

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Genre Hybridity in Contemporary Hungarian Youth Prose

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a, The objective of the thesis, the definition of the topic

In my thesis I analyse the outstanding works of contemporary Hungarian youth prose, and I try to place the selected texts in the context of contemporary youth literature, written primarily in Hungarian. In order to do this, it is essential to know the historical background of literature, so in the introduction I focus on the historical aspects of children's and youth literature.

The focus of my research is youth prose, but to understand this subfield it is necessary to start with children's and youth literature as a whole. The general introduction is followed by an interpretation of five contemporary Hungarian youth texts. The main criterion for the selection of the works was *hybridisation*, which is a key concept not only in children's and youth literature, but also in (contemporary) fiction in general. In my analysis, I will show that hybridisation can be understood on several levels in books for adolescents: many texts are characterised by a mix of genres, themes and registers. The primary aim of my thesis is to illustrate this hybridisation: I am interested in how certain genres are mixed within texts. This leads to the other key concept of the thesis, the *crossing of boundaries*: one of the defining characteristics of youth prose is its transgressive character, the serial subversion of genre and linguistic codes – in this process, the preconceived expectations of youth literature may change. Another aim of the dissertation is to explore the characteristics of youth prose through the interpretation of the selected texts. The different genres and themes of the novels also show similarities in many respects, and in the summary of the dissertation I will discuss these parallels in a more general sense.

b, An overview of the methods used

In the introductory chapter, I discuss the literary historical antecedents, pedagogical, theological, psychological aspects that determine the reception of children's and youth texts; I draw on the results of childhood studies, childism, canon theory, genre theory and genre history, among others. The general introduction is followed by an interpretation of five contemporary Hungarian youth literary texts. I begin each chapter with an examination of genre issues and continue with an analysis of the novels in question. At the beginning of the chapters, I discuss the genre characteristics of the short story, the crime novel, the historical novel, the dystopia, the adventure novel and the pulp fiction, adapting the results of genre theory with respect to each text. The themes of the works analysed in the thesis involve approaches and methods from a wide range of disciplines. Thus I draw on the results of sociology of reading, trauma studies, memory studies, ethnography, pop culture studies or (Protestant) theology. I approach each text through a close reading approach, using in particular the tools of narratology in my analyses. I place great emphasis on scenographic analysis, which leads to more general conclusions. One of the semantic and methodological novelties of the thesis lies in its attempt to link sometimes seemingly distant and non-reflective approaches and their results, in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the phenomena at stake.

c, The new academic results of the dissertation

Introduction: a general overview of the issue

The introductory chapter aims to summarise research findings on children's and youth literature. First, the question of the definability of children's and youth literature is addressed, with particular attention to Hans-Heino Ewers' three-tier definition, which has become a reference in the international literature on the subject. I deal with the history of the concept, highlighting its theological and historical antecedents, since it is worth reflecting on the changes in children's literature not only in the context of pedagogy but also in the context of Christian theology. Moving closer to the corpus of texts under study, I will locate youth literature at the borderline between literature for adults and literature for children, and I will also examine the specificities of this borderland. I then turn to a typology of youth novels, drawing mainly on the research of Gabriele von Glasenapp and Gina Weinkauff. Finally, I will outline the theoretical foundations of the genre.

Short stories for youth readers

In the problem statement, I discuss the characteristics of the short story genre and the literary history of the youth short story. After the regime change, during the “pathfinder” decades of children's and youth literature, the publication of youth short stories was pushed into the background, and in 2016, with the collection *Jelen!* (Móra Publishing House), the genre received a new impetus. It is likely that sociological considerations of reading play a role in the (re-)emergence of short story anthologies on the children's and youth book market. Many researchers point out that the reading habits of the „digital natives” are very different from those of previous generations. It is in this situation that the short story can enter as a kind of “accommodation genre”. It is accommodative in that it adapts to the changing reading attitudes of the age group (consumption of shorter texts) and also in that it can help in the linguistic-rhetorical socialisation of the age group. I therefore begin my study of „juvenile” prose genres with the short story because I believe that this type of text can be the first stage in the process of educating adolescents to become readers.

The target audience for youth short story anthologies may have a genre background from primary or secondary school literature classes. The genre specificities mediated by literary teaching are also characteristic of many contemporary youth novels, but since the textual universe under discussion is highly fragmented, the focus of my investigation is on the question: on what basis do the bodies of texts read, organised and labelled as youth novels enter into an

architextual relationship with each other? By examining the narratives, thematic connections, and language use of the texts in this chapter, I have found that some texts confirm and others undermine our prior knowledge not only of what „youth” is, but also of what a „short story” is. The youth short story is a twofold relational concept: it is distinguished from the (youth) novel on the one hand, and from short stories for adults (and children, see for example Ervin Lázár: *Százpettyes katica*) on the other. The duality of the term also implies a certain openness: the adjective „youth” can successfully integrate short stories originally written for adults, but we also see examples of a short story originally published as a youth novel finding its place in an „adult” book. Péter Szirák's argument, quoted in the chapter, shows that not only the short story, but the genre as such, is a borderline, intertextual aspect, and that the short story can „ally” with other genres; as a result, further subgroups may emerge. These groups could include the „youth novel”, which I believe has a strong transgressive element. Reading youth novels is transgressive on several levels and in several senses: transgressing prior knowledge of the genre, encountering specific linguistic-poetic worlds.

The genre analysis will be followed by an analysis of András Dániel's short story *Off*, published in the *Budapest Off* anthology. Its unique narrative style, associative structure and complex spatio-temporal organisation set it apart from the other texts in the anthology: the other works in the volume are characterised by their plot-oriented, linear structure. The genre designation „youth short story” can be used appropriately for the text, since its theme is the processing of a break-up, its narrative closely follows the point of view of the teenage girl protagonist, and its language draws on adolescent slang. The text recalls memories of the relationship in a fragmented way, so I have examined the short story from the perspective of memory and trauma studies, reading the end of the relationship as a kind of trauma. The short story becomes a kind of postmodern collage, as the protagonist's surprising associations of images mobilise a myriad of contexts. The narrator uses the technique of narrated monologue to convey the character's consciousness, and the short story is perhaps best associated with the Mészölyan tradition of open canon authors for its reflective, filmic narrative. The transgressive character of the short story is asserted by the cinematic references (*Mad Max*, Disney castle, Béla Lugosi playing Dracula): the written text constantly gestures towards cinematic media, thus bringing into play patterns that are far removed from elite discourse. Through childhood memories we see that the protagonist is a girl with a stable identity, but since the break-up her whole world has been questioned. However, through the associatively constructed personal narrative, to which we as readers have access through the narrator, the identity can be reconstructed.

Youth crime fiction and taboo breaking

In the introduction to this chapter I describe the characteristics of crime fiction and taboo books. I interpret crime fiction as a way of acquiring reading practice: the (classic) crime novel operates in a recognisable pattern, maintains the attention of the young reader through its twisty plot and makes increased use of a range of mental activities. According to the cognitive literary approach, the processes of mindreading, cognitive mapping or foregrounding, among others, are more active in reading crime fiction than in other texts, and the enhanced functioning of these activities can be drawn upon in the teaching of literature.

A significant milestone in the history of the genre is Erich Kästner's 1929 novel *Emil and the Detectives*. Kästner's novel has all the characteristics of later youth crime novels: children take over the task of crime detection from adults; there is a distance, even mutual distrust, between the worlds of children and adults; the novel is a kind of genre fusion, as it brings together the characteristics of the holiday novel, the gang novel and the adventure novel. Marja Rauch uses Emil as an occasion to formulate the characteristics of the (early) youth crime novel, which are: the investigators are children or young people who form a group; the children or young people solve the crime without the help of adults; the perpetrator is an adult; the motive for the crime is not revealed; the investigation has exciting twists and turns, during which the young reader does not encounter serious crimes such as murder; and social order is restored after the crime has been successfully solved. Many of these insights are also characteristic of István Csukás's novel *Keménykalap és Krumpliorr*, which can be seen as a direct successor to Emil. Opinions are divided as to the extent to which the detective genre has become prevalent in youth fiction since Csukás's work; what the works mentioned in this essay have in common is that none of them can be considered a classic detective story, but all of them are characterised by genre hybridity. Another common characteristic is the emphasis on taboo subjects: contemporary youth literature, for example, deals with issues such as bullying, parent-child problems, fear of the unknown or family secrets in the context of detective novels. In the following, I briefly examine what contemporary problems appear in contemporary youth literature, and then I will analyse Anikó Wéber's work *Az osztály vesztese*.

In the first chapter of *Az osztály vesztese*, we learn in „real time” that a pupil ties up a classmate, puts him in a minion mask, takes a photo of him and scribbles the caption above his head. The perpetrator shares the photo on a profile created by the class teacher, which is updated almost daily by the pupils of class 5 as part of a literary project. This way, it is not clear who took and uploaded the photo, nor, because of the mask, who is in the photo – the identity of the perpetrator and the victim remains unclear until the end of the text. Here is a mixture of genres:

the work can be interpreted as a crime story or as a succession of short stories. The individual chapters are not, however, crime novels in the Poean sense: the texts do not reveal the identity of the perpetrator. The short narratives, written from different narrative and character points of view, introduce us to some of the members of the class, their role (or lack of it) in the crime, and their private problems, so we read short stories that are very character-driven, usually ending with a punch line of some kind. The heterodiegetic narrator, in the singular third person, gives voice to the thoughts of ten different pupils as free dependent speech, and by the last three chapters he „changes” into an omniscient narrator to give a credible account of the details of the crime and its participants. The protagonists of each short story could be both perpetrators and victims; shame and guilt are present in each narrative, and it is impossible to tell whether the central characters in each chapter are ashamed of being perpetrators or victims. The „props” of the classic detective story are all present in the texts, but the most important character of the classic detective story, the Great Detective, is left out of the narrative, so the reader becomes the detective. The text also addresses the issue of bullying, and I will draw on psychological findings on that in my analysis. The book is therefore not only based on unravelling a mystery, but also on the group dynamics of class communities, the problems and the conflicts that arise.

Youth historical fiction and science fiction

In the introduction to this chapter, I seek to answer the following question: how did works written primarily for adults or mixed-age groups become youth novels? Research into children's literature in English shows that Walter Scott's historical novels quickly became popular with children and young people; indeed, Dennis Butts argues that the enthusiastic reception of his works among young readers contributed to the genre's establishment. The novels of Scott or G. A. Henty also played a role in shaping „boyhood” and making „macho masculinity” the dominant model. In the light of English literature, we can see that early historical novels were written for a mixed age group, so there was no adult-child distinction. As the book market differentiated, however, with the emergence of books dedicated to young people, many historical novels found a place in this segment. The question of the pedagogical purpose of this genre cannot be avoided either: the usefulness of historical novels in teaching is a lasting legacy in our country too, and the „authentic” depiction of history and the „accurate” ordering of events have not helped to break down and rethink genre conventions. This view of the historical novel as a means of strengthening national consciousness has determined the reception of youth historical novels for many decades.

This heritage is partly followed by Pagony's Absolute History series, but it is undeniable that the volumes in the series are aimed at young people in the 21st century, exploiting the potential of linguistic and situational humour, are adventurous and twisty, and do not have an overt didacticism. Parts of the series play on the theme of time travel, in keeping with the science fiction theme. The novels are also closely linked to the tradition of crime fiction: almost all of the series have some kind of investigation, and the characters are either investigating a family mystery or a historical event. Ten volumes in the Absolute History series have been published up to 2024, and I wondered whether the novels would be confronted with the experience of the foreignness in the Koselleckian sense. In the novel analysed below, this kind of confrontation takes place: Balázs Zágoni's novel *Szamos-parti Hollywood* successfully combines various genre concepts and themes, and his unique narrative language is able to address readers and make historical events „come alive”.

The novel's unusual opening, compared to the rest of the series, sets a time and a space for the plot, and also focuses on the novel's central metaphor, film, which appears in its materiality and as a memory image. The particular narrative style of the introduction is characteristic of the text as a whole: the narrative, which is predominantly external in focus, often shows in profound detail the clothing and material surroundings of the 21st and 20th centuries, the various locations, and even the facial expressions and gestures of the characters. Balázs Zágoni has also developed his own special language, which makes the events of his chosen era tangible, almost experienceable: he has chosen the language of film-like narration. One of the stakes of the plot is to get the reels of the silent film *A tolonc* into the right place: like the novel, the film begins with the topos of the setting off, and certain scenes in the film and the novel can be read together. The 21st-century characters become spectators, mediators and actors at the same time, and the novel thus creatively responds to the dilemmas of time travel by combining the functions of spectator, mediator and participant in the characters.

Dystopia, science fiction and „religiously relevant” literature

In the introduction, I explore the relationship between dystopia and hope: hope is a central concept in the literature of the genre. Dystopias for adolescents offer a kind of „hope shaped by hopelessness”: the (teenage) protagonist's courage, hypocrisy, creativity and strength can show the way out of hopeless situations and reshape the whole of society. This is why, of all the genres discussed so far, dystopia is perhaps the genre that makes the most powerful use of didacticism: it draws attention to a possible disaster or series of disasters and, with a mostly hopeful ending, suggests that there are strategies of action that can avoid total collapse. In this way, dystopias

can also be understood in an eschatological framework, in so far as they provide possible answers to questions about the ultimate, the future of the individual and of humanity. Péter Gombos, among others, has worked extensively on the genre in Hungarian, and I draw on the results of his dissertation in the introduction to this chapter. In his own typology of dystopias, Péter Gombos distinguishes between fairy-tale-based and science fiction-based dystopias, and a third group of works that cannot be classified in either of these two categories, thus interpreting the concept in relation to other genres. In contrast to the genres reviewed so far, dystopian codes are scarce in literature for children (kindergarten, primary school). One reason for this is the „unwritten convention” of the happy ending, or we can also point out that much of children's literature derives from folklore, while youth literature draws its inspiration from „adult” fiction. Dystopian fiction subverts the fairy-tale worldview: the characters in the most successful novels are nuanced, not clearly good and evil, and the ending does not restore „order” but rather destroys an inherently dysfunctional system, while the interpretative context is not children's books but rather science fiction for adults. I will therefore discuss the concept of science fiction, which I will interpret not as a genre, but as a theme, following Margit S. Sárdi. Following this insight, the writings that operate the genre codes of dystopia are a subset of science fiction texts, within which youth dystopias have enjoyed great popularity worldwide in recent decades. The reasons for the genre's popularity are explained, among other things, by the research of Justin Scholes and Jon Ostenson, who, on the basis of the best-known works, have found that their settings, themes and characters follow well the intellectual changes that occur during adolescence. As teenagers develop, they become increasingly capable of abstraction and critical thinking; they also show a growing interest in issues relating to society as a whole. In this way, dystopias aimed at them can help raise awareness of the role teenagers should play in their wider communities.

In the context of the novel to be analysed, it also seemed important to introduce the concept of „religiously relevant” literature. Magda Motté divides the corpus in question into three groups. The first group includes books that have a „moral-existential” message and deal with general human themes. The second group consists of „religious literature” which is not explicitly linked to any religion or denomination, but which interprets human experience from a transcendental dimension. The third group is that of „books with an explicit Judaeo-Christian message”, which Motté notes are often didactic and of little aesthetic value. In the category of „religious literature”, one might also include Balázs Zágoni's *Fekete fény* duology, which does not explicitly refer to the doctrine of Christianity, yet the image of religion as a god is a major determinant of the figure of the transcendent entity who is one of the central characters in the

novel. In what follows, therefore, I will interpret the novels using the tools of Christian, and within that, Protestant theology.

Balázs Zágoni's two-part novel (*A Gömb; Odaát*) presents a re-mediatized, technicized society that resembles the world of our time in many elements, but the story highlights what happens when hi-tech tools are used by the state to closely monitor and exploit the individual, thus severely limiting his freedom. The work draws on the tools of science fiction, yet its stakes are not the possible progress of science, but the personal choices of the individual. As one progresses in reading the duology, it becomes increasingly clear that the story can be read allegorically, as it explores the relationship between the individual and the transcendent in a possible I-Thou. In the development of this relationship, the novel seeks not only to show that effective rebellion against oppressive regimes is possible, but also to suggest that there is something beyond individuals and systems that can intervene in the course of events in a sovereign way. In Balázs Zágoni's duology, the aforementioned „hope shaped by hopelessness” can be born not only through the aspirations of the protagonist, but also through the work of the transcendent.

Pulp fiction, adventure novel and „crossover”

In the final analytical chapter of the thesis, I will address the question that arises perhaps most frequently in relation to youth literature: is this corpus of texts „high” literature or entertainment literature? In answering this question, I will first consider the genre of the adventure novel, with particular reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the adventure genre. The Russian author argues that it is impossible to say who the hero of an adventure novel is: if the protagonist had a definite character, this would limit the possibilities of the adventure, since anything can happen in the course of the adventure, the protagonist can become anything; he stands before us as a kind of unfinished character. At the heart of Bakhtin's theory, then, is a kind of „empty” character, who is placed in various situations, the resolution of which is helped or hindered by „eternal human” qualities. Bahtyin emphasises that the adventure novel is a genre rooted in antiquity and, in examining its origins in relation to serious and comic literature, he sees it as the first example of carnival literature. *Kalasznyikov és Rózsafüzér* as a postmodern novel, analysed in the second large unit of the chapter, is characterised by the features of carnival literature described by Bakhtin: it depicts a serious subject without detachment, in a comic, sometimes parodic way; it is ironic in its relation to the antecedents and traditions of fiction, entertainment literature or pop culture; it mixes the registers of „high” literature and trash culture, the live speech and the literary language. It was especially because of the latter two

aspects and the subtitle of the novel (*Pulp Fiction*) that I needed to deal with pulp fiction, which I approached from the perspective of pop culture research and folklore studies. I interpreted the concept of crossover on the basis of Krisztián Benyovszky and Rachel Falconer, and used the term in two senses in my analysis of the work under study: the novel can effectively address several age groups and it transposes characters from other texts into its own world.

The novel by András Fekete and Gergely Grancsa is perhaps the most subversive work of contemporary Hungarian youth literature. Not only because of the often obscene language or the open staging of drug use, but also because he changes tones, registers, and genre codes with extraordinary creativity, so that by the end of the novel the plot that we have known until then is almost completely withdrawn. The novel stands firmly in the 21st century's technicized environment, yet the story of its heroes becomes really exciting when they don't live their lives in the virtual world; for example, when we read the religious-themed dialogues of the characters, or when a short story of Krúdy (and the film scene inspired by it) is parodied. During the analysis, I quoted several scenes, as they exemplify the functioning of the entire novel. The dialogues are extremely emphasized in the text, we learn more about the characters based on what they say than from the narration. The narrator gives an account of the facial expressions, movements, and external characteristics of the characters, less about their inner consciousness processes. This is also why the characters become „empty characters”, because the narrator relatively rarely reports on their desires, emotions or thoughts. At several points, reading the text becomes similar to the reception of dramatic works: the narrator's interjections can also be interpreted as stage directions, and the dialogues can also be read as a succession of replicas, as utterances that prompt the interlocutor to respond. The conclusion of the novel reveals that we „actually” followed the plot of a film. As a result of the closure, the previous chapters are also reinterpreted, and when read from the perspective of the closure, the novel becomes a parody of what we read as a youth novel. As we have seen, the protagonists of these novels are teenagers who make serious decisions, sometimes solve seemingly intractable problems without the assistance of adults (or with minimal help), they are also closely based on the interpretive contexts of pop or trash culture, they are twisty, exciting, humorous, and the readers' fiction they also help his initiation – all this is true for this novel as well, but mostly with a parodistic twist.

Summary

In the last chapter, I summarize the results of the interpretations, which led to conclusions that may be suitable for thinking about works not discussed in the thesis. Finally, during the

arguments of this dissertation, but also in the field of children's and youth literature in general, I raise a dilemma that arises again and again: who is the reader and where is he? I outline the possible answers from aspects of reading and media research.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

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Budapest : Demokratikus Ifjúságért Alapítvány, Sárospatak, 114-136, 2024, (Bibliotheca
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