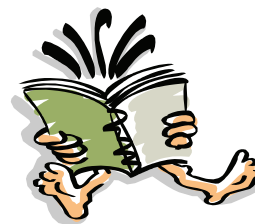


# Special Feature



## So the wheel turns: crossing boundaries

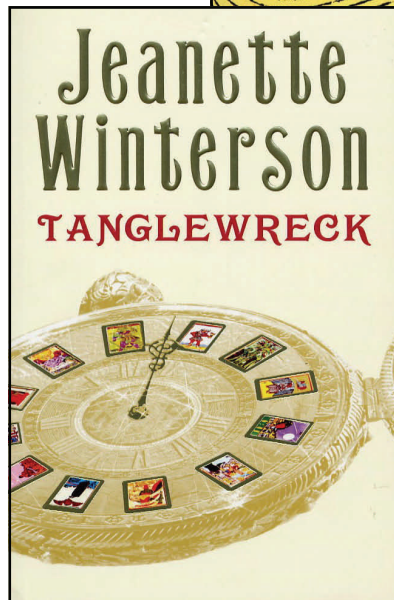
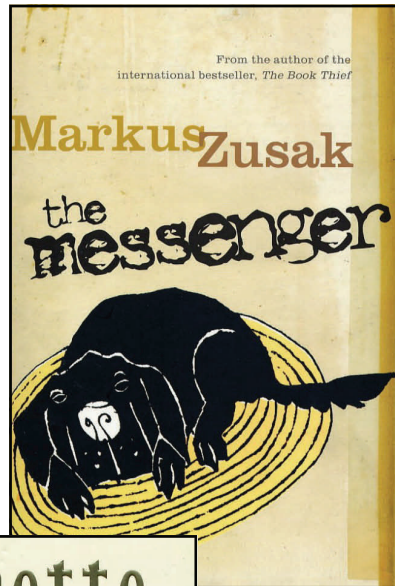
Before Jeanette Winterson's first book for young adults, *Tanglewreck*, was published in July, there was much speculation as to whether this award-winning author of adult literature could make a satisfactory transition to a presumably 'easier' market aimed at children and young adults. Reviews were indeed mixed. 'Far from a wreck, but a bit of a tangle' concluded England's *Sunday Times*<sup>1</sup>, and other reviewers also expressed concerns about the ambition of the project, while acknowledging the merit of the writing. Kate Thompson, herself an award-winning writer for young people, observed in her review of *Tanglewreck*<sup>2</sup> that: 'The desire of writers of adult literature to venture into children's fiction is an understandable one. The genre offers a wider palette with which to explore ideas.'

Winterson is not alone as a successful author from the adult market who has chosen to broaden their palette. As well as a review of *Tanglewreck*, this issue of *Fiction Focus* contains a review of *Sexy* by Joyce Carol Oates – winner of a US National Book Award and three-times nominee for the Pulitzer Prize – who has received critical acclaim for her earlier YA novels such as *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* and *Black Girl / White Girl*. Other authors with a foot in both camps, and whose books have been reviewed in this issue, include Nick Earls and Scott Westerfeld. Isabelle Allende and Clive Cussler are two others who have seen the need to write for a younger audience, albeit less successfully, while Tim Winton doesn't seem to put a foot wrong, writing as easily for the adolescent as for the literati.

While some authors best known for their 'literary' writing have been experimenting with a YA format, other predominantly YA authors have been reaching a broader audience, so perhaps the boundaries, especially at the upper end of the teenage years, are becoming blurred. There have been scholarly forays into defining essential characteristics of YA literature. Owen<sup>3</sup> identifies the need for a teenage protagonist, a fast-pace and a sense of optimism as being key markers of any YA title, which could come in any number of genres. A YA novel will allow readers to explore issues that are important to them without necessarily providing solutions.

So is Nick Earls predominantly a YA author; an adult author or does it really matter? Although it is sometimes comfortable to pigeonhole writers, such artificial constraints may prevent us from having memorable reading experiences. Scott Westerfeld crosses all boundaries, but those who dismiss 'futuristic' fiction simply because it is speculative, believing it to be a genre they do not enjoy, will miss the very great pleasure of reading the work of a writer who refuses to be categorised. Sonya Hartnett has long resisted the YA label, saying: 'I've been called every sort of writer and now I am every sort of writer.'<sup>4</sup>

David Mitchell, Mark Haddon and Curtis Sittenfeld raise other questions. Is a book *about* an adolescent necessarily a YA title? *Black Swan Green*, also reviewed in this issue, is just such a book, but was also longlisted for the 2006 Man Booker Prize, a success not enjoyed by too many dedicated



YA titles. Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, a Whitbread Book of the Year with an adolescent protagonist, has been embraced equally by adult and young adult readers. The fact that *Prep*, Sittenfeld's debut novel, was set in a private school and dealt with the concerns of adolescents, did not prevent it from being regarded as one of the best ten books of last year and being translated into twenty-two languages. Similarly, does John Green's debut novel *Looking for Alaska* belong on the YA or the adult shelves or both? Even Harry Potter titles have been issued with alternative jackets designed to appeal to adults.

In the United States, Markus Zusak has been enjoying much acclaim with *The Book Thief*.

Nominated for a 2006 Quill Award for YA Literature, it has also reached a discerning adult audience, at one stage briefly toppling *The Da Vinci Code* from the *New York Times Bestseller List*. The signing of film rights should ensure continued success. At home, the same title has been honoured by the publishing industry in 2006, being nominated for Literary Fiction Book of the Year and Book of the Year in all categories. *The Messenger* (CBCA winner in 2003 and marketed as *I am the Messenger* in the US) has been published in a number of editions, many of which are directly aimed at an adult readership. Fans of *Bridget Jones's Diary* have seen similarities in Jaclyn Moriarty's *Feeling Sorry for Celia*, which was marketed in the US with just such an audience in mind.<sup>5</sup>

Writers of speculative fiction have long had devoted readers of all ages. Terry Pratchett, Garth Nix, Cecilia Dart-Thornton and many others who write in the genre are as much enjoyed by adults as by teens. Gillian Rubinstein, reinvented as Lian Hearn, has not only crossed the nightingale floor, she has written books of universal appeal with her *Tales of the Otori* series.



In the nineteenth century, a story written by an English clergyman for a young girl called Alice soon reached a much wider readership. Today it is regarded as a timeless classic. The appetite for YA literature as we now know it probably began with J D Salinger more than fifty years ago with *The Catcher in the Rye*, a novel originally intended for adults. Has the wheel turned full circle? If a book is written well, surely it will speak to any audience.

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2. 'Silver's time tornado'. Review of *Tanglewreck* by Kate Thompson. Guardian Unlimited. 10 June 2006. [books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/childrenandteens/0,,1793959,00.htm](http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/childrenandteens/0,,1793959,00.htm)

(continued on page 10)



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[www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/31/1099219994120.html?from=storylhs](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/31/1099219994120.html?from=storylhs) 
5. White, Kerry. (2001), 'Border crossings'. *AB&P*. July 2001. p.19.

- Pratchett, Terry**  
Discworld series
- Sittenfeld, Curtis**  
Prep  
The Man of my Dreams\*
- Westerfeld, Scott**  
Uglies Trilogy (Uglies; Pretties; Specials\*)  
Peeps\*
- Winterson, Jeanette**  
Tanglewreck\*
- Winton, Tim**  
Cloudstreet
- Zusak, Markus**  
The Book Thief  
The Messenger\*

### Crossing boundaries: select list of authors and titles

\*Reviewed this issue

**Disher, Gary**

The Divine Wind

**Earls, Nick**

48 Shades of Brown

Monica Bloom\*

Zig Zag Street

**Forsyth, Kate**

The Starthorn Tree

The Tower of Ravens

**Gaiman, Neil**

Coraline

Mirrorsmask

**Green, John**

Looking for Alaska

**Haddon, Mark**

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

**Hearn, Lian**

Across the Nightingale Floor

Grass for his Pillow

Brilliance of the Moon

The Harsh Cry of the Heron (November 2006 release)

**Lanagan, Margo**

Black Juice

**Marillier, Juliet**

Wildwood Dancing (to be reviewed in *Fiction Focus, Issue 1 2007*)

**Mitchell, David**

Black Swan Green\*

**Oates, Joyce Carol**

Big Mouth & Ugly Girl

Black Girl / White Girl

Sexy\*

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