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FROM JUXTAPOSITION TO INTERWEAVE

INTERGENERATIONAL COLLABORATION IN THE WORKS OF BRIAN SELZNICK

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In his trilogy *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007), *Wonderstruck* (2011), and *The Marvels* (2015), Brian Selznick explores the possibilities inherent in child-adult relationships, particularly how children and adults can stimulate one another creatively and establish mutually beneficial communities. The books may not seem to be a trilogy because they share neither characters nor plot elements. However, Selznick has stated that he is "comfortable thinking of them as [such]" (quoted in Henderson), since not only are they united in their experimentation with form, but they are also united in theme: the nature of family. They share, as well, a celebration of creativity: film in *Hugo*, dioramas in *Wonderstruck*, and stage design in *The Marvels*. As Roni Natov observes, the arts are important tools to stimulate imagination (165), but I am more interested in creative activities as loci for cross-generational collaboration. This chapter considers Selznick's use of the orphan plot in all three books and then focuses on *Wonderstruck* and *The Marvels*, which structurally take a more sophisticated approach to intergenerational relationships, juxtaposing and interweaving stories focalized through different generational perspectives to demonstrate intergenerational solidarity. In *Wonderstruck*, there is a vivid connection between a grandmother and grandson as we read about the parallel adventures of Rose and Ben. In the final section of the book, parallelism is replaced by intersection when the now aged Rose meets Ben. The very structure of the narrative emphasizes cross-generational cooperation. Similarly, in

The Marvels a family history presented entirely in pictures is succeeded by a word-only narrative of Joseph trying to untangle the mysteries of his Uncle Albert's life. The narratives are connected by clever incorporation of visual and verbal clues, and Albert comes to find in Joseph a creative collaborator. In the end, Joseph makes a story of his own adult life that both pays homage to and is enabled by his uncle's story. In both works, the narratives of children and adults become symbiotic, highlighting the degree to which the generations thrive when they collaborate in telling their stories and helping one another find purpose and place in the world.

ORPHANS AND CROSS-GENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Initially, Selznick's child protagonists are either literally or figuratively orphaned: Hugo's and Ben's parents are dead; Rose's mother rejects her and her father is distant; and Joseph's parents send their son to a boarding school to prevent him from disrupting their lives. Despite their seeming powerlessness, though, these children seek agency in running away from circumstances in which their development is stunted. Maria Nikolajeva has addressed the carnivalesque freedom provided by the runaway plot (20). Yet, she argues, such plots always end in restoring the usual power structure that privileges adulthood. To be sure, there are many social and legal structures in place that prevent children from having autonomy. However, while I take Nikolajeva's point that much children's literature is aetonormative, preserving and normalizing a power imbalance between children and adults, I also find in some contemporary texts, such as Selznick's, a more nuanced treatment of the relationship between child and adult, wherein child characters exercise agency by, as Michelle Superle argues, "collaborat[ing] with adults to realize goals and intentions, [. . .] seek[ing] to realize their rights and/or responsibilities, and [. . .] demonstrat[ing] critical thinking and/or problem solving capacities" (152). Moreover, Richard Flynn suggests that, rather than re-inscribing a hard boundary between adult and child, setting the two in a binary relationship that privileges the adult, we think instead of "the life course as a continuum [. . .] and [recognize] the intersection of the natural with the cultural and of modes of being and becoming that persist throughout our lives" (262–63). Selznick's books show that viewing adults as well as children as beings who differ in abilities and agency allows us to identify spaces where adults and children can interact and cooperate for mutual pleasure and benefit.

For Selznick, one of those spaces is the creative and identity-forming process of telling stories. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* has been rightly celebrated for

its innovative formal hybridity. Nevertheless, it is relatively conservative in its use of the orphan plot to celebrate cross-generational relationships. Critics have described the sentimental arc of the orphan story in which (usually) a girl, embodying childhood innocence and optimism, finds a home and reforms the fallen adults around her into a caring, supportive community (see Mills, 230; Nelson, 66; Sanders, 42; and Reese's chapter in this volume). Hugo is, of course, not a girl, nor is he the embodiment of the Romantic child. He is an orphan in Paris who has run away from an unsympathetic uncle to live in hiding in a train station. Here he steals to stay alive, but also to pursue his dream of fixing his dead father's automaton. Hugo believes this object, salvaged from a museum fire, contains a final message from his father. When the shopkeeper from whom Hugo steals turns out to be the film pioneer Georges Méliès, and Hugo is befriended by Méliès's goddaughter, Isabelle, Hugo repays the family for taking him in by reviving Méliès's creative passion. Hence, an intergenerational exchange occurs by which Hugo has achieved a home wherein his imagination is valued and nurtured, and, through shared interests in magic, automata, and film, he has also transformed the life of a depressed adult who has lost his way. In this regard, Hugo does work similar to that performed by orphan girls such as L. M. Montgomery's Anne Shirley, who is nourished by her life at Green Gables and brings a renewed sense of family and community to the adults there. Like the story of Anne, Hugo's story, although told inventively through words and images, is always Hugo's. There is no intersection of adult and child perspectives.

In contrast, both *Wonderstruck* and *The Marvels* present different generational points of view intersecting and collaborating to describe the formation of families by individuals who have been prevented from growing and developing in their families of origin. In his May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture on queerness and families in children's books, Selznick uses Andrew Solomon's term "horizontal" to describe the identities of children who find themselves in this situation ("'Love is a Dangerous Angel,'" 6). *Wonderstruck* opens with the story of two children living in separate time frames: New Jersey in the 1920s and Minnesota in the 1970s. Rose's parents, in the earlier period, seem uninterested in their daughter as an individual; they see only her disability. Ben's mother, in the 1970s, loves him, but for her own reasons she has cut him off from any knowledge of his father; when she dies, Ben is left with his well-meaning aunt and uncle, neither of whom share his interests. In *The Marvels*, in the contemporary setting in England, Joseph's absent father is obsessed with his career, and his mother has abandoned her youthful creativity in exchange for economic security. His parents find Joseph, at best, inconvenient and, at worst, an embarrassment. These children are cut off from their roots; they do

not seem to belong within their families. This generates one of the most popular tropes of the relationship between older, non-parental adults and children: the adult as caring elder or mentor who passes on knowledge that helps the child understand him- or herself and their place in the world (Scheffel, 178; Joosen, 128). Joosen identifies this motif as ageist, potentially ignoring the needs of the older adult (137). However, Selznick resists this in two ways. First, while the adult Rose provides Ben's family history, the structure of *Wonderstruck* parallels Rose's story with Ben's, and the adult Rose needs Ben's story to fill in her knowledge of her descendants. Second, in *The Marvels*, Uncle Albert participates in cross-generational creative activity while establishing his living museum-house and the story of its fictional family, eventually welcoming Joseph as a collaborator, which meets his own needs while supporting those of his nephew. For Selznick, sharing and creating stories allows different generations to create spaces to find themselves and find meaningful cross-generational connections.

INTERSECTING CROSS-GENERATIONAL NARRATIVES IN *WONDERSTRUCK*

Perry Nodelman argues that it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, for readers to identify with two protagonists in a single book (7). As he is talking about two narratives addressing the same events, this conclusion may not seem applicable to *Wonderstruck*. Yet readers of Selznick's book encounter a serious challenge in the opening: a series of illustrations of wolves running in the snow give way to pages set in 1977 in Gunflint Lake, Minnesota, introducing Ben, who has been dreaming of the wolves; then the book cuts to a new title spread identifying the setting as 1927 in Hoboken, New Jersey, and introduces a new main character named Rose, who is obsessed with a silent film star and surrounded by paper skyscrapers for a cityscape in her bedroom. Just as readers see Rose issuing a cry for help after she observes a man arriving at her house, the story cuts back to Ben, who is struggling to cope after his mother's death. The only thing linking the parallel stories is that both children are clearly unhappy. Even the forms of the narratives are separate, with Ben's story told all in words and Rose's all in pictures. It might seem easier for readers to identify with Rose's graphic narrative, given the power of images such as the double-page spread close-up of Rose that highlights her unhappiness and perhaps fear. However, readers encounter Ben first, and they get exposition of his circumstances and feelings in the words. Nodelman notes that twice-told tales move "attention away from what the characters experience onto *how* they experience it (7). In *Wonderstruck*, with characters experiencing events fifty years apart, the *how*

becomes focused on figuring out what the relationship is between the two stories. How is Ben's story connected to Rose's story?

The key word here, of course, is "relationship." Eventually, Rose is revealed as Ben's grandmother, but even though they do not know each other for most of the book, they have much in common. Rose is deaf; Ben is born deaf in one ear and loses the hearing in his functional ear after being struck by lightning. Both Rose and Ben are desperately unhappy, and both run away to New York: Rose to find her mother and Ben to find his father. Both find themselves, literally and metaphorically, at the Museum of Natural History, which becomes central to their family story, and both encounter people who help them: Rose's brother, Walter; and a boy who befriends Ben, Jamie.

The stories are not only parallel for the first two parts of the book, but the form cleverly interweaves them. As Virginia Zimmerman notes, "certain pictures co-exist in both storylines and thus function like artifacts that mean different things to people of different times" (48). Similarly, Katherine Eastland describes these convergences of word and image as a form of translation (40). I am not sure either of these fully captures the connection, though. In an online interview, Selznick states that he arrived at the intersection of words and pictures because he wanted to draw the lightning that strikes Ben; since Ben's narrative is in words, Selznick had to introduce lightning in Rose's story (Jules). Selznick uses the lightning link twice. First, Rose leaves home to attend a silent film, *Daughter of the Storm*, featuring her actress mother carrying a baby and fleeing amid a storm, an ironic commentary on Rose's situation, as her mother does not wish to care for her own child. Yet when the screen (a double-page spread) fills with lightning, the book switches to Ben's narrative, when Ben is in his former home during a storm (126). Having discovered information about a man he believes to be his father, Ben calls the man's phone number. Selznick ends here with a cliffhanger of the phone ringing (137). In the ensuing visual narrative, Rose leaves the cinema and is herself caught in a storm. Immediately after a second double-page spread of lightning, we return to Ben, now deaf in both ears after lightning has traveled through the phone line (156). This is a dramatic interweaving of picture and word, but the narrative technique begins much earlier in the book. Ben's first narrative section ends with his mother's favorite line from Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars" (27). When we turn to Rose's narrative, she *is* looking at a star, the film star who is her mother. Then we return to Ben, looking at a shooting star from his aunt's house (56–57). Likewise, just as he sneaks out to go to his old home, we turn the page to see Rose sneaking out of her house to go to the cinema. The interweaving continues throughout the book: when Ben discovers the Museum

of Natural History (311), a turn of the page brings us to a double-page image of the museum, with another turn of the page showing this to be a postcard from her brother in Rose's hands. Again, when Rose is safe with her brother, Walter is reading the book *Wonderstruck* in bed, and he is on the same page that Ben looks at in his copy of the book (482). There is more going on here than simply translating experiences, and rather than objects meaning different things to different people across time, the objects actually serve to highlight shared interests and pleasures between generations.

In part three of the book, Ben finds Rose, now an adult. He learns that she is his grandmother; his father is dead. From this point onward, words and pictures come together not to tell parallel, interwoven stories, but to tell a single story that Ben and his grandmother share as they piece together their family story; the narrative is mostly focalized through Ben, but large chunks of inserted written narrative are by Rose. The book *Wonderstruck* is the touchstone for the family connection: a catalogue for an exhibit on Cabinets of Wonders that Walter, a museum exhibits worker, gave his sister, who gave it to her son Danny, Ben's father, who gave it to Ben's mother. The book, as both an artifact and a metatextual device, "holds these people (and the reader) together" (Zimmerman, 48). Everything in the book is about connection, as readers must solve the puzzle of the interwoven narratives to figure out how characters are connected to place and to each other. When Ben first sees the aged Rose in the museum, she is just another old lady to him. When he later looks at her, knowing she is his grandmother, "Rose's face somehow change[s] before his eyes. Her skin, her white hair, and her slender fingers no longer [belong] to a stranger" (520). Ben finds a missing part of himself in Rose: "It was odd to touch his grandmother's face, almost as though her skin were somehow a part of his own face, and his father's (579). Ben has felt like Major Tom from his mother's favorite David Bowie song, "Space Oddity," imagining that he, like his father before him, has been floating, disconnected from the earth. Now Rose tells Ben that not only did his father have connections, but so does he. Ben's love of collecting things is something he shares with his father: Daniel was a diorama designer, sharing this activity with his mother, Rose. When Ben first sees Rose at the Museum of Natural History, she is looking at a wolf diorama based on Daniel's research in Gunflint Lake, which ties the three of them together.

Rose also takes Ben to the Queens Museum of Art, where she shows him a scale model of New York that she helped make for the 1964 World's Fair. This brings her story full circle, as it links to her paper models from her childhood bedroom. She shows Ben how she has curated a history of Daniel's life in the model. In the hospital where Daniel was born, she has placed a baby photo of him; in his former school, one of his pencils; and so on. Inside the model of the

Museum of Natural History is a child's drawing of the wolf diorama, made by Ben. In this moment, Ben realizes that even though he does not remember his father, he has always been connected to him: "in some strange way it all made sense. His need to collect things, his interest in museums, the wolf dreams . . . it all came into focus sort of like one of those polaroid pictures. [. . .] Ben's dreams hadn't come from nowhere. He'd been dreaming of his *father's* wolves, which he'd *seen*" (577). Ben marvels at the connections that have led him to this moment, concluding that "[t]he world is full of wonders" (609). In the end, as he sits during a blackout in New York, not in the gutter but on a rooftop, looking up at the stars with his grandmother and his new friend, Jamie, Ben realizes that no matter what happens to him in the future, he has found his place and the family where he belongs.

When the narratives come together, Rose's story seems to be taken over by Ben's: despite her contribution of a lengthy handwritten narrative, she has become an adjunct character in his narrative. This could reflect a similar situation in Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, in which a boy staying with family connects through a fantastical manifestation with a young girl, discovered eventually to be an aged neighbor dreaming of her childhood. Once this is revealed, the book is over and the boy returns home, perhaps never to see the old lady again. Joosen talks about such books as providing a model of backtracking in which "elderly characters re-embody their former childlike selves in order to bond with the young" (129). However, Ben has not been interacting with the child Rose; it is the reader who has been making that connection, and having learned to identify with Rose's emotions, the reader can also see that Rose is profoundly affected by finding Ben. While Ben has been cut off from part of his family's past, Rose has been cut off from her family's future. Scholars exploring the geographies of age have discussed how the aged and children in Western societies are seen as existing on the margins. This is challenged by Peter Hopkins and Rachel Pain, who suggest it might be more productive to think about age geographies as relational: "identities of children and others are produced *through* interactions with other age/generational groups and are in a constant state of flux" (288–89). Applying this to Rose and Ben alerts us to how not only is Ben's identity transformed by what he discovers from Rose about his family history, but Rose's identity is also transformed by learning that she has a grandson who carries on her family history. As Rose sits with her grandson and his friend during the blackout, the narrative shifts to pictures, which readers have come to associate with Rose's perspective. Over three pages, the boys look at each other, then a double-page spread shows just Rose, looking at her grandson. The love in Rose's smile shows that she benefits from this discovery of a grandson and a new life stage for herself as grandmother.

Katharina Mahne and Oliver Huxhold summarize research that indicates the importance of the grandparent role in the well-being of older adults (225). They apply to grandparent-grandchild relationships the intergenerational solidarity model developed by Vern Bengtson (see the introduction to this volume). Most dimensions of the model are apparent in the relationship between Rose and Ben. Associational solidarity addresses "frequency of contact and shared activities" (Mahne and Huxhold, 227); although Rose and Ben have been denied contact for much of Ben's life, they discover that they have practiced similar activities in collecting and curating: there is an inference that they will share these activities as often as they can be together. Affectual solidarity addresses "the emotional bonds between family members" (227). The reader perceives emotions and experiences shared by Rose and Ben, and once the two characters meet, the emotional bond is reciprocal. Consensual solidarity refers to values and beliefs shared across generations (227). This is subtle in the book, but Rose and Ben clearly share values related to family connections and the importance of creative activities. Finally, functional solidarity addresses mutual helpfulness across the generations (227), and this is manifested in the ways Rose and Ben help each other discover their shared history and their resultant new identities. It seems clear at the end of the book that Rose will support Ben as he moves forward, and Ben anticipates being able to spend time with Rose, perhaps helping with her diorama work. *Wonderstruck* interweaves cross-generational narratives to show how adults and children can become collaborators in storytelling and identity formation.

CROSS-GENERATIONAL CREATIVE COLLABORATION IN *THE MARVELS*

The Marvels also intertwines cross-generational narratives. As in *Wonderstruck*, the reader is presented with a puzzle: the first 387 pages, all in images, tell the history of five generations of a London theatre family, from Billy Marvel and his brother, Marcus, in 1766, through orphan baby Marcus raised by Billy; disruptive Alexander, son of Marcus; greatest actor of his generation Oberon, son of Alexander; and finally hapless Leontes (Leo), son of Oberon but uninterested in theatre. The narrative then jumps decades to 1990, when Joseph's story is told entirely in words. Just as Joseph becomes fascinated by the clues about the Marvels in his uncle's house, the reader is also looking for connections to understand the relationship between the Marvel family and Joseph. Selznick states in a television interview that his interest in this book is exploring "memory and storytelling and family and the way people pass down stories from generation to generation" ("Making of Brian Selznick's *The*

Marvels"). The Marvel family history, however, is a fiction, created through an intergenerational collaboration between Joseph's Uncle Albert, his lover, Billy Marvel, and their neighbor's son, Marcus Bloom, to establish a unique home for their queer family. The ensuing narrative of Joseph's evolving relationships with his new friend Frankie and Albert, which weaves motifs from the fiction to reveal the answers to the mystery, is then followed by another fictional—or not—narrative presented in images depicting Joseph growing up to live happily in his uncle's house with his friend Blink and a baby. Billy's motto—"You either see it or you don't" (451)—not only refers to clues to his, Albert's, and Marcus's relationship hidden within the Marvel stories and the house, but also, as Joseph learns, to how one might see that there is truth in stories (544).

The Marvels, then, is about how generations create and share stories that allow individuals to define themselves. Most discussions of cross-generational creative work focus on the adult as the guide directing the child to develop more advanced skills (see, for example, Kouvou, 275–76). Hausknecht et al. suggest that, via collaborative storytelling while playing alternate reality games, adults and children can "form new understandings through the coming together of differing perspectives" (48). Similarly, sharing the stories of Albert's house and the Marvels, Albert and Joseph develop new understandings of their relationship to one another and others, as well as of their own identities. Joseph learns to revision his family history and his own identity: "perhaps his ancestors really *had* been actors and artists! What if [his] cold, rich parents were the *exceptions* on his family tree, not him? Maybe every other generation, the ones he'd never known, had been full of brilliant adventurers and romantic dreamers, like himself" (480). Likewise, Albert has woven the stories of the Marvels with the collaboration of Billy and Marcus, creating a family that is "restorative, founded [in] similar views and interests" (Natov, 173). For all that, after the deaths of Billy from AIDS and Marcus in a car accident, Albert has become reclusive and initially resists the new opportunity for cross-generational solidarity presented by Joseph. He tells his nephew that he cannot continue the Marvel stories without Billy and that the blank page at the end of the drawings signifies time has stopped (550–51). However, in telling the history of the stories to Joseph, Albert finds that time begins again. As he says to Joseph, "'I'm glad you came and found me. [. . .] I'd hate to think what I'd be doing right now without you" (558). Perceptively, reviewer Sarah Hunter notes that both Joseph *and* Albert find home (66). With Joseph now his family, Albert finds his house a home again, and he welcomes Joseph as co-caretaker of the house and its stories.

When time progresses, though, there must be change. Albert dies of AIDS, and Joseph again is left to the mercies of his parents. This book may seem to

be aetonormative, insofar as the child Joseph is limited in his options. He is able to question his mother, insisting that she consider that her and his father's vision of what is best for him might be wrong for who he really is (597), but he must still carry on at school, and his mother only promises to listen and talk to him about the house, his uncle, and their family at a later date. Nevertheless, on what might be his last night in the home he shared with his uncle, Joseph looks through Billy's drawings of the Marvels and comes to realize that the "story within the story" is "the real gift Albert Nightingale had given him. [. . .] It [is] *his* story now, and he kn[ows] his own story [is] as unfinished as Leo's" (602). Joseph has identified with Leo Marvel, as he too has felt that he did not belong in his family. Now, though, Joseph knows that there is a blank page after the flames that trap Leo and his grandfather in the theatre, so "Joseph turn[s] the page" (603). The remainder of the book is a visual narrative, presumably by Joseph, that encompasses both entrapping flames and a cozy fireplace reminiscent not only of Joseph's happy memories of his grandfather but also of his uncle. Then a series of double-page spreads show us this is the home of Albert and Joseph, eventually arriving at a framed photo on a bedside table of Albert protectively holding Joseph in front of the house, with a smaller double photo frame holding Leo's drawing of the angel Marcus and a picture of a young man, perhaps Leo. Leo has survived, as will Joseph. As the image of Albert and Joseph is reproduced in successive close-ups, we finally focus on Joseph, and just as Billy's drawings showed Billy Marvel growing up, the final close-ups show Joseph transforming into an adult. Then we see that he is reading a postcard from Frankie, off pursuing her dreams of travel, addressed to "Joe and George." A turn of the page shows Joe and another adult man, presumably George, reading before a fireplace, with a baby in a cradle between them. The proper name of Joseph's school friend Blink is George Patel, so the inference is that Joseph and George have found one another again, and they are now a family. Baby Albert is their child, named after Joseph's uncle. The final spread is a close-up of the infant's alert gaze, with blank pages left for the next part of the story. The postscript, from director Wim Wenders's *The Act of Seeing*, presents a question and an answer: "'Is this a true story?' [. . .] 'It is now.'" Continuing his uncle's story allows Joseph to invent the future he wants. *The Marvels*, like *Wonderstruck*, demonstrates that cross-generational creative activities benefit adults and children by helping them develop new relational identities and opportunities to become their authentic selves. The truth lies within the creative act.

Selznick uses creative activities as spaces where members of different generations join to share interests and stories, as well as find opportunities for transformation. In *Wonderstruck*, Rose and Ben fill in gaps in each other's

family narrative with their interweaving narratives, and both are empowered by new identities shaped within their cross-generational relationship. Their curating becomes a form of self-invention for each. In *The Marvels*, Albert and Joseph come to share the narratives of their house, both in the fictive and dynastic sense. After all, as the book teaches, stories can be both nonfactual and true. Just as the original stories are the products of intergenerational collaboration between Albert, Billy, and Marcus, so the final story becomes an act of collaboration as Joseph carries the stories forward, only to leave space for the next generation. These books reinvent the concept of family, allowing those who shape their own non-normative families to also reshape themselves within these family identities. In Selznick's trilogy, there is no fixed boundary between adult and child, and not all adult norms are upheld. Cross-generational relationships are shown to have capacity for creative invention of the self (whether that self is young or old) within dynamic collaborations. You either see it or you don't.

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