

‘You never know, things might have once existed’: Young Readers Engaging with Postmodern Texts that Blur the Boundaries between Fact and Fiction

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Abstract

This article considers children’s engagement with the *Ologies*, a series of post-modern texts that blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. This follows on from a text-based analysis of the series published in this journal (22 (3) 2015). Data collected from 9-12 year olds demonstrates how actual readers took up the invitation offered by the text and were able to identify the tension between realism and fantasy; oscillate between different genres; stop to play games and use the tactile to make meaning. In addition they willingly brought their own knowledge of the world to the text and were able to tease out meanings through dialogic interaction. It is argued the quality discussion which ensued is due to the multi-layered nature of the books and the offering of agency to the pupils with little adult interference.

Key Words: multi-modal, postmodern, fantasy facts, agency, implied reader

Introduction

Following a text based analysis of the *Ologies* series (Williams 2015), further research was conducted with pupils to find out how they engaged with challenging post-modern books in which fantasy and fiction combine. The main thrust of this article is to highlight Meek’s (1988) notion that what children read play a significant part in developing them as competent and enthusiastic readers. She observes that:

‘The most important single lesson that children learn from texts is *the nature and variety of written discourse*, the different ways that language lets a writer tell, and the many and different ways a reader reads.’ (21).

As with many postmodern publications, the books under discussion offer a variety of written discourse, thus offering the reader the opportunity to read in different ways in the same text.

A summary of the *Ologies* series follows after which data collection is explained and finally the pupils are given voice as they engage with the books.

Summary:

The *Ologies* series with titles such as *Wizardology* (Steer 2005), *Monsterology* (Steer 2008) and *Alienology* (Steer 2010) have the appearance of non-fiction where spatial organisation, rather than linear reading, is paramount combining illustrations, diagrams, headings, charts and maps. Tactile elements are distinctive with flaps to open, letters to read, items to feel,

pull out encryption devices and card games to play. The provenance is intriguing as they are presented as facsimiles of ancient books that have been ‘found’. However, they are predominantly fiction located in a secondary world of magic, monsters and aliens while heavily disguised as fact: a term coined in the previous article as ‘fantasy facts’ (Williams 2015).

While there are few child protagonists, typical in children’s books, the implied reader is directly addressed and constructed as an apprentice *Ologist*. Thus it is this positioning of the reader that implies a young rather than an adult reader.

Implied is a reader who is able to bring their experience of reading both fiction and non-fiction to the text. There is an assumption that they have some background knowledge to contribute. For example some idea of Ancient Egypt (*Egyptology*), notions of spells and potions in *Wizardry* (*Wizardology*) and mythical creatures such as Unicorns (*Monsterology*). In addition the reader is invited to pick up irony, pastiche and recognise intertextuality. Significantly the reader has to oscillate between the two forms giving credence to the authenticity of the ‘facts’ while engaging in the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ with the fantasy.

Research with Actual Readers

Research was conducted with pupils aged 9-12 in years 5, 6 and 7 (final 2 years of primary and first year of secondary school) involving 19 pupils in total. We were interested to see how the pupils engaged with the texts, what they focused on, if/when they stopped to play a game or solve a puzzle, and how they dealt with ‘fantasy facts’.

Unfortunately, in the current testing regime in English schools, engagement with texts is usually teacher-centred with pupils being put on the spot to answer closed questions with the concomitant sense that there are right and wrong answers. As such the focus is less on making meaning rather on decoding skills. In this piece of small scale research pupils were given agency to engage without a sense of having to find the ‘right’ answers.

Pairs were invited to select a text from a range of Ologies books, read through it together while they were audio recorded. Additional notes were made at the time about what they were doing, looking at, interacting with. Transcriptions were made from 5 pairs and are discussed below. The texts selected by the pupils were:

Monsterology (Yana/Alan Year 7);

Wizardology (Jocelyn/Lee, Millie/John Year 6; Suzie/Joel Year 5)

Alienology (Millie/John Year 6; Mike/Louise Year 5).

(Note: not their actual names)

The researchers’ aim was to intervene as little as possible, avoid asking questions; rather act as a facilitator when necessary. It was important for the pupils not to feel they were being ‘tested’.

So how did actual readers respond?

General comments about the readers’ first engagement.

All were immediately interested with a strong focus on the book and a great deal of talk was generated without the need for prompts. They were particularly eager to touch, feel, open up, and this tactile aspect was always the initial focus when turning to a new page. They all picked up intertextuality and could identify the tension between realism and fantasy often discussing the 'fantasy facts'. Hence they demonstrated a meta-fictional awareness.

Much information was gleaned from looking at the visual elements with less attention paid to the words. We noted they often engaged in tasks without reading the instructions showing their keenness and excitement to do rather than read detail. However, there was a sense of understanding that this would be a text they would return to. Our initial engagements as adults were similar: a first reading involving skimming and scanning, touching, looking and then a second more focused reading. Below are details of that engagement.

Examples of types of engagement

There was a great deal of categorising, identifying and analysing; a response associated with non-fiction. But there was also an affective reaction related to fiction.

Alan and Yana are discussing the evolution chart in *Monsterology* where some of the creatures are mythical while others are not:

Yana: *Oh so that one's probably evolved from that.*

Alan: *(looking at the Nue): Ooh that's like a cross between a monkey and a tiger.*

Susie and Joel are puzzling over the image of a creature in *Wizardology*:

Susie: *Is that a goat?*

Joel: *It's a dog.*

Susie: *It looks like a goat.*

John offers an example of talking aloud in order to organise his thoughts. It also demonstrates a skimming and scanning approach rather than looking at a heading first:

John: *This must be all about spells 'cos over here you've got forbidden spells and here healing spells and I think this is about spells as well and, yeah, it says 'Spell craft'.*

Jocelyn: *(referring to a pendant) The only default about this is it's like got a hanger, like it's off a stall*

Lee: *Maybe that's like where you can hang it up.*

Jocelyn: *Maybe yes so like every time you come home from school like...and then if there's a beast you'll probably like go into your cupboard and get your sword out and swish the air. Ah, that'd be so cool.*

In order to help understand they often asked questions of each other and offered explanations. Here are examples from *Monsterology* of how it is the text that engages the reader and invites dialogic talk.

Alan: *and what does that mean 'actual'*

Yana: *what does it mean supposedly mythical and actual?*

Alan: *oh mythical probably means...*

(Researcher's observation notes: Pause while they work this out)

Questions were raised in *Wizardology*:

Joel: (referring to the wizard's pets) *Why are they all so skinny?*

Susie: (referring to an illustration of a potion which has gone horribly wrong) *Is that a man with a donkey's head?*

Susie: (referring to a star chart) *Is that Earth? How come the sun's there?*

Joel: (referring to Divination cards) *What are these?*

Susie: *I don't know.*

While the pupils were categorizing, defining and analysing they were also emotionally involved and often enthusiastic. This began before even opening the first page as the covers of the books are attractive and include precious stones which invite a tactile response. There is clear excitement here on first seeing the covers of *Wizardology* and *Alienology*:

Mike: *I've got this at home (referring to Alienology) and I think they're really good.*

Susie: *I love these!*

John: *Ah, this looks good already.*

Millie: *Ohh! This is the one I wanted to look at.*

There was clear enthusiasm and a keenness to voice their feelings. This is an example of not only an affective response but evidence of making intertextual links:

Yana: *I love the animals.....*

Yana: *Hippogriff. No, it isn't....yes it is, isn't it. Oh look, where it is. I love Hippogriffs. I want a Hippogriff except that they can be quite/*

Alan: *Horse/*

Yana: *apparently Hippogriffs can be quite um proud of themselves.*

Alan: *Yes...according to er Potter.*

There is some nasty purple slime at the back of *Alienology* which produced the following response from Millie: (touching the slime) *I'm scared, I'm scared.*

Such an affective response to touch is reflected in the huge draw of the tactile. *Monsterology* contains an example of a unicorn's hair taken from the mane which can be felt:

Yana: *Oh what is that? It's meant to be a unicorn's tail feather...thing....a hair*

Alan: *the mane*

Yana: *can I touch it? Oh that's so weird*

(Researcher's notes: Both feel the unicorn's hair and then look around the page.)

In *Wizardology* there is a phoenix feather to touch:

John: *It just feels like a normal feather doesn't it?*

While in *Alienology* the reader is offered the opportunity to feel an Alien's skin:

Millie: *What's that? It feels like scales.*

John: *Eurghhh! Dead skin apparently!*

Millie: *Why do you wanna keep on touching it?*

John: *Well because you never know whether it's real or not.*

This is an example of the tension held by the readers between the factual and fantasy. There is something about the concrete sense of touch which offers validity. However, it is clear that John retains some scepticism which is also reflected in Mike and Louise's interaction:

Louise: (Reading) *'Above a sample of the shed skin of a reptilian'.*

Mike: *But it isn't, I bet it isn't.*

Much of the evidence for the tactile response came from researchers' notes:

'Both immediately feel the skin from tail of sea serpent.'

'Both go for feeling the ashes of the phoenix situated far right down middle of page'

'Both touched the jewel on the front cover'

As discussed in the introduction implied is a reader who is able bring their own knowledge to the text and the actual readers willing did this with information ranging from disciplines such as biology, geography, science as well as observations from everyday life plus engagement in a variety of fantasy texts and games.

Here are two examples of their knowledge of animals:

Susie: (with reference to a passage about cats) *That's true. I've got a cat and she goes loads of places and you won't know she's there.*

Yana: *I like salamanders but they're real*

Yana: (reads) *six-legged Salamander... because it's six legged of course. Normally they have 4 legs.*

Alan: *Do they?*

Yana: *I think.*

Two pupils are reading a section in *Wizardology* about how to carve a wand and demonstrate ways of how they might acquire a knife to do this using their own experience:

Susie: *My neighbour's got a knife*

Joel: *Get one on e-bay.*

Susie: *I'm going to search that to see if it actually comes up.*

Similarly Lee recognises a piece of equipment, a glass on a tripod, in *Wizardology* :

Lee: *I've seen one of those before.*

Researcher: *Where have you seen one?*

Lee: *At a Science lab.*

Researcher: *Is that like a tripod?*

Lee: *Yes I think so. And you can get one for like cameras and stuff.*

This is an example of a rare contribution from the researcher. We both were careful to allow the pupils to respond to the text without intervention as far as possible. However, there were times when it was deemed appropriate. In this case Lee is helpfully offered a technical word.

They also brought knowledge of other literary characters without needing any prompts:

Jocelyn: *That looks like Santa.*

Lee: *And that looks like Gandalf.*

Jocelyn: *This is a wizard in his power but it actually looks like Shakespeare for some reason.*

This pair also brought their knowledge of the Roman Empire:

Jocelyn: *This looks like the coliseum in...*

Lee: *In Rome.*

Jocelyn: *Yeah in Rome.*

Maps were an attraction and time was often spent identifying what they could recognise:

Millie: *This is like the map of the world...England doesn't look the same. Well it says Europa?*

John: *And America?*

Millie: *England doesn't look the same at all.*

John: *I'm sure Australia is more down there than right up there.*

Millie: *And it's a different shape but all like the islands look similar.*

They also made connections with other games:

Millie: (referring to the pendant that locates magical creatures) *This is like chips..you know.. when you can follow your animal..... He looks like Gandalf. I was playing a game with my friend and it's called Diablo and they've all got these different gems and they've all got these different spirits. They're purple, blue, silver, orange and black and that one is spirit, that one is spirit.*

And films they had watched:

Louise: *If you were sucked into a black hole would you die instantly or would you survive until you came out somewhere else?*

Mike: *Yes, I think it takes you to another universe.*

Louise: *That would be awesome!*

Mike: *Cos I got the DVD of The Dawn of the Planet of the Apes...this man gets sucked into a black hole and everyone was apes.*

This led to an in-depth discussion on time travel, time-machines and dinosaurs which included further detailed reference to the box set of the Planet of the Apes.

Evidence that the readers were relaxed and enjoying their engagement with the text is demonstrated by humour:

Joel: (referring to a miniature book) *It's the perfect size for Sophie.*

As researchers, we also joined in the fun:

Researcher: (looking at the pendant) *It definitely means there's a magical beast about.*

Jocelyn: *Might that be Lee?*

Researcher: *Yes.*

Jocelyn laughs loudly.

Yana and Alan had fun with a picture of a Yeti:

Yana: (looking at the Yeti) *Oh it's so cute. Just like my granddad.*

(laughter)

Alan: *Don't tell your granddad*

Yana: *The yeti, by the way, not the salamander*

(more laughter)

Millie also noticed a family similarity: (Looking at picture of an alien) *He looks a kind of bit like my dad.*

The ability to make links to other texts has already been highlighted. Unsurprisingly many were linked to J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series showing how much these texts are part of the readers' cultural landscape.

John: *Yes. And it says like in Harry Potter, you use unicorn tail hairs to make a wand. So if I make a wand, I can stick one of those in.*

Susie: *A phoenix is the one that burns when it dies and then is reborn out of the ashes 'cos Dumbledore's got one.*

Lee:(referring to an illustration of an Owl) *That looks like Harold from Harry Potter.*

Jocelyn: *Hedwig!*

Lee: *Hedwig!*

Disengaging from the Narrative

As well as our focus on engagement with the text, we were also interested to see if the pupils would disengage from their reading in order to undertake tasks, tests, games and other such activities. This ability to oscillate was noted by Mackay (2002) in her research and was repeated here as all pupils stopped for up to 10 minutes to focus on a task. However, many were so keen to get started that they didn't read the instructions first and subsequently needed help. *Wizardology* tasks which attracted the readers were divination cards and a beast locator. For some pupils the secondary world had entered their imaginations as they looked round to see if there were any beasts in the room as they manipulated the pendant.

Alienology has a series of quite challenging logic tests which were largely ignored on this first reading. While they do not appear to play a large role in the narrative, they are significant because only those who have passed them are immune from the dangerous S.L.I.M.E., a purple substance which can be pulled into different shapes. The 'slime' was a big attraction in which the pupils enjoyed manipulating. However, they only read the warning after touching it and demonstrated mock horror when they realised it is dangerous to those who have not passed the logic tests! Hence this is another indicator of a willingness to enter a secondary world. Two activities attracted attention: the Alien detector and a detecting mirror.

Eight riddles are offered in *Monsterology*. The pair spent 8 minutes absorbed in working out the answers asking for pencil and paper to help. A second task which engaged them was the decoding of Ogham script (ancient Celtic writing). The code can be found at the in the Cabinet of Curiosities which is the last item. The *Ologies* series usually has a task at the end which encourages the reader to turn back to the beginning to solve more puzzles and hence encourages a second encounter with the text. This is important as much is missed on a first encounter.

Tensions between Realism and Fantasy

Having looked at examples of engagement this might be a good moment to pause to consider what being an *Ologist* means in terms of these books. Clearly the suffix 'ologist' means an expert in the field. The text is given by an expert and the reader is an apprentice; learning the trade. Hence they are invited to read for information, to learn and put into practice what they have been told. At the same time, of course, the reader knows that they are entering into a game where they are taking on a role as the information in the *Ologies* is largely fantasy. And it is clear from the analysis the pupils are able to do both. They are analysing, responding, working out, solving puzzles and at the same time noting how the texts are produced and understand the tension offered between realism and fantasy. This is evidenced by the following:

John: (*reads about stone of immortality not being real*)

Millie: *That's a shame.*

John: *Oh.*

Millie: *Well obviously I'm disappointed now because if the Philosopher's Stone isn't real how do we know the Goblet of fire isn't real...or Fluffy.*

John: *Fluffy is real, Fluffy was Cerberus dog.*

Millie: *Yes but he's got three heads!*

John: *Yes-Cerberus dog!*

Millie: *Oh yes!*

They simulated disappointment that the immortality stone was not true because it apparently brought into question their confidence in the Harry Potter series, much-loved books which they had been immersed in for years. However they were able to move swiftly beyond this 'sad' discovery by reasoning that Fluffy must still be real because he is referenced in Greek mythology. In this way the children responded to the book's intention and guise - that it is a factual text full of fantasy facts - which they were able to willingly respond to with their own playful constructs based on readings of other texts. The observations of how children engage with the *Ologies* give a fascinating insight into how they are able to move fluidly between reality and fantasy. They demonstrate that they understand the rules of play in operation established by the book and that they are free to accept or disclaim whatever is put before them. They show that in reading it is both the author and the reader that has authority - the author to invite and provoke, the reader to engage and respond. For example, *Wizardology* presents itself as an authority on magic. This pseudo authority is accepted by the children who appear to believe the 'facts' that they are reading, while applying their own rules of playful logic which are rooted in their own well-developed constructs of make-believe. This tension between realism and fantasy induced a playful logic that moved seamlessly between the primary and secondary world. For example, in the majority of cases they seemed to accept the fantasy facts suggested by the *Ologies* while demonstrating that they too had well-developed constructs of the secondary world:

Joel: *I do believe that aliens are real cos there's got to be something more out in space.*

Susie: *Magic's real-some types are.*

Joel: *Yeah!*

Susie: *Santa's definitely real. The only reason people don't believe it is because one year they're naughty and he doesn't come and then their mums and dads have to put it in 'cos Santa's not going to come.*

Interestingly some facts appeared to be dismissed either because they contradicted the children's experiences, reasoning or just a plain unwillingness to believe:

John: (reading) *Flying ointment! Oh that's stupid!*

Susie: *I reckon because this book is meant to be old I reckon they think that the dogs have a magical sense of smell but they don't because it's just their natural behaviour.*

Joel: *I know skeletons are true but I don't think skeletons coming alive are true.*

However, just as the books invited and provoked the reader, that invitation left the reader free to engage and respond in whatever way suited them, and they moved very quickly from outright dismissal of some fantasy facts to complete acceptance of others.

John: *What if you have a massive aeroplane carpet!*

Millie: *I don't think you can get one of those!*

John: *You can make one...with phoenix feathers.*

Although John had dismissed the idea of flying ointment, apparently a flying carpet was perfectly feasible as long as you had the right materials to make it. Throughout their interaction with the text the children expressed a strong desire for the book to be true:

John: *It'd be good to practice wizardology.*

Louise: *I wish they'd actually tell you. If there was like a scientist note in the back - 'Aliens are real!'*

And often engaging with the text as if it was true:

Mike: (After using the fish test from *Alienology*): *Phew! I am human!*

Or to put into practice the things that they had read:

Millie: (reading out a spell for concealing things) *Hocus Pocus!*

John: (Pointing to researcher miming waving a wand) *Hocus Pocus!*

Researcher: *Oh thank you!*

They expressed clearly that constant interchange between what they knew to be true and what they wished for:

Susie: *When you read like a book, I sometimes wish it could actually happen and I've tried to do it. I've tried to make my own wand before but I didn't have the right knife.*

This comment demonstrates perfectly the willing suspension of disbelief. Sophie understood that the book wasn't real but wished that it was, blaming the defunct wand on not having the right knife rather than on the non-existence of magic. This was also evidenced in an exchange between Millie and John.

John: (pointing to the biscuit tin) *Open sesame!.... Oh didn't open the biscuit tin.*

Millie: *Probably cos you need a wand, John.*

John: *My hand's my wand!*

Again it was not the existence of magic that was brought into question but the fact that John did not have a wand. Millie tried to express how the tension of holding together reality and fantasy aided the reader's enjoyment and pleasure of reading:

It's like if you truly believe it will happen. I always believed I might fly but it never happened but I just liked the thought that I might fly one day. It's imagining that this can happen makes you more interested.

However, while children showed a real desire to physically engage with this fantasy world they were able to see the benefits of it being purely confined to the imagination:

Joel: *Imagine walking into your bedroom and finding something like that lying on your bed.*

Susie: *I would be quite scared cos you'd be wondering if you were dreaming it or not, especially if it's in the middle of the night.*

Joel: *Imagine if it was actually real.*

Susie: *That would be really horrible. I can picture that happening as well.*

However, they could envisage the personal advantages:

Jocelyn: *I would probably cast (a spell) for my brother to be nice to me because he kind of argues with me all the time.*

This constant tension between realism and fantasy enabled the reader to fully engage with the *Ologies* while understanding the notion of irony embedded in such texts. Significantly they are able to discuss how they oscillate between immersing themselves in the fantasy while also observing how the text is organised and sensing the tension between fact and fiction. Yana and Alan comment on the layout demonstrating they understand the features of non-fiction:

Alan: *...it has an index and a glossary and.....I always forget their names...non-fiction...*

Yana: (looking) *and they have got Latin names....as well as common names.*

Typographical features that offer a sense of the authentic are noted: *It's clever how they make it look like ink pen.* Alan also observes that placing fictive creatures on a recognisable map of the world validates their existence:

Alan: (locating Unicorns on a map of the world) *I like the way they mark where they are. So this is like Arabia. This is and this one here is Southern Europe*

The provenance is discussed with reference to *Wizardology* by Jocelyn and Lee as they refer to the design and Lee offers his theory about how they make the pages look old:

Jocelyn: *Out of the whole book I like the old-fashioned look of it.*

Researcher: *Why do you like that?*

Jocelyn: *It shows that it's quite old and that its being going on for a long time and it's finally come to us.*

Lee: *Cos if it was like a wizard's book it's not going to be like from our time now.*

Jocelyn: *That's the word I was looking for. It's not modern.*

Lee: *Like what you can do. You get a teabag.*

Jocelyn: *Tea bag!*

Lee: *And it's been burnt and ripped.*

Jocelyn: *It just springs out. This is a very old book.*

Jocelyn offers further comments on the book: *I like this book cos it like gets you interactive.... Cos some people find it difficult to image these in their heads and the pictures just help.... The pictures bring out loads of information.*

Discussion

From the data collected and presented above it can be seen that there is match between implied and actual reader. Significantly the pupils are able to oscillate between reading different types of discourse, stop to try out an activity, discuss, ask questions, respond intellectually and emotionally. There is much in the literature concerning pupil talk with Barnes and Todd (1995), Wells (1987) and Cordon (2000) for example emphasising the importance of dialogic talk in concept development and how often there is less opportunity for this in the classroom. This is particularly relevant now in England and Wales with more top-down teaching, increased testing with concomitant sense of what is right and wrong. Hence pupils are more likely to be tested on decoding skills rather than enjoyment. On the other hand there are advocates of literature circles including King and Briggs (2012) who emphasise open exploration of text while significant in-service courses take place at the CPLE focusing on the power of reading children's literature. In addition Barrs and Cork (2001) have demonstrated how reading quality literature and engaging in role play produces quality writing. However, there is still less on what is in the texts that support dialogic talk and engages the readers in 'the pleasure of the text' (Barthes 1989). On the surface the *Ology* books appear to be a challenging read. There is no first person narrative from the perspective of a child, the language is often technical and challenging but the pictures and movable elements serve to engage even a less experienced reader. In spite of the challenges of this series, there is enough to maintain an interest and captivate the pupils' attention. The pupils accepted the invitation to bring their own knowledge to the texts with alacrity, were keen to ponder on what they were reading, enjoyed the physical 'hands on' and rose to the challenge.

What is often missing from pedagogical discussion on how to develop dialogic talk is what to put in front of the pupils. The *Ologies* do teach what readers learn and serve as zones of proximal development in which the reader is moved on to build on what they know and learn the new while engaged in a social activity. Moreover they were well aware of the tensions between fact and fantasy offering the opportunity to evaluate what they were reading; an important life-skill where what is presented as 'factual' may be anything but that.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

(4,979 words)

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