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Conceptions of Time Travel in Literature for Children and Young Adults

Three Case Studies

Abstract

This article explores the motif of time travel in children's and young adult literature. After a brief overview of the origins and development of this motif, the article focuses on three books: Todd Strasser's *The Beast of Cretacea* (2015), Alex Scarrow's *TimeRiders* (2010), and Torben Kuhlmann's all-age picture book *Einstein. The Fantastic Journey of a Mouse Through Space and Time* (2021). While the time travel in all three books requires technical equipment, the reasons for undertaking this travel differ, connected to various topics that affect the readers. Time travel is evidently a flexible and adaptable motif. As the article shows, it can be connected to memory studies.

Keywords

Time Travel, Children's Literature, Youth Novel, The Time Machine, H. G. Wells, Memory Studies

Biography

Sabine Planka, Dr. phil., is a literary scholar of children's and young adults' literature/media from the 19th to the 21st century, with a particular interest in food, food cultures, and food systems as well as gender and space discourses in children's literature. Film is also part of her research. She has published a number of articles in scholarly journals and essay collections. Her recent publications include "Räuberkost. Die kulinarische Lektüre von Otfried Preußlers *Hotzenplotz*-Geschichten und *Das große Räuber Hotzenplotz Koch- und Backbuch* (in *Otfried Preußler revisited*, edited by Julia Benner / Andrea Weinmann, Munich: kopaed, 2023 [kjl&m 23.extra], 93–103), and "Meet to Eat. The Restaurant as Narrative Setting in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) and *The Fisher King* (1991)" (in *A Critical Companion to Terry Gilliam*, edited by Sabine Planka / Philip van der Merwe / Ian Bekker, Lanham et al.: Lexington, 2022, 101–116).

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> “There is no difference. Earth *is* Cretacea, and Cretacea *is* Earth.” […] A millennium ago […] scientists discovered how to create wormholes – tunnels between different points in space-time. “Cretacea, Triassica, and Permia aren’t other planets […]. They’re the names we’ve given to the missions taking place in different periods of Earth’s history. […] To harvest the past for the resources we need in the future.”
>
> *—Todd Strasser, The Beast of Cretacea*

The Earth of the future is dead: “Almost one hundred percent of life on Earth, including man, is gone.”[1] The scenario created by Todd Strasser in his young adult novel *The Beast of Cretacea* (2015) is dark and bleak and makes unmistakably clear where careless use of the Earth’s resources can lead. Readers are sensitized to a theme that is more relevant than ever in the 21st century. The motif of a destroyed Earth is linked to another motif that has been used in literary works since the 18th century: time travel.

Time-travel narratives are many and varied, as the following section will briefly outline. In this discussion, I focus my analysis on three novels that use a time machine as a prominent tool to travel through time, aligning the novels with the science-fiction genre: Todd Strasser’s youth novel *The Beast of Cretacea* (2015), Alex Scarrow’s youth novel *TimeRiders* (2010), and Torben Kuhlmann’s all-age picture book *Einstein* (2021). I aim to show how the time-travel motif is woven into the narratives and connected to topics ranging from current ecocritical debates about historical events to scientific findings. I explore the facts that these narratives mediate, thus allowing the books to be read as sources of knowledge in the sense of literary memory studies, yet without conveying the didactic implications too obviously. Such books can be understood as circulation media that help reproduce memory, as Astrid Erll proposes.[2] She notes that such “collective texts” (German: *kollektive Texte*) mostly belong to the field of popular literature and contribute to the creation of collective memory by mediating collective identities, historical images, values, and norms.[3] According to Erll, high literature is not alone in being read with reference to cultural memory:

1 Strasser 2015, 389.

2 See, additionally, Planka 2014a, 63–83.

3 See Erll 2017, 181.

> Trivial literature in particular makes use of symbolic resources that can be assigned to cultural memory. It generates and perpetuates myths and conveys culturally specific patterns of meaning. The memory of a solid past and collective constructions of meaning of a normative and formative nature are obviously determined more by popular circulation media than by institutionally mediated memory media, which are refreshed in the context of enculturation, for example, at school or during religious instruction.[4]

Children's and young-adult time-travel narratives are able to mediate facts in an entertaining and tension-filled setting, as this article will show – and are thus far removed from the accusation of escapism that entertaining children's and young-adult literature is occasionally subjected to.

Before turning to the case studies, I begin with an overview of the development of time-travel narratives in general and in children's and young-adult literature in particular, where I note theoretical aspects connected to the motif of time travel.

The Motif of Time Travelling in (Children's) Literature – A Historical and Theoretical Approach

Initially dreams and long periods of sleep bridged large spans of time in literature, but since H. G. Wells' short story *The Chronic Argonauts* (1888), time machines have also allowed literary protagonists to travel through time.[5] It is no wonder, then, that Wells' *The Time Machine* (1885) has influenced children's literature, too, for example Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet* (1906), the first time-travel narration for children.[6]

4 "Trivialliteratur [, die …] sich symbolischer Ressourcen [bedient], die dem kulturellen Gedächtnis zuzuordnen sind. In ihr werden Mythen erzeugt und perpetuiert, kulturspezifische Sinnstiftungsschemata vermittelt. Die Erinnerung an eine fundierende Vergangenheit und kollektive Sinnkonstruktionen normativer und formativer Art sind offensichtlich gesamtgesellschaftlich mehr durch populäre Zirkulationsmedien bestimmt als durch institutionell vermittelte Speichermedien, die im Rahmen der Enkulturation, etwa in der Schule oder bei der religiösen Unterweisung, aktualisiert werden", Erll 2017, 181. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

5 See Planka 2014b, 9–27, esp. 13. The introductory remarks in this essay are partly based on this introduction.

6 See Nikolajeva 1988, 62. Additionally, Planka 2014b, 9–27.

Authors are creative in engineering these journeys through time. Magical time travel exists alongside time machines, perhaps initiated by a bump on the head or a fall. The various devices used to link times are often combined with the relocation of the protagonists. In Mary Pope Osborne's book series *Magic Tree House*, the protagonists travel in the eponymous tree house, which moves from the woods behind their house to, for example, Nepal, a wildlife reserve in South Africa, or the ancient Andes in Peru. The protagonists point to an image in a book, then the magic tree house starts to rotate and delivers them to that place at that time. This pattern is typical in time-travel narratives in children's literature, as Maria Nikolajeva shows, and stands in contrast to Wells' story, in which the Traveler only travels through time, not through space. While Wells' conception of time travel does not entail simultaneous journeys through time *and* space, children's narratives often operate with precisely this concept – a sign that the motif of time travel has developed since its earliest appearances. Time-travel narratives in children's literature – Nikolajeva labels them "time fantasies"[7] – operate in relation to primary and secondary worlds, a dualism that is constitutive for the majority of fantasy narratives: while the primary world is similar to the readers' world and does not include magical elements, the secondary world does contain magic. Nikolajeva suggests that "travelling in space implies travelling in time", since "the principle of time travelling in fantasy is a possibility of a direct connection between the two or more simultaneously existing times. But this is the same principle that admits the possibility of travels into secondary worlds."[8] Nikolajeva calls this a "chronotope", in reference to Mikhail Bakhtin, and describes a "*primary chronotope* (a unity of primary world and primary time) and *the secondary chronotope* (a unity of a secondary world and a secondary time)".[9]

Time travel can therefore mean transgressing borders and boundaries. The central meaning of time travel is, however, the ability to encompass past and future. Time is no longer linear: "For modern concept [*sic*] of time, as well as for science fiction and fantasy, there are no such things as 'past', 'present' or 'future'; all times and epochs exist simultaneously. Still, we are used to thinking of history as 'the past' and of something that has not

7 See Nikolajeva 1988, 62.
8 Nikolajeva 1988, 62, 64.
9 Nikolajeva 1988, 63.

happened as 'the future'."[10] For that reason, I use these terms too in accordance to Nikolajeva, who uses these terms "for sake of lucidity. By present is meant the narrator's and the protagonists' primary time. The past and the future are secondary times placed respectively before and after the primary time on the linear vector."[11]

Any epoch can become the setting for these time travels, and since the epoch will be unfamiliar to the protagonists, it invites exploration. Similarly, time travels enable glimpses into potentially utopian or anti-utopian/dystopian futures, but also ways of responding to or rewriting the past while exploring social or technical achievements. Here lies a vital aspect: secondary worlds constructed as the traveller's destination can be historically "realistic". As Nikolajeva notes,

> In time fantasy two *real worlds* are described, or at least the other world (which does not involve the character's own time) is rationally possible. It has no magic in itself. […] It is the linking of the two worlds that is magical. […] Thus we may consider a world placed in another historical time as a variable of the secondary world fantaseme. No magic is present in the secondary world itself, but the connection is achieved in a magical way.[12]

This aspect of the time-travel narrative can contribute to its educational use, in the classroom for example, for it allows its reader to learn about the past.

In such narratives, past and future times may be deterministically fixed and appear unchangeable, but in other stories times may be alterable, a device that enables protagonists to change – or try to change – their own times, whether for good or ill (the latter must then be prevented at all costs). Leaps in time may be straightforward or circuitous, resulting in time loops; additionally, parallel timelines create multiple realities, between which the protagonists can jump. Nikolajeva notes, "Most time fantasy writers assume that time is not linear, that all different times and epochs exist simultaneously, like a multitude of parallel worlds"; they also assume that time paradoxes often come into play.[13] While some pro-

10 Nikolajeva 1988, 70.
11 Nikolajeva 1988, 70.
12 Nikolajeva 1988, 62.
13 Nikolajeva 1988, 63.

tagonists are able to travel through time repeatedly, some can only travel once, moving from the present into the past or the future and then staying there.

Various theories are linked to these "thought experiments":

> From time as a fourth dimension to the butterfly effect – changing the past has (massive) effects on the present and sometimes also on the future – to chronoclasm […] – changes in the future can equally change the present – all possible physical considerations are taken up and made narratively usable.[14]

Within time-travel narratives in children's literature, the thematic spectrum is correspondingly wide. The breadth since the late 20th and early 21st centuries reflects how authors have absorbed and refracted technical developments and social-cultural as well as political ideas. If topics that appear in these realistic settings are didactically charged, the books in which they appear may be good teaching material,[15] especially when historical aspects are woven into the narrative.[16] It is also striking that environmental, ecological, and ecocritical positions are becoming more prominent. By virtue of the time-travel component, writers are able to visualize and show changes to the Earth caused by human misconduct: as the protagonists seek solutions to climate catastrophes, the readership can identify with the characters in the story, who thus work as role models.

The connection between time-travel narratives and historical topics allows any moment in time to be visited. In such cases, as we shall see, authors will often research the historical background and include an appendix with facts about the relevant historical period.

14 "Von der Zeit als vierter Dimension über den Schmetterlingseffekt – die Änderung der Vergangenheit hat (massive) Auswirkungen auf die Gegenwart und mitunter eben auch auf die Zukunft – bis hin zum Chronoklasmus – Änderungen der Zukunft können gleichermaßen die Gegenwart verändern – werden alle möglichen physikalischen Überlegungen aufgegriffen und narrativ nutzbar gemacht" (Planka 2014b, 10). On chronoclasm see Slusser/Heath 2002, 11–24.

15 See Planka 2014b, 9–27, esp. 14.

16 See Planka 2019, 417–440.

The Failure and Ignorance of Humankind. Todd Strasser's *The Beast of Cretacea* (2015) as a Children's Ecocritical Time-Travel Narrative

Strasser's *The Beast of Cretacea* shows a destroyed and eradicated world, a product of the Anthropocene, from which his protagonists seek a way out. Strasser cleverly incorporates the time-travel motif and only reveals it as such at the end of his novel. He leaves his readers – along with his protagonists – to believe that the main characters have been sent on a journey to another planet to test whether the living conditions are suitable for the resettlement of the people still on Earth. The final twist is that the journey was not just through space but also through time.

The time travel in this narrative is technology-based: the protagonists are sent on their journey in "pods" – curiously, the German edition of the novel changed these pods into cryostasis capsules with the protagonists put in a deep sleep, a connection to an early version of the motif of time travel, when the protagonists "travelled" through time by sleeping for a very long time, rather than by using a technical device. This time travel seems to go hand in hand with spatial relocation: the protagonists awake on a ship (instead of on the solid ground where they likely started their journey) in the middle of an ocean in a faraway past that turns out to be the Earth's Cretaceous period – a clue is given in the title of Strasser's novel.[17]

It is therefore not that one world is real and one fantastical, for both are real worlds, revealed to be the Earth. The Earth of the past, a place so distant in time that the writer has a blank canvas, is depicted as utopian. As the novel's "present" is the readers' future, the author is free to show the worst possible outcome of the Anthropocene: the death of humankind on a desolate Earth destroyed by humans. This dualism – a dystopian future and a utopian past – establishes the frame for the setting of the story. The reader is called to explore both worlds, and while the future seems to be a foreseeable extrapolation of present behaviours, the very distant and unknown past provides room for plentiful speculation.

The connection between the two worlds is principally circular: although most of the characters prefer to stay in the past, a minority want to return to their time, and thus to the destroyed Earth. But the end of the Anthro-

17 See Strasser 2015, 1–2, 389.

pocene is the end of life on Earth. At this point in the novel, its critical and didactive intent becomes clear, having been anticipated by the speculation of characters earlier in the novel: the majority of humankind has learned nothing from their past mistakes, and those responsible for the mission are continuing to make in the "new world" the mistakes they made in the future (their present), mistakes that have led to the destruction of the world. They are exploiting the world of the past, taking what they can. They seem to be aware of the harm they are doing: "We chose times prior to extinction events in the hope that whatever […] *alterations* we caused wouldn't carry over. Of course, all of that is now moot, as the time you and I came from – the Anthropocene Epoch – has ended."[18] The adult mission leaders are willingly accepting a renewed destruction of the world without realizing the paradox they are creating: if they destroy the Earth at an earlier point in time, it, and humankind, will not exist in the future. Therefore, people cannot travel to the past and destroy it. It is the classic motif of a time loop – and seems to be their blind spot. The young protagonists, by contrast, are constructed as role models for the readers; they are aware of the potential for destruction if humankind's behaviour does not change, especially as they observe how the new adult arrivals behave in their new homeland:

> The camp smells of freshly cut wood, and the thatching on the roofs is green. But unlike the islanders' elevated village, the construction here is crude and clumsy. The walkway creaks and dips unsteadily, and instead of having finely carved joints, the woodwork is amateurishly lashed together with strings of rope and vine. Still weak and needing to pause and catch his breath, Ishmael watches while a handful of men and women on the ground attempt to raise a newly built hut onto an elevated platform. It's plain to see that they're not used to manual labor. Their polished shoes sink into the mud, and the men's tight trousers and rain-soaked tunics hinder their movements. There is fevered shouting as some of them tug on the ropes attached to pulleys, hoisting the small dwelling into the air, while others attempt to guide it over the platform. *Snap! Crash!* A hoist rope breaks. Workers cry out and dive for safety as the hut smashes to the ground and splinters apart. […] Ahead on the walkway, an irate woman with two children is complaining loudly to a harried-looking man holding a tablet. The woman and children are dressed in gold-trimmed finery

18 Strasser 2015, 388.

> and have the same ashen-skinned and plump look Pip had when he first arrived on the *Prequod*. The woman lugs a heavy bag in one hand while using a purse to shield her head with the other. The children cling to armloads of electronic toys. The woman gestures at a thatch-roofed hut. "*This* is where you want us to live?" "It's the best we can offer right now, madam," the man apologizes. The woman peers inside. "It's so tiny and dark." "We hope to have lightning soon." "And the washroom?" The man blushes and points down a walkway at two small structures. The nicer one – with a metal roof and small skylights – has a human figure painted in gold on the door. The other is made of rough-hewn wood and has a thatched roof. Instead of a door, there hang sheets with a crude outline of a worker with a shovel. "You … expect us to *share* a toilet?" the woman asks, aghast. "It is only temporarily, madam," the man replies. "We are working to remedy the situation as soon as possible."[19]

This situation shows more than the ignorance and disrespect of the newcomers in relation to nature. They do not seem to understand that they are survivors of a catastrophe that has cost billions of lives; consequently, they show no gratitude. Additionally, it shows how ill-prepared the newcomers are for an epoch that is characterized by a life with and in nature, and not – again – against it.

The key theme in this quoted passage relates to the destruction of nature and the interlinked and apparently unconscious behaviour of the new arrivals, but it also mentions, albeit in passing, the 'islanders', a group of people that protagonist Ishmael has met before. They live in a unity with nature that accords with Karan Barad's definition of an *agential realism*. As Adrian Tait elucidates, "In Barad's subject–object blurring reading of the continuous and constitutive entanglement of entities – a reading that blurs the subject–object divide – the human body is reinstated as itself a part of the natural world, and as itself natural."[20] This principle is perfectly illustrated in Strasser's novel, where the islanders take only what they need – unlike the pirates who live on Cretacea and selfishly exploit nature. Thus, the islanders show how life in the past can exist in respectful harmony with nature, without damaging the future. And here, too, Strasser creates a plot twist, as the islanders the young protagonists meet are descendants of other time

19 Strasser 2015, 393–394.

20 Tait 2024, 14.

travellers, who were sent even further back in time – and one of them is revealed (at the novel's end) to be Ishmael's brother, who made this way of life possible.

All of this underlines that lacking the ability to travel through time, we (the readers) cannot change the past from the future; our only option is to act in the present in a way that secures the future for generations to come.

The mediation of historical knowledge is not the primary goal of this novel; its main interest is in evoking a critical understanding of ecological issues and leading the protagonists (and readers) to recognize that they must take responsibility for the future of Earth. By contrast, the mediation of historical knowledge is integral to the adventure-novel series *TimeRiders*, by Alex Scarrow. We turn now to the first novel of that series.

Rescuing the Course of History, Saving the Future of Humankind: Alex Scarrow's *TimeRiders* (2010)

TimeRiders, the first novel of the *TimeRiders* series by Alex Scarrow, takes an approach different to that of Strasser's novel. Time travel, achieved by means of technological innovation, is integrated into an adventurous science-fiction story. The time setting of the story is striking: the starting date for the young time travellers is 11 September 2001, the day the World Trade Centre in New York was obliterated by terrorists. Readers are familiarized with this historical event[21] – and with other events, as the analysis here will show – but it also works as cover for the actions of the time travellers, as it is integrated into a time loop. The protagonists have to experience 10 and 11 September 2001 over and over again. This momentous historical event has been chosen as the traveller's home base because it will help hide from the citizens of New York that the characters are travelling through time.[22]

It turns out that there are other time travellers journeying from the future back in time to change things to their advantage. Our three time travellers are responsible for correcting these manipulations of time to preserve the "correct" course of history. The first novel establishes a complex storyline

21 See also Planka 2019, 417–440.

22 For example, Liam does most of the time travelling and therefore grows older faster than the other protagonists. See Scarrow 2010.

that starts in the present, a realistic present similar to the present of the reader. The time travellers jump back and forth in time, between past and present – a present that changes twice within the novel because of actions in the past. The past depicted is not long ago: it is the year 1941 and Adolf Hitler is planning to invade Russia. Kramer, a time traveller who wants to change the course of events, convinces Hitler not to carry out the invasion. Instead, Kramer instals himself as a ruler and takes Hitler's place, changing history completely: Germany wins the Second World War, and Kramer's army conquers the United States. At this point, Scarrow establishes a split in time that shows two possible futures. The first timeline continues Kramer's success, and New York becomes part of his tightly organized empire. The alternative timeline shows Kramer going mad and detonating a nuclear bomb, with apocalyptic results: New York is destroyed and the remains are inhabited by starving creatures barely recognizable as human.

In contrast to Strasser's storyline, in which the protagonists jump only once into the past (they do not want to travel back to the future, even if they could), Scarrow's protagonists jump back and forward several times. To help the reader understand the novel and to underline its mediation of historical knowledge, the author provides an appendix with a graphic overview of the relevant years, 1941, 1945, 1956, and 2001, points when history changed dramatically and the narration rotates through 180 degrees. Thus, in 1941 Hitler prepares for the invasion of Russia, in 1945 Germany loses the Second World War, and in 2001 New York exists the way the readers know it. In this novel, the turning points are marked by different events: in 1941 Hitler no longer prepares for an invasion, in 1945 Germany wins the Second World War, and in 1956 – in an additional relevant shift in time – Kramer either (a) becomes mad or (b) does not become mad, and in 2001 New York is either (a) tightly controlled or (b) has become a dystopian world. Other actual historical events are named in the story – a concept continued throughout the series. Thus, the series offers real historical facts while entertaining its readers with a fast-paced story. The games the novel plays with time make it even more interesting. Scarrow lets his time travellers travel back and forth in time *and* establishes time loops: when the protagonists travel through time, the time machine can be programmed in such a way that they can stay in the past – or future – for many years. They age, but when they return to their "home time" no time has passed.

Both *The Beast of Cretacea* and *TimeRiders* depict the end of the world, but their central concepts differ. In contrast to the ecocritical perspective

in Strasser's novel, Scarrow's novel centres on the avoidance of a war bigger even than the Second World War, a war that might end apocalyptically in nuclear catastrophe. The novel both mediates history and shows clearly why nuclear conflict must be avoided.

Explaining the Space-Time Continuum: Torben Kuhlmann's *Einstein* (2021)

In contrast to the novels already discussed, Kuhlmann's book is a picture book aimed at readers of all ages from six up (with its 128 pages, it is more extensive than many other picture books). The book is composed of images and text, with text on several pages much longer than is conventional for a "picture" book but also wonderfully illustrated pages that tell the story visually, without written words.

The story centres on a tiny mouse realizing that she has missed the cheese festival in Bern, Switzerland. Another mouse suggests she turn back time. She is then educated by a clockmaker's mouse about the history of measuring time. Yet even the clockmaker's mouse cannot explain exactly what time is, so points to a man who lived 80 years ago in Bern and who worked at the local patent office. The tiny mouse (nameless throughout the story) starts her research. In the attic of the patent office, she finds several books by Albert Einstein, to whom the clockmaker's mouse was referring. She starts reading but cannot find answers to her questions about what time is and how travelling through time might work. At this point, a little bit of magic comes into play: as the mouse puts Einstein's book on the theory of relativity back on the shelf, a flash of inspiration (illustrated as a bright light) hits her. She starts to construct a time machine. A computer helps her calculate the exact time when the cheese festival took place. However, something goes wrong and the tiny mouse is catapulted 80 years back in time, to the year 1905 – when Albert Einstein lived and worked in the patent office.

Kuhlmann's illustration of the mouse's time travel evokes memories of H. G. Wells' highly influential novel *The Time Machine* (1895): the time machine remains standing in the attic, but the attic's interior changes as the clocks run backwards. The mouse has no idea how to travel back to her time, so she comes up with the idea of contacting Einstein to find a solution. The question of how a human being and an animal can communicate is creatively solved: the mouse writes riddles on time on tiny sheets and

places them on Einstein's desk. As her questions become more detailed, Einstein increasingly neglects his regular work in order to solve the riddles. With Einstein's help, the mouse is able to travel back to her time. Einstein, curious about who is asking such questions, catches a glimpse of a tiny time machine in the attic as the mouse leaves his time forever. He finds that she has left him a note saying: "Time is relative."[23]

The story depicts a historical moment, which it does not translate into an action-packed adventure story but instead links to the development of Einstein's theory of relativity – while at the same time giving the reader insight into Einstein's life before he became the famous physicist. To the reader's amusement, the story suggests that it was a tiny mouse who prompted Einstein to think and write about the relativity of time and how light, time, and space are connected. This creative handling of highly theoretical and "dry" facts lets readers immerse themselves in the story, curious about how time travel could work and the theory on which it would be based. Indeed, the picture book includes a rich appendix comprising Einstein's biography and easily comprehended explanations where, in small steps, Kuhlmann explains relativity and Einstein's various thought experiments, including his insight into curved spaces. All this information contains options for time travel, as Kuhlmann explains.

This factual appendix aligns the novel with Alex Scarrow's work, with its timeline of how history happened (fact) and how the story's time travels changed that timeline (fiction). The detailed information given in Kuhlmann's book makes it a perfect teaching tool, prompting thought about history/historical timelines and individuals who have influenced our current thinking and initiated enormous technical, physical, and other developments.

In addition – and perhaps the most relevant aspect of Kuhlmann's book – the story shows that anyone can initiate developments that will have long-lasting impact on humankind. Even a mouse.

Time Travel Narratives in Children's Literature

The narratives discussed above show time-travel stories with different aims and different thematical foci. They are, however, similarly able to connect the reader with historical and/or social-cultural/-political developments,

23 Kuhlmann 2021, n.p.

allowing the reader to learn through literature – in light of the thematic focus or identification with the protagonists[24] – while caught in the tension of the story. Time-travel narratives enable readers to experience historical moments, and when the historical background of these narratives is accurately depicted, these narratives can be linked to memory studies and to the mediation of (historical) knowledge.

All the books discussed here belong to popular culture. While the nature of their narratives differs, they all mediate historical knowledge, norms, and values whilst encouraging a critical understanding of current issues affecting humanity. The concept of time travel generates thrilling and entertaining plots and therefore seems ideally suited to mediating these fields of knowledge. Sent along with the protagonists through time (and space), the reader participates in their adventures, with tension rising from their concern for the protagonists and their return to the reality that corresponds in several narratives to the reality of the reader's life.[25] In Scarrow's novel, for example, the events in the past are relevant for the future – and sometimes for the present, too. Often the structure of the time travel aligns with Christopher Vogler's journey of the hero, with protagonists who step into a foreign world (here, a foreign time) where they have to prove themselves in order to be able to travel back to the familiar time.[26]

The protagonists act as role models, for they are undergoing a journey during which they grow stronger and bolster their own identity. As role models, they offer solutions to real problems that might one day be adopted and realized by readers.

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24 See, for example, Richert/Schlesinger 2022. Also Dore 2022.

25 See Planka 2019, 435–436.

26 See Planka 2019, 435–436.

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