Funke's *Inkheart* (2003), ascending metalepsis dismantles adult-centred power structures and enables the child protagonist to claim her voice as a reader. In Connolly's *The Book of Lost Things* (2006), complex metalepsis collapses the boundary between escapist reading and emotional confrontation, forcing the protagonist to face his grief rather than flee it.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Metalepsis: Definitions and Typology

Genette (1980) defined narrative metalepsis as any transgression between ontological levels of a narrative specifically, any violation of what he termed the "shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells" (p. 236). Building on Prince's (1988) articulation of diegetic levels, Genette distinguished three levels: the extradiegetic level (where narrating takes place), the diegetic or intradiegetic level (where events are told and characters act), and the metadiegetic or hypodiegetic level (an embedded narrative within the primary narrative). Metalepsis occurs when characters or narrators cross between these levels, producing what McHale (1987) called a "violation of ontological boundaries."

Later scholarship has complicated and extended this account. Ryan (2004) took the concept into digital and interactive narrative, reading metalepsis as a "grabbing gesture" that makes manifest the normally tacit relationship between narrative levels. Malina (2002) argued that many metalepses are better described as transgressions between hierarchically ordered levels or between outer and inner narrative frames, rather than between fully parallel universes a distinction that matters here, since the three novels deploy structurally different configurations (embedded, hierarchical, and parallel) that correspond to different forms of developmental challenge.

Klimek's (2011) three-part account of metalepsis is the most directly useful for this study. In *descending metalepsis*, characters from the diegetic world enter the hypodiegetic (embedded) world; the protagonist "becomes a hypodiegetic hero and interacts with the hypodiegetic characters within the embedded story" (Chen, 2008, p. 399), with the main setting relocated to the Bookworld. In *ascending metalepsis*, the reverse occurs: hypodiegetic characters enter the diegetic world, disrupting it from below. In *complex metalepsis*, the two movements are combined in a recursive pattern, producing what Wolf (1993) termed a "Möbius strip story" a paradoxical short circuit between levels in which the distinction between the story and the telling of the story progressively breaks down.

More recent work has deepened this picture. Alber (2016) reads metalepsis within unnatural narratology, examining how cognitively impossible narrative structures challenge readers' default frames for comprehension. Caracciolo (2014) connects metalepsis to embodied cognition, arguing that boundary-crossing in narrative produces distinctive experiential effects that cannot be reduced to propositional content. Both lines of argument support a claim this article develops: that metalepsis is not merely a structural curiosity but a device with particular uses in fiction addressed to developing readers.

2.2 Metalepsis and the Act of Reading

What distinguishes the three novels examined here is that their metalepses are not triggered by magic, fate, or authorial intervention: they are triggered by reading. This matters because, as Appleyard (1994) argued, reading is itself a doubled activity it involves the simultaneous operation of the experiencing self (who enters into the fictional world) and the judging self (who reflects on that experience from the outside). That double structure is precisely the structure of metalepsis: the protagonist who crosses narrative levels is always simultaneously inside the story and outside it, both the character who descends and the diegetic self who will return. By making reading the mechanism of metaleptic transgression, these novels render visible on the narrative surface a process that is normally hidden inside the act of reading.

Spufford (2002) and Waller (2009) have both argued that reading works as a tool of adolescent growth because it offers a space in which the self can be tested and revised without the stakes of real-world action. Metalepsis takes this claim literally: the protagonist does not imaginatively inhabit another world but enters it, acts within it, and returns changed. What the abstract growth-through-reading thesis leaves undemonstrated the mechanism by which imaginative engagement becomes developmental change is here made concrete in narrative structure.

2.3 Adolescent Development and YA Fiction

The three novels draw on distinct but related frameworks from adolescent psychology. Erikson's (1963) account of identity formation describes adolescence as the stage at which the individual must work through *role confusion* the inability to commit to a stable sense of self through a sustained process of exploration. Trites (2000) has shown how power the adolescent's negotiation with the institutions and adults that shape their world is the central preoccupation of YA fiction, with growth understood as an achieved, if always unstable, accommodation to those structures. Kübler-Ross's (1969) five-stage model of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), though developed in an adult context, has found wide application in

children's literature scholarship as a way of tracing how fiction helps young readers process loss.

More recently, Beauvais (2015) has offered a rich account of the 'mighty child' in children's literature a figure whose power is always negotiated against adult structures of time and authority that bears directly on the reading of Meggie in *Inkheart*. Trites (2014) has extended her earlier work through cognitive metaphor theory, showing how conceptual metaphors of growth, power, and identity operate in adolescent fiction at levels that go well beyond surface theme. These frameworks underpin the close readings in Section 3.

2.4 The Central Analytical Model

Across the three novels, metalepsis operates according to a consistent three-stage pattern:

Stage 1 — Life Confusion: the adolescent protagonist carries an unresolved developmental challenge (identity confusion, disempowerment, or emotional paralysis) into the act of reading.

Stage 2 — Metaleptic Externalisation: the act of reading triggers a metaleptic transgression that projects the protagonist's internal confusion into an alternative world — externalised as characters, settings, and situations that give it narrative form.

Stage 3 — Metaleptic Return: the protagonist navigates and resolves the externalised confusion within the Bookworld; the metaleptic return marks the resolution of the developmental challenge. The protagonist returns changed.

The three forms of metalepsis are not simply different in direction; they produce structurally different world-configurations that correspond to different kinds of developmental difficulty. Descending metalepsis entry into an embedded possible world corresponds to identity exploration, the trying on of an alternative self. Ascending metalepsis the intrusion of hypodiegetic figures into the protagonist's world corresponds to the claiming of voice within a disrupted authority structure. Complex metalepsis which refuses any stable inside/outside distinction — corresponds to the processing of grief, an experience that similarly refuses the clean boundary between the self before and after loss. This three-way correspondence is the argument the article sets out to demonstrate.

3. Textual Analysis

3.1 Descending Metalepsis and Identity: The Neverending Story

3.1.1 The Novel and Its Metaleptic Structure

Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* (1983) follows Bastian Balthazar Bux, a bullied, overweight, recently motherless ten-year-old who steals a strange book and reads it hidden in his school attic. The book he reads is a *mise-en-abyme*: a story within a story, structurally embedded within the diegetic narrative in which Bastian exists. Within it, the child hero Atreyu undertakes a quest to save the land of Fantastica from the encroaching Nothing. As Bastian reads, the boundary between his diegetic world and the hypodiegetic world of Fantastica progressively dissolves, until Bastian descends into the embedded world and becomes its hero.

Worth noting from the outset is the paratextual encoding of this boundary. In both the original German edition and the English translation, Bastian's diegetic world is printed in red,

the text of Fantastica in green (Ende, 1983). The chromatic doubling makes the narrative level-distinction visible on the page before it is violated inviting the reader to hold both levels in view at once, precisely as Bastian himself increasingly cannot.

3.1.2 Identity Confusion and the Mirror-World

In Erikson's (1963) framework, the central challenge of adolescence is working through the conflict between identity and role confusion building a coherent sense of self through exploration and eventual commitment. Bastian at the novel's opening is a clear instance of role confusion: he cannot assert himself, retreats from conflict, and has no stable sense of what he is or values. His identification with Atreyu begins immediately; in the child hero of Fantastica he sees an image of the self he cannot yet be.

Herman (1997) introduced the Alternative Possible World (APW) to describe embedded fictional worlds that function as ontologically distinct but structurally related alternatives to the primary narrative. Fantastica is precisely such an APW: a world that mirrors Bastian's own while inverting its terms. The AURYN the amulet Atreyu carries bears an ouroboros, two snakes eating each other's tails, an image of self-enclosed recursion that the novel repeatedly uses as a figure for the relationship between the two narrative worlds. The novel's very first page shows a mirror in which the sign of the bookshop where Bastian steals the book is visible reversed (Ende, 1983, p. 1). The Bookworld is Bastian's reflected world, similar and inverted.

Lacan's (1977) account of the mirror stage describes the child's first recognition of itself in a reflection as the founding moment of the ego — identification with an image that is both the self and not the self. Bastian's identification with Atreyu follows this logic: Atreyu is the ideal-I, the image of the self-Bastian cannot yet claim. His descent into Fantastica literalises the identification. He does not merely read about Atreyu; he becomes him, and in becoming him begins the work of identity formation.

3.1.3 Identity Lost and Found

Within Fantastica, each wish Bastian is granted costs him a memory from his real life. The device is neat: each wish is a trial of the idealised self, and each lost memory represents a provisional identity abandoned in the search for a stable one. The crisis comes when Bastian has surrendered so many memories that he can no longer remember who he is role confusion rendered as literal amnesia.

Resolution comes when he is brought back to his one remaining memory his father, and the love between them and understands that the self he was looking for was not the heroic self of Fantastica but the ordinary, vulnerable son of the real world. In Marcia's (1966) extension of Erikson's model, identity achievement follows a period of active exploration and ends in commitment. Bastian's metaleptic adventure enacts exactly this arc: exploration of alternative selves within the Bookworld, followed by a return to, and commitment to, the actual self.

3.1.4 The Neverending Searching: Identity on a Möbius Strip

The novel's conclusion and its title carry the same recursive logic. The AURYN's ouroboros, the reversed mirror on the first page, the title that names both the book Bastian reads and the book in which he appears: all of these insist that the story cannot be finished, that identity formation is not a destination but a process that continues. Bastian returns changed —

more capable of love and connection than before but the novel's final pages make clear that reading will continue, and with-it growth. Identity, like the surface of the Möbius strip, has no final edge to reach.

3.2 Ascending Metalepsis and Power: Inkheart

3.2.1 The Novel and Its Metaleptic Structure

Where *The Neverending Story* sends its protagonist down into a Bookworld, Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* (2003) reverses the direction. Twelve-year-old Meggie lives with her father Mo, a bookbinder with an unusual gift: when he reads aloud, the characters in his books are brought into the real world. This ascending metalepsis predates the novel's opening: years earlier, Mo read three characters out of the hypodiegetic novel *Inkheart′* Capricorn, Basta, and Dustfinger and in doing so accidentally read Meggie's mother into the book in their place. The novel's plot turns on the consequences: Capricorn's bid for power in the diegetic world, and Meggie's discovery that she shares her father's gift.

There is a significant structural difference from *The Neverending Story*. Ende's embedded novel *NS′* is fully visible to both Bastian and the reader, its text held in chromatic doubling with the primary narrative. Funke's *Inkheart′* is closed to us: we can see its characters moving through the diegetic world but cannot access the source text. This places the real-world reader in the same position as Meggie: able to witness the consequences of the metalepsis, but denied access to the mechanism that produced it.

3.2.2 The Silenced Child and the Constructed Reader

Rose (1984) famously argued that children's fiction is always-already adult-centred that it positions the child as "an outsider to its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child in" (p. 1–2). Lesnik-Oberstein (1994) developed this critique through the figure of the fictional child: the child constructed by adult literary discourse as its imagined object, rather than a genuine participant in meaning-making. *Inkheart* gives both arguments narrative shape. Meggie is kept in the dark about matters that directly concern her: Mo hides the truth about her mother; Fenoglio treats the child reader as a passive recipient of his creations; Capricorn treats reading as an exclusively adult power.

Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992) drew the distinction between the child as *constructed* passively shaped by adult discourse and the child as *constructive* an agent who makes her own meaning. Meggie's arc in *Inkheart* is the movement from one to the other. Fivush's (2004) model of voice and silence, organised around the axes of self/other and voice/silence, maps this trajectory well. At the novel's opening, Meggie is either spoken for by adults, silenced by them, or silencing herself. What she is not, yet, is the voiced self Fivush describes: speaking in her own voice, for her own purposes.

3.2.3 Claiming Voice: The Ascending Metaleptic Return

The discovery that Meggie shares Mo's silvertongue gift is the turning point. She is no longer simply the person in whose world the ascending metaleptic transgression is occurring; she is a potential agent within it. Sending Capricorn and his figures back to their Bookworld requires two people: Fenoglio, who as author can write the words, and Meggie, whose voice as reader can bring them to life. Neither is sufficient alone. This structural requirement is the novel's clearest argument about the adult-child power relation: authority and agency need each other; neither can do the work alone.

The climactic reading-aloud scene is where this argument is settled in practice. As Beauvais (2015) has shown, child power in children's literature is always negotiated within and against adult structures; it does not appear from nowhere. Meggie's power is real, but it operates within constraints that adults Fenoglio, Mo have set. What has changed is that those constraints now recognise her power as necessary. The scene ends with the accidental reading of Fenoglio himself into his own Bookworld. Barthes (1968) wrote that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (p. 148). In *Inkheart*, this is not a metaphor but a plot event: the Author is literally removed from the diegetic world at the moment the Reader comes into her own.

3.2.4 The Fictionality of the Real

The novel is the first in a trilogy called the 'Inkworld' trilogy a title the narrative itself explains: everything in books belongs to the inkworld, making the distinction between the fictional and the real a matter of medium rather than reality. For the real-world child reader, this has a clear implication: their position as reader mirrors Meggie's, and the growth she achieves by claiming her reading voice is not closed off from them. The trilogy's architecture makes the metaleptic argument extradiegetic: *Inkheart* reaches out towards its reader.

3.3 Complex Metalepsis and Emotional Growth: The Book of Lost Things

3.3.1 The Novel and Its Metaleptic Structure

John Connolly's *The Book of Lost Things* (2006) works with a more entangled metaleptic structure than either of the preceding novels. Twelve-year-old David has lost his mother to illness, acquired a stepmother he cannot love, and a half-brother whose existence feels like a usurpation. He retreats into the fairy tales his mother used to read to him. But the books begin to talk back: characters from the fairy tales intrude into his waking world (ascending metalepsis), and eventually he descends into a Bookworld assembled from those same fairy tales, distorted by his own emotional life (descending metalepsis). The two movements are interlocked in a continuous loop the Möbius strip structure that Klimek (2011) terms complex metalepsis.

The structural difference from the previous two novels is significant. In *The Neverending Story*, Fantastica is embedded within and dependent on the outer narrative; there is a clear hierarchical relation between levels. In *Inkheart*, *Inkheart'* is similarly subordinate to the diegetic world it invades. In *The Book of Lost Things*, no such hierarchy holds. David's real world and the Bookworld stand alongside each other as parallel spaces; neither contains the other. Malina's (2002) distinction between hierarchically ordered levels and parallel universes applies directly: the complex metalepsis here operates between universes, not between levels.

This has a precise correlate in grief. Unlike identity confusion, which moves from a confused before to a resolved after, or disempowerment, which is structured by a hierarchy of power, grief does not organise itself cleanly. The dead are simultaneously absent and present. The self before the loss and the self after it cannot be kept apart. Complex metalepsis which refuses any stable inside/outside distinction is well suited to a novel whose subject is precisely this refusal of clean boundaries.

3.3.2 The Worlds of David: A Structural Account

David's situation involves four distinct world-spaces. Before his mother's death, he inhabits Realworld I and Bookworld I his actual life and the orderly fairy tales she shared with

him two worlds that cohere and reinforce each other. After her death, Realworld I becomes Realworld II: disordered, invaded by unwanted newcomers, governed by a logic he had not consented to. The clash between Bookworld I's rules (good is rewarded, evil punished) and the reality of Realworld II is the novel's founding irony: "his mother had been brave; bravery had not been enough" (Connolly, 2006, p. 16).

The ascending intrusions the Crooked Man appearing in David's waking life, the voice that sounds like his dead mother are the product of this clash. Bookworld II begins to take shape in the gaps of Realworld II, built from the materials of Bookworld I but refracted through the emotional logic of Realworld II: grief, jealousy, fear of death. When David descends into this hybrid world through a crack in an old tree, he is not entering a pre-existing Bookworld but one that has, in part, formed around the intensity of his own reading.

3.3.3 Grief, the Five Stages, and the Twisted Fairy Tales

Kübler-Ross's (1969) five-stage model denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance gives the psychological shape to David's journey. Each stage takes narrative form through encounters with figures drawn from twisted versions of familiar fairy tales.

Denial is given voice by the figure that claims to be David's dead mother, luring him deeper into the Bookworld: "Come to me, please come to me" (Connolly, 2006, p. 249). The voice is printed in italics throughout a typographic signal that marks its unreality even within the Bookworld. The young David believes it; the adult David narrating the novel does not. The gap between their positions is the gap between Appleyard's (1994) experiencing self and judging self-made visible on the page.

Bargaining and depression take form in the sleeping beauty figure: she appears first as David's mother, then awakens as Rose, his stepmother. The kiss he is urged to give her echoes both the fairy-tale convention and the goodbye kiss at his mother's funeral, and when he touches her she is "colder even than she had lain in her open coffin" (Connolly, 2006, p. 261). Acceptance is reached when David says plainly what he has been unable to say: "Roland was dead. So too was David's mother. He had been a fool to imagine otherwise...he had always known his mother was gone. He just wanted to believe otherwise" (Connolly, 2006, p. 267).

Bacchilega (2013) has argued that dark fairy-tale adaptations of the early twenty-first century are defined by their refusal of sanitised convention, reaching back instead to the moral complexity of pre-Perrault and pre-Grimm traditions. *The Book of Lost Things* belongs clearly to this tendency: its fairy tales include a Little Red Riding Hood who seduces wolves and gives birth to werewolves, a Sleeping Beauty who seduces the protagonist, and a Roland who is both knightly companion and openly gay man dying for love. These distortions carry the novel's insistence that adult experience cannot be contained within the clean binaries of the childhood fairy tale, and that growing up means learning to inhabit the grey.

3.3.4 Jealousy, Responsibility, and the Refusal of the Bargain

Running alongside the grief narrative is a second thread: David's jealousy towards his half-brother Georgie. The Crooked Man the novel's trickster figure, associated with Rumpelstiltskin (Connolly, 2006, p. 427) exploits this jealousy by offering David a bargain: speak Georgie's name, and the child will be taken, leaving David free. The bargain gives external, narrative shape to David's most shameful wish.

David's refusal is the novel's emotional turning point: "'His name is—' / 'Tell me!' shrieked the Crooked Man. / 'His name is "brother"', said David" (Connolly, 2006, p. 333). The answer is simultaneously a response to the Crooked Man and a statement to himself: the Bookworld has made his jealousy visible and navigable, and he has chosen differently. Where the metalepsis externalised his internal life, the return enacts his having worked through it.

3.3.5 The Möbius Strip Conclusion

The endings of the three novels each mark the metaleptic return differently. *The Neverending Story* restores Bastian to a version of his prior world, enriched by the journey. *Inkheart* sends the ascending intruders back where they came from, correcting the disruption. *The Book of Lost Things* does neither: it opens outward. The dying adult David returns to the Bookworld for the last time, and "what was lost was all found again" (Connolly, 2006, p. 348). The closing words echo the opening "Once upon a time for that is how all stories should begin there was a boy who lost his mother" (Connolly, 2006, p. 1) but the shift in register, from fairy-tale conventionality to something quieter and philosophical, carries the novel's argument in its tone. David is back at the beginning, but the beginning is no longer what it was.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Structural Unity of Metalepsis, Reading, and Growing Up

What the three analyses show is that the connection between metalepsis, reading, and growing up in these YA novels is not simply a matter of theme. The connection is structural. Each metaleptic form produces a different world-configuration (embedded, hierarchical, parallel) that corresponds to a different kind of developmental difficulty (identity exploration, power negotiation, grief); and the mechanism of each metaleptic resolution return from the Bookworld having changed is a formal model of the process it depicts.

This is what distinguishes the present argument from previous work on reading and adolescent growth. That scholarship has, in the main, proceeded thematically: it identifies what adolescent fiction is about, and argues that engagement with those themes assists development. The present readings suggest that these novels make the same claim at the level of narrative structure that the architecture of the metaleptic transgression is itself a model of how growth through reading works.

4.2 Adolescence, Metalepsis, and the Möbius Strip

There is a further structural point worth making. Nikolajeva (2002) has described adolescence as a condition of being "in a marginal, unstable zone between childhood and adulthood" neither one nor the other, defined by its transitional, boundary-dissolving character. That description applies, almost without alteration, to metalepsis: both are conditions of being between worlds, both involve the transgression of ordinarily stable boundaries, and both are characterised by a recursive movement in which the traversal of apparent opposites childhood/adulthood, fiction/reality reveals a single continuous surface rather than two separate sides.

This is not coincidence. It is why metalepsis works so well as the narrative device for these novels: the device and its subject share the same logic. A more conventional narrative of internal change a character who reflects and grows without leaving their narrative level cannot render visible the boundary-dissolution that is central to both metalepsis and adolescence as experiences. These novels need the device to do what they are trying to do.

4.3 Reading as a Neverending Act

One further observation cuts across all three novels. In each, the protagonist is an avid reader before the metaleptic adventure begins; in each, the adventure ends not with the abandonment of reading but with a deepened engagement with it. Bastian understands the story is neverending. Meggie has become a reader who knows her own power. David returns to the Bookworld even in death. None of them is done with reading once growth has been achieved.

This consistency encodes an argument that goes beyond the individual novels: reading is not a means to growth that becomes unnecessary once growth has occurred, but a continuing practice of self-formation. Like adolescence, and like metalepsis, it is recursive the reader who completes the traverse is back at the beginning, but changed, and ready to begin again. The title of Ende's novel names not just the embedded book but the relationship between reading and growth that all three novels share: neverending, without a final destination.

4.4 Implications for Reading Education

The argument has practical implications for the teaching of reading. If metalepsis works in these novels by making visible the mechanism by which reading produces growth by giving it narrative form rather than merely asserting it then these texts may be particularly valuable in educational contexts. Pantaleo (2023) has shown that metafictive devices in picturebooks can develop children's critical awareness of how narrative works; the metaleptic structures identified here may do comparable work in YA fiction, encouraging readers to reflect on their own reading practices rather than simply being carried along by the story.

5. Conclusion

Metalepsis, in the three novels examined here, does something that literary criticism has generally had to settle for describing: it shows, in the structure of the narrative itself, how reading helps young people grow up. By making the act of reading the mechanism of metaleptic transgression, these novels externalise and give shape to a process that is normally interior and invisible.

The three metaleptic forms descending, ascending, and complex map onto three distinct developmental challenges: identity formation (Bastian in *The Neverending Story*), the claiming of voice within a disrupted power structure (Meggie in *Inkheart*), and emotional maturation through grief (David in *The Book of Lost Things*). In each case, the structural logic of the metalepsis embedded, hierarchical, or parallel is suited to the particular difficulty it externalises.

Underlying all three is a deeper correspondence: metalepsis and adolescence share the same structural logic. Both are transitional, boundary-dissolving, and constitutively unfinished; both involve the traversal of apparent opposites that turn out to be a single surface. This correspondence is what makes metalepsis the right device for these novels not merely an appropriate choice but a necessary one.

Reading, finally, is the thread that holds the three analyses together. Not reading as a stage of development that ends, but reading as a practice that continues and changes with the reader. What these novels propose, through their metaleptic structures, is that the relationship between reading and growing up is itself neverending recursive, ongoing, and without a definitive conclusion.

Several questions this study has not addressed remain open. How do adolescent readers actually engage with metaleptic structures do they experience the level-transgressions as the article suggests they function? The claim here is made at the level of narrative form; reader-response research could test it empirically. The three novels are also all European in origin; whether the model holds across other literary traditions is an open question. And as metalepsis migrates into digital and interactive narrative forms (Ryan, 2004; Alber, 2016), its developmental uses may look quite different from those identified in print fiction.

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