



CHALLENGING READING: ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDUCATION WITH CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

STRAND 4: THE COGNITIVE CHALLENGE OF EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE WORLDS

Reading Alternatives: Ethical and Cognitive Challenges of Time Travel Stories for Young Adults

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The last decade has engendered a surprising number of stories for young adults that have at their centre a group of protagonists who travel through time in order to ‘put history right’. These novels, often in the commercially successful series format, are stories of empowerment of otherwise disempowered teenagers, who are frequently found saving the world from a fate far worse than history as we know it.

What are the challenges and affordances of such alternative histories for their young readers? These texts promote and activate any historical knowledge the young readers might have and add to that, and they do so by referring to well-known tropes of time travel and other references to popular culture. Cognitively, readers are required to engage

in world-building, in (co-)constructing alternative histories as they read and to empathise with the teen characters who are thrown into historical periods of which they often have little knowledge. There are ethical and philosophical questions involved in armchair time travelling, too, such as that of determinism and free will, or decisions between ‘original’ and potentially ‘better’ histories, which challenge the readers’ positions morally and ethically. These affordances provide ample opportunity for discussions and activities in the EFL classroom, ranging from CLIL (content and language integrated learning) projects, in which a time travel text is used in order to make a particular historical period more graspable to their learners, to metadiscussions about alternative history lines in which, say, Hitler decides not to invade Russia in 1941.

In my presentation, I will refer to examples from a number of different time travel series of the past decade, such as Alex Scarrow’s *Time Riders* (2010-2014), Carl Ashmore’s *The Time Hunters* (2012-2015), Damian Dibben’s *The History Keepers* (2011-), and Eoin Colfer’s *Artemis Fowl* (2001-2012) and *W.A.R.P.* (2013-), to illustrate the potential processes of world-making and meaning construction that young readers engage in, the ethical challenges that these stories raise, and how they can be made good use of in the EFL classroom.

Susanne Reichl is Associate Professor at the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Vienna, Austria. Her PhD thesis focussed on postcolonial British literature (*Cultures in the Contact Zone: Ethnic Semiosis in Black British Literature*, 2002) and her *habilitation* on the teaching of literature at university (*Cognitive Principles, Critical Practice: Reading Literature at University*, 2009). She has published on postcolonial humour (ed. with Mark Stein, *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, 2005) and on teacher education (ed. with Julia Huettner et al., *Theory and Practice in Teacher Education. Bridging the Gap*, 2012). She is currently working on a cultural history of time travel for young readers.