

# Young Readers and Old Stories. Young-Adult and Crossover Adaptations of the Arthurian Stories

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Who has read Arthurian stories in the last century and who is still enjoying them today? One of the possible answers is: young readers. This paper reviews the choices and changes the authors of twentieth-century Arthurian retellings have made in an effort to adapt the traditional stories to a modern young readership.

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Versions of Arthurian stories for children and young adults have been in circulation for a century and a half, and most people have heard about these stories in their childhood.<sup>1</sup> Although back in the late Middle Ages young princes and aristocrats are very likely to have been acquainted with most of the stories (Lynch 5), they were not originally written for a young audience. Arthurian literature, rooted in legendary and mythical as well as chronicle material, began to flourish in the courts of Europe, especially France, in the twelfth century. It was a courtly literature addressed to kings, queens and noblemen and it was composed both in verse and in prose. In England the Golden Age of Arthurian romance began in the middle of the fourteenth century and at the end of the fifteenth century the prose compilation known as *The Death of Arthur*, by Sir Thomas Malory, delivered most of the stories of Arthur and his knights to the modern age. Although other English romances have a more popular appeal than their French and German counterparts, those of the matter of Britain are usually courtly in tone and so is their readership. Well into the Renaissance Arthurian romances continued to be read or otherwise enjoyed by the English aristoc-

racy and monarchs and they became source material for courtly literature, such as Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and courtly entertainment, such as the tournaments that celebrated Queen Elizabeth's Accession Day and the pageants held in her honour during her summer progresses. However, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, Arthurian romances also started a new life in more popular forms of art, such as garland ballads, chapbooks, theatre performances for festive days such as May Day. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were dark ages for the Arthurian legends, which survived only as place and characters' names in popular entertainments, and in a few minor texts.<sup>2</sup> However, by the end of the eighteenth century a new interest in the Middle Ages and its literary products began to flourish in Britain and, by the beginning of the following century, it had led to the rediscovery of Middle English romances, including those of the Matter of Britain.<sup>3</sup> There were three editions of Thomas Malory's collection of tales between 1816 and 1817 and, if on the one hand the book began to become the subject of serious scholarly study, on the other there were also the first hints of a change of medium: abridgements and adaptations soon began to flourish and in the introductory remarks to his 1817 edition (see *Byrth*) Robert Southey suggested that it was indeed good reading material for boys and it could easily regain its popularity if it were modernised and published 'as a book for boys'.

In the second half of the century the first adaptations of the stories of king Arthur and his knights specifically aimed at boys began to appear. Two of these nineteenth-century retellings are worth mentioning: one by James T. Knowles, printed in London, which went through eight editions between 1862 and 1895, and one by Sidney Lanier, published in New York in 1880, which dominated the popular children's versions in America for half a century. The introductions to both works are quite literary and the readers are assumed to be well-educated and to know about Arthur's stories and their origins, as French and Old English sources are quoted in the original. Moreover, in his introductory remarks, Knowles highlights the splitting in two of the Arthurian readership mentioned above: scholars are supposed to study the Arthurian legends, boys are supposed to enjoy them:

The story of king Arthur will never die while there are English men to study and English boys to devour its tales of adventure and daring and magic and conquest. [...] If in our time it has disappeared from the popular literature and the boys' bookshelves, the cause is, probably, that, since the days of cheap books, it has never been modernised or adapted for general circulation. Concealed in antiquated spelling and quaint style, it has become a treat for scholars rather than for the general reader, who would find it too long, too monotonous, too obscure. Still

less is it fitted for boys, who would probably become the principal readers of the Arthur legends in a popular form. [...] If [the author] shall succeed in paving the way for such a popular revival of the Story as is its due, and which would place it in boys' libraries anywhere beside 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'The Arabian Nights', he will have obtained his reward. (*Story* i–ii)

Having briefly shown how the readership of the stories of Arthur and his knights evolved through the centuries, we can now move inside the boys' library mentioned by Knowles and review the choices and changes some twentieth-century authors have made in an effort to adapt the traditional Arthurian stories to a modern and young readership: given the number of adaptations, my discussion will not be a complete review but will highlight the main trends of the phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> A definition of 'Young-Adult literature' (usually abbreviated YA) is here needed. The last few decades have seen the emergence of children's literature as a particular field of study, mainly branching out of cultural and gender studies and within the wider field of children's literature some scholars have started to focus on literature for teenagers: such interest has boomed in the last fifteen years as a consequence of the extreme popularity of series such as the Harry Potter books (1995–2007), Philip Pullman's *Golden Compass* and the other two books of the trilogy (1995–2000), and Stephanie Meyer's vampire stories (2005–2008) – just to mention the most famous.<sup>5</sup> The particular appeal of these books to adults as well as teenagers, has also brought to the spreading of the trendy label 'crossover fiction', i.e., fiction primarily aimed at teenagers but attracting adult readers as well. This is exactly what the Arthurian retellings considered here are. Retellings are a huge chunk of children's and YA literature, and the most thorough study of the phenomenon is Stephens and McCallum's seminal study *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture* (1998). In twentieth-century English and American literature there were no less than eighty adaptations of the Arthurian legends (and that is without counting the books that were inspired by Arthurian material), some for adults, some for children, some for boys, and, only in the last two decades, for girls.<sup>6</sup> In reviewing the most relevant and popular retellings, I will focus on the depiction of child and teenage heroes and heroines, as in most cases they are offered as models for the young readers to follow.

The first versions, from the beginning of the century to the early 1940s, are very indebted to Thomas Malory's compilation of prose romances, which is, as far as English is concerned, the form in which Arthurian stories reached modernity before the other medieval versions were discovered and reedited. The Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson was much indebted to Malory in his composition of the twelve narrative poems known

as *The Idylls of the King* (1856–1895) which made the stories of the Round Table extremely popular in Victorian England. Tennyson is the other constant reference in the first retellings of the stories as his poems were still very popular in the beginning of the twentieth century. The first retellings take a literary audience for granted and it is easy to see why: editions and abridgments of Malory were still circulating and Tennyson's poetry was very popular. The first retelling of the century is Howard Pyle's *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* (1903), which, however, is not particularly aimed at young readers and does not give any account of Arthur's teenage years, as does the second famous retelling: T. H. White's tetralogy *The Once and Future King* (1958), which was made famous by Walt Disney's animated film adaptation of the first book, *The Sword in the Stone* (1963).<sup>7</sup> What we find throughout the tetralogy is a strong indebtedness to Malory and the following canonical Arthurian literature and these sources are repeatedly mentioned so that the fictional barrier is often broken by the narrator. After mentioning Queen Elaine (Galahad's mother), for example, the narrator observes: 'it was a popular name in those days and several women in the *Morte D'Arthur* had it, particularly as some of its manuscript sources have got mixed up' (White 321); and when introducing Lancelot for the first time he states: 'Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites would have found it difficult to recognize this rather sullen and unsatisfactory child, with the ugly face, who did not disclose to anybody that he was living on dreams and prayers' (White 316). As these quotations clearly show, what we have here is a very intruding omniscient narrator who tries to explain most details of medieval life and the Arthurian story to his readers; passages such as the following are common occurrences:

It was Christmas night, the eve of the Boxing Day Meet. You must remember that this was the old Merry England of Gramarye, when the rosy barons ate with fingers, and had peacock served before them with all their tail feathers streaming, or boar's heads with the tusks stuck in again – when there was no unemployment because there were too few people to be employed – when the forest rang with knights walloping each other on the helm, and the unicorns in the wintry moonlight stamped with their silver feet and snorted their noble breaths of blue upon the frozen air. Such marvels were great and comfortable ones. But in the Old England there was a greater marvel still. The weather behaved itself. (White 134–135)

In White's work, the adventure story is particularly enjoyable for young readers in the first and second book, when Arthur and his cousin Gawain respectively, are still young and adventurous knights-to-be: White was the first to imagine Arthur's childhood and upbringing in his foster parents' house and he also devoted the first pages of his second book to the child-

hood of Gawain and his brothers. As the story progresses and the protagonists grow old and tragic, the age of the implied readerships also leaps forward, but in the first two books we find several passages specifically aimed at young readers and reproducing, *mutatis mutandis*, situations they would find familiar:

The children had erected an amateur tent over their heads, out of the plaids, and under this they were lying close together, telling a story. They could hear their mother stoking the fire in the room below, which made them whisper for fear that she could hear. [...] Gawain was telling a story because he was the eldest. They lay together, like thin, strange, secret frogs. (White 209–210)

A second group of retellings during the post-war period focused on the historicity of Arthur and his tales and used the pseudo-historical material found in Nennius and Gildas: authors such as Henry Treece and George Finkel debunk the numinous and supernatural elements in search of realism and everydayness because they want their adaptations to fulfil the exemplary function of historical fiction, the pattern being that of the emergence of civilisation out of barbarism. One of them, Treece's *The Eagles Have Flown*, is particularly gritty in his description of fighting and death, but the author tries to attract his young readers by introducing two boys (Festus and Wulf) to register emotional responses to the cruelties of the dark ages. The historical and realistic model was popular soon after the war but it did not last long. Other authors (for example Matthews and Stewart, and Rosemary Sutcliff) in search of exemplary models for their young readers tried to offer exemplarity and a sense of unity by going back to the literary material of Malory but setting the stories in Saxon Britain and resorting to Celtic lore: the idea was to recover culturally authentic stories to transmit a version of unity and spirituality to inspire the contemporary decadent world. The main characteristic of all these retellings, up to the early 1980s, is the effort to transmit the cultural heritage and this is why new stories are seldom grafted to the original. The exemplarity of the story and the political ideology linked to nationalism are still the most evident features and it must be observed that female characters play a very small part. However, in Sutcliff's novels a new attention to the psychology of the characters starts to emerge, as is clear from the following passage, which describes the first encounter between Arthur and Guinevere:

For in the high-walled garden of the castle there, he saw Guenever, King Leodegrance's daughter, for the first time. [...] The princess's hair was black with a shimmer of copper where the sun caught it, and her eyes, when she looked up from the flowers in her lap, were grey-green as willow leaves and full of cool shadows. And Arthur saw all this; but she was scarcely more than a child, and

though he was but eighteen himself, he was feeling very old, old and weary with his hard-won victories and deaths of men. And though they gave each other one long grave look before her father swept him on his way, he thought no more of that first encounter after he rode south again, than that he had seen a girl making a flower-chain in the king's garden. Yet something of him was changed from that moment. Something in him that had been asleep before, began to stir and to ache, longing for – he did not know what. (Sutcliff 46–47)

The early 1980s saw the publication of Marion Zimmer Bradley's best-selling *The Mists of Avalon* (1983), lauded as one of the most original and emotional retellings of the Arthurian legend. Although the novel is not aimed at young readers, Bradley's work strongly influenced the story of modern retellings for two reasons: firstly it is a first-person narration; secondly, it retells the whole story from the point of view not only of a woman, but of the most troublesome woman – and the one on whom most mythical, legendary, literary scraps of tradition have deposited – of the Arthurian world, Morgaine, i.e., Morgan le Fay. Juvenile Arthuriads from the 1990s onwards mostly follow this new trend and tell the story from the point of view of one of the characters. Morpurgo's *Arthur, High King of Britain* (1994) is one example, but I would like to focus on two other texts. Nancy Springer's *I Am Morgan le Fay* (2001) and *I Am Mordred* (1998) are particularly interesting because they retell the story from the point of view of the two troublemakers of the Arthurian world in their teens: Arthur's bastard son, who will bring his dream of peace and order to an end, and Arthur's sister, the traditional dark force behind most of Arthur's and his knights' unlucky adventures. The Arthurian dream and tragedy are viewed through their adolescent eyes so that the main time of the narration is that of their youth (supposedly they are the same age as their readers), but there are frequent flash-forwards that allow the readers to glimpse at the story they know from tradition. The most interesting feature of these novels is the effort to portray – and justify – the personalities of the characters, which are laid bare for teenage readers to see and judge: the medieval is 'combined with the modern apprehension of the evil that arises from the dark side of the human psyche rather than from external, demonic promptings' (Stephens and McCallum 132). The other very relevant characteristic of Springer's retellings, and the place where the author's indebtedness to Bradley is more evident, is her focus on gender and the frequent allusion to Morgan le Fay's frustration and anger at playing a minor role in the family life and kingdom politics just because she is a woman. The first-person narrator and the choice of topics – relationship with his or her mother, father, siblings, and stirring of first love feelings – create an emotive response in the young readers and an identification with

the protagonists of the story. The cultural heritage is taken for granted and not particularly emphasised in an effort to retain the exciting features of the story without the burden of exemplary history. However, the two young protagonists are confined within the boundaries of their own tragic destiny, and the lofty style of their numinous premonitions often creates a distance from the modern reader:

I could not sleep that night for dreaming of king Arthur. [...] My father would look upon myself and see himself in my face. He would reach out to me. He would stand, wavering just a little, and step down from his throne and embrace me. My son, he would say. Prince Mordred. (Springer, *I Am Mordred* 68)

Arthur. My half brother, a fifteen-year-old stripling who would be king while Thomas lay dead. Why should this untried youth, this Arthur, my half brother, have a throne when I, who knew much and had suffered much, had nothing? I had not met Arthur since his name day, when he had lain a fat baby in my mother's arms, but sitting on a hard chair in my mother's chamber I still despised him every bit as much as I had then, with the fire dragon burning in my heart and vengeful thoughts blazing in my mind. Thinking of him, wishing him ill, I felt the milpreve go hot in its metal nest in the palm of my hand. (Springer, *I Am Morgan* 215–216)<sup>8</sup>

My last example is Kevin Crossley-Holland's prize-winning Arthur trilogy (2000–2003),<sup>9</sup> which deals with the life of a young boy named Arthur de Caldicot living in the Welsh Middle Marches in 1199. A magical device called 'the Seeing Stone', after which the first book of the trilogy is titled, plays a large part in the plot of the story: it is given to Arthur de Caldicot early in the story by Merlin and through it the young protagonist can observe the life of the mythical King Arthur and his rise to power as King of Britain. Many of the characters in the protagonist's life look exactly like or very similar to characters in Arthur's life. The most notable resemblance is that between Arthur de Caldicot and young King Arthur himself, which leads him at first to believe that the Arthur in the stone is actually him in the near future. Such belief is strengthened when he finds out that, like the young King Arthur, the people he believes to be his parents are actually his foster parents. Later into the story, it becomes clear that King Arthur inhabits a parallel universe, with various events in both worlds reflecting one another and helping the young protagonist to understand some key passages of his growing into a knight, a landlord, a lover: '[W]hat happens in my life and what happens inside the stone are often connected like sounds and echoes, or like my left and right eye which overlap but can each see more than the other. What I see in the stone sometimes seems like a promise, sometimes like a warning' (Crossley-Holland, *At the Crossing* 219).

Crossley-Holland identifies a better strategy to appeal to young readers than his immediate predecessors as his narrative exploits most of the characteristics of the retellings highlighted above and mingles them in a masterly way. First of all, like Springer and Morpurgo, he uses first-person narration, but this time the thoughts of the thirteen-year-old Arthur are more convincingly those of a teenager: Arthur de Caldicot's fears and joys are cast in a remote yet familiar context, because though living in a twelfth-century manor, he is struggling with everyday chores, feelings and disputes of life within a community and people and incidents are seen from a truly young and inexperienced perspective.

I don't want to write about Abner and Ner and Ishbosheth and Joab and Asabhel, especially not in Latin. I want to write my own life here in the Marches, between England and Wales. My own thoughts, which keep changing shape like clouds. I am thirteen and I want to write my own fears and joys and sorrows. (Crossley-Holland, *The Seeing* 12)

Crossley-Holland's first person narrator is neither one of the well-known Arthurian characters nor a spectator like those we have seen in Treece's version of the story: by being both inside the story, as events from Arthur's life are mirrored in his, but not confined within its well-known boundaries, Arthur de Caldicot comes out as a real character the reader can identify with.

Secondly, the novel has a masterly woven plot with narrative times overlapping in more sophisticated ways than simple flash-forward: this makes the atmosphere far more mysterious and increases the suspense. Moreover, the didactic part with information and explanations about medieval life, especially the everyday life of rural manor houses and the harsh realities of war, is rendered exciting because it is nonchalantly woven into the plot through adventurous and domestic incidents. Literary sources and medieval poets are part of the story and not mentioned by a third-person narrator such as the one used by White; during his stay at a monastery, for example, Arthur meets Marie de France: '[L]ate this afternoon, Lady Marie de Meulan arrived here with three servants [...]. Brother Gerard told me that she writes story-poems which are recited in courts and castles all over England' (Crossley-Holland, *At the Crossing* 282–283); and after talking to her and going back to his cell to write about her stories he observes: 'I can see it plain now. With these words, their red and black blood, I'm telling a story about a lady who told me a story about telling a story inside this story of my own life' (Crossley-Holland, *At the Crossing* 293). Lastly, Crossley-Holland's retelling is bound to be equally interesting for boys and girls because we find very interesting characters of both



genders. Most young girls are just as active and relevant to the plot of the story as boys: Grace and Winnie, the two young noblewomen Arthur falls in love with, Gatty, the daughter of a farmer, Simona, the daughter of a Venetian shipbuilder. The doors Crossley-Holland opens on the life of twelfth-century teenagers is truly rich and, to quote the words of a review that appeared on *The Guardian*, ‘teenagers will identify with young Arthur, dreamer, poet and child on the brink of adulthood whose personal confusions and struggles to find out who he is and control his own destiny find him increasingly caught up with his namesake, King Arthur, the once and future king’ (Gardner).

As Stephens and McCallum have shown in their seminal study, in most cases modern adaptations of old stories tend to be conservative. However, there are cases when completely new meanings – for new generations of readers – can be produced from old stories. The retellings of the Arthurian stories of the last twenty years have shown that Arthur can be in girls’ libraries as well as boys’, and that cultural heritage can be transmitted in a very unexpected and emotionally convincing way.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a list of famous twentieth-century writers who declared they were influenced by their experiences of the legends during childhood and youth see *Adapting* xiv–xvii.

<sup>2</sup> For the survival of Arthurian materials after the Middle Ages in general see Merriam; for the use of Arthurian material in the sixteenth century see Davis, Logan and Teskey, and Cooper; for the new life of Arthurian stories in popular ballads and chapbooks see Simons and *Guy*.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the circulation and edition of medieval romances between the end of the eighteenth and the end of the nineteenth century see Johnston, Matthews, and Santini.

<sup>4</sup> For a longer and more detailed review see Lynch.

<sup>5</sup> Books featuring teenage protagonists and implicitly addressed to a teenage readership are of course a much older phenomenon, dating back from the nineteenth century and there were many books specifically marketed for teenagers back in the 1970s and 1980s, but the emergence of the label ‘YA literature’ – with specialised scholars working on it and quite a few literary prizes devoted to it – is more recent.

<sup>6</sup> A complete list of all editions and retellings of Arthurian medieval texts does not exist, but for editions and adaptations of Malory’s works see Gaines.

<sup>7</sup> The four books appeared separately between 1938 and 1958 and some episodes were modified in the single edition published in 1958.

<sup>8</sup> The ‘milpreve’ is Morgan’s magic stone, the symbol of her power.

<sup>9</sup> The book was awarded the Guardian Children’s Fiction Award, the Tir na n-Og prize, and the Nestlé Smarties Book Prize bronze medal. It was also shortlisted for the Whitbread Awards.

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