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Crossover Literature and its Readers

A Comparison of Online Book Reviews

Master's Thesis

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**ABSTRACT**

Denna undersökning jämför barn och vuxna som läsare av samma skönlitterära texter genom att analysera yngre och äldre läsares nätbaserade bokrecensioner av J.R.R. Tolkiens *Bilbo – en hobbits äventyr*. Analysen tar sin utgångspunkt i teori om den allålderslitteratur som på engelska kommit att benämnas *crossover literature*, samt i läsarorienterad *reader-response* teori. Syftet med analysen var att besvara frågan om huruvida och på vilket sätt barn och vuxna läser och tolkar texter olika med tanke på hur erfarenheter och kunskaper skiljer sig åt mellan grupperna. En annan frågeställning var varför *crossover*-verk tilltalar läsare av olika åldrar, och om de tilltalar äldre och yngre läsare på olika sätt. Förklaringen verkar ligga i att denna typ av litteratur bygger på starka berättelser och behandlar ungersala teman som är relevanta oavsett ålder, samt att den indelningen vi idag har i barn- och vuxenlitteratur inte alltid kan anses vara befogad. Analysen av bokrecensionerna visade att det förekommer vissa skillnader i hur barn och vuxna ser på sig själva som läsare och i hur de identifierar sig med karaktärerna i boken. Det finns även skillnader i hur deras förväntningar på *Bilbo – en hobbits äventyr* ser ut, samt i hur de fokuserar på vissa delar och teman i boken. Undersökningen visade dock att förmågan att uppskatta *crossover*-verk inte verkar vara beroende av en läsaers specifika kunskaper eller erfarenheter. Skillnaderna i hur barn och vuxna läser verkar inte heller utgöra några hinder för en lyckad läsoplevelse.

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**KEY WORDS:**Crossover literature, fantasy, reader-response criticism, *The Hobbit*



## 1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to answer the question of how adults and children differ as readers of the same works of literature by comparing online book reviews by children and adults on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937). The way in which this question is studied is by combining theory on crossover literature with reader-response theory, and analysing actual adult and child readers' responses to literature. A combination of the two theories of crossover literature and reader-response is considered necessary in order to answer the above question, since the theory on crossover literature as such does not describe how children and adults function as readers. Neither does it, to any greater extent, explain what it is in the reading process that makes certain works of literature appealing to dual audiences. The theory on crossover literature has insofar mostly aimed at explaining how "it is transforming literary canons, concepts of readership, the status of authors, the publishing industry and bookselling practices" (Beckett 2010), or tried to determine the sociological reasons behind the growing trend of adults reading children's fiction (Falconer 2010). Studies have been oriented toward the sociological factors around the crossover trend or descriptions of the works as such, and have not focused on child and adult readers or the actual reading process. By including reader-response theory in the study, however, it is possible to develop a method of studying crossover literature through its readers.

Maija-Liisa Harju, in her dissertation *'Being Not Alone in the World' Exploring Reader Responses to Crossover Books* (2012: 13, 34, 178–180), acknowledges the lack of research based on readers' actual experiences in the study of crossover literature. This neglect exists despite the fact that the crossover phenomenon is based on the adoption of certain works by a diverse readership, and thereby fully dependent on the actual readers' responses and their own reasons for engaging with this kind of literature. Harju (2012: 179-180) criticizes how "the work in crossover literature studies to date has been mostly based in children's literature criticism and relied on analysis of texts alone to examine the crossover phenomenon, neglecting the critical role of reader[s] and their actual experiences of reading crossover books." She holds forth phenomenological research methods in order gain a greater understanding of the true significance of

crossover literature and what it “actually *does* for readers”, and encourages scholars to research reader-response as it “can complement traditional methods in literary criticism so that [they] may gain a holistic understanding of the role of literature in our lives.” Harju’s own study, with a more reader centred approach, and her insights on the process of cross-reading are of great value when analysing reviews by readers.

Harju’s campaign for a phenomenological approach to the research of literature is shared by Rita Felski (2008: 17–19), who in her turn criticizes traditional reader-response theories of providing a highly formalist model of how readers respond to texts. Felski (2008: 16), for example, describes Wolfgang Iser’s and Roman Ingarden’s prescribed readers as “curiously bloodless and disembodied”, and advises against wishful theoretical speculations of what reading actually is. Instead of creating imaginative readers “conformed to a one-sided ideal of the academic or professional reader” (and, in other words, hardly your typical crossover reader), reader-response theory should “do justice to how readers respond to the worlds they encounter” and be open to the various responses engendered by actual readers (Felski 2008: ). In Felski’s (2008: 19) view, the primary goal of phenomenological research should be to “clarify how and why particular texts matter to us”, and here the reviews produced by actual readers based on their own experiences will function as the starting-point.

Crossover literature is a relatively new label on books crossing between child and adult audiences which was first adapted and served as a buzzword in British media before it gained ground with publishers and eventually literary scholars as well (Nel & Paul 2011: 59–60). The phenomenon of crossover literature has been described in Sandra L. Beckett’s study *Crossover Fiction, Global and Historical Perspectives* (2009) and Rachel Falconer’s *The Crossover Novel, Contemporary Children’s Fiction and Its Adult Readership* (2009). Beckett and Falconer have both studied crossover literature with a focus on the crossover trend of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which started as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* (1997–2007) series grew in popularity both among children and adults. Together with Rowling’s books, Mark Haddon’s novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) and Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000) were among the first to be referred to as crossover literature, and commonly regarded as the

archetypes of the new kind of crossover literature (Beckett 2009: 7). In *Keywords of Children's Literature* (Nel & Paul 2011: 58), crossover literature is defined as “literature that crosses from child to adult or adult to child audiences”, which means that it can also refer to literature originally intended for adults that has found its way to child readers. Although literature has crossed from adult to child audiences ever since the first books were published expressly for adults (Beckett 2009: 60), it is literature crossing in the other direction, namely from child to adult, that will be studied here. The main criterion for the literary work chosen for this study was that it would be popular with, and commonly read by both children and adults. Another criterion was that there would be enough review material available online, both by children and adults, in order to analyse readers' responses to the text.

Although the term of crossover literature dates back only to the late 1990s, the phenomenon as such is not a new one, and there are numerous examples of books having found their way to a dual readership even before the emerge of a specialized children's literature (Beckett 2009: 2; Falconer 2009: 11). The new theory and the recent label of crossover literature enables us to categorize such literary works in a way that we formerly were not able to, although a large number of titles fit under this category. The object of study here is not any of the new crossover titles having emerged since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the recent crossover trend, but rather one of the more classical works of children's literature that are now regarded as crossover literature. As such works have stood the test of time, they are more likely read by dual audiences, not because reading crossover has become a trend and thereby become of increased commercial interest (Beckett 2009: 179–229), but because of a genuine crossover appeal.

It is difficult to write about children's books as crossover literature without addressing one of the most controversial issues in the field, namely the question of whether some works of literature are more suitable for readers of a certain age. This leads us to consider the fact that it is, to a great extent, adults who make the decisions for and influence young individuals' reading choices. It seems that many of the examples of classical crossover works are highly regarded and appreciated by adults (parents,

publishers, literary scholars), whereas actual child readers do not have the same means of voicing their opinions about literature. Neither do they have the same power to influence which books they read, as it is ultimately parents, publishers and the (adult run) media who judge whether a children's book is good or not.

Children's literature scholar Peter Hunt advocates a "childist" approach when studying children's literature in consideration of the actual child readers (Cumming 2007). Reader-response criticism, and analysing children's book reviews, is one approach to the study of children's literature which enables the incorporation of children's own views and opinions. However, since most reader-response theory will not be specifically adapted for the analysis of children as readers, and in order to introduce a more childist approach to the study, references will be made to theory dealing with children's literature whenever necessary. In this way, the aspect of child readers can be introduced to the largely adult-centred theories on reading.

Adults reading children's books for their own interest is true for "many of the great classics of children's literature" (Beckett 2009: 86), and this is also the case with the adults whose reviews have been selected for this study. From the reviews it is evident that the adults sought to read crossover literature for themselves, and not as co-readers to children. Although adults often read children's books aloud to a younger audience in the role of mediators, we need to distinguish between adults as co-readers and as actual readers of children's literature. Although many adults read children's books aloud to children, this study focuses exclusively on adults and children as consumers of crossover literature for their own pleasure.

Except for the main question of how children and adults function as readers of the same literary works, this study also sets out to answer the questions of how adult and child readers differ, and how they read and interpret texts differently (if this is at all the case). The aim is also to explore why some literary works – here referred to as crossover literature – have become popular with a dual audience of both children and adults. Other essential questions when studying crossover literature is whether a certain work can be read and interpreted on several levels, appealing to child and adult readers in different

ways, and whether understanding and enjoying crossover works might require certain knowledge or experience. It is likely that the adults whose reviews are analysed in this study focus on and appreciate certain aspects of crossover literature more than child reviewers do – and vice versa. The analysis will probably reveal a shift in focus between the readings by children and adults, and studying actual readers' reviews should be helpful in explaining the underlying reasons for such differences.

## 2 ONLINE REVIEWS ON *THE HOBBIT*

The primary material used for this study is reviews on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* or *There and Back Again* written by both children and adults. A book review, as described by Gail Pool (2007: 8, 10), is written – contrary to academic criticism – without utilizing any specialized jargon and theory to support one's argumentation. This is because reviews are addressed at a general audience and written for all readers to understand. Furthermore, Pool (2007: 10) explains, book reviews are also written for an audience which is not already familiar with the literary work in question, and thus requires the reviewer to include a description rather than merely evaluating it in order to provide those unfamiliar with the work a chance to assess it.

The reviews by children used in this study are from [spaghettibookclub.org](http://spaghettibookclub.org), [readingmatters.co.uk](http://readingmatters.co.uk) and [worldreading.org](http://worldreading.org), which are all sites especially designed for children to review books. On the [spaghettibookclub.org](http://spaghettibookclub.org) site 13 reviews on *The Hobbit* by children ranging between ages 8–12 can be found, on [readingmatters.co.uk](http://readingmatters.co.uk) 22 reviews by children aged 10–18 can be found, and [worldreading.org](http://worldreading.org) offers 9 reviews by children aged between 9 and 14. The reviews written by adult readers, on the other hand, are all taken from [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) (which, according to children's studies scholar Peter E. Cumming (2007), although a commercial site, may host some of “the most democratic of Web reviews”), and due to the large amount of material on the site, 15 reviews have been chosen from [amazon.com](http://amazon.com). Reviews of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* have been chosen as Tolkien's work represents crossover literature as described by Sandra L. Beckett and Rachel Falconer. Enough review material on *The Hobbit* is also available online, produced by both children and adults, which enables a comparison of children's and adults' readings of the book.

### 2.1 Online Review Forums

The Spaghetti Book Club is a service offered to classes, after-school groups and libraries providing them with curriculum, training and web publishing services for

online publishing of children's book reviews. The site claims to be the largest of its kind, and the aim is stated as "teaching students how to write and illustrate book reviews", and also as helping them to "develop critical reading and writing skills". Pupils are expected to learn how "to make personal connections to what they are reading, summarize stories, construct meaning from text, express their opinions and reactions, and compare literary works". The most evident problem with the site, the aim being a childist approach to the study of children's book reviews, is that the process of reviewing is highly teacher and adult monitored. The child reviewers work in groups where they discuss the books they have read, "discuss the elements of a book review", "write group reviews to practice writing summaries, opinions and recommendations" and even "read their reviews for feedback from their peers ". Once sent to The Spaghetti Book Club (2005), the reviews are further read by the staff in order "to ensure that they meet explicit standards-based publishing criteria". The result of this is most likely that reviews from The Spaghetti Book Club will not have as great a genuinity and variation as they would had it not been for the fact that reviewers work in teacher-led groups and that the reviews are controlled by adults before publishing. On the other hand, the material can be trusted to be produced by children, and we can be quite certain of the age of the reviewers. (Spaghetti Book Club 2012)

The form of reviews at the Reading Matters site is not as controlled as the Spaghetti Book Club reviews, something which becomes evident in how the review material varies in both length and quality. Readers are expected to rate the books they have read from one to ten, and then fill in information about their gender, age and nationality. Reviewers are further asked to answer the general question of what they think about the book, followed by the more specified sub-question of whether they "loved it or hated it [and] why it made [them] feel that way". Reading Matters is a site run privately by Jill Marshall, who is a trained lawyer but has also worked as a teacher, and she herself reviews all the books that children are then free to comment on. These books are evidently of her own choice, limiting which books children can at all comment on. One child reviewer does not seem entirely satisfied with the corpus of books to choose from on the site and comments that "THIS SITE IS GREAT, BUT PLEASE CONSIDER PUTTING SOME MORE BOOKS ON IT, NAMELY, ANY OF THE 102 BIGGLES

TITLES BY CAPTAIN W.E.JOHNS” (Reading Matters 2007). Marshall herself hopes that her reviews “will help [children] to think about the ideas and form [their] own views”. Again, a certain amount of adult influence on children’s reading is visible, although Marshall assures that children “don’t have to agree with my interpretations and conclusions” but that her reviews are there as a starting point. When submitted, the reviews are not immediately uploaded on the website, but go through the “adult filter” of site administration controlling them and choosing “some of the interesting ones”. (Reading Matters 2007) On the whole, however, the children’s reviews are not seemingly influenced or affected by Marshall’s own reviews, which are at times so long that it is doubtful if most children will actually take the time to read through them.

The third site for children’s book reviews, aadl World Reading, was originally initiated by Mary Pat Timmons for the Internet Public Library (described as a “public service organization and a learning/teaching environment [...] answering reference questions” (ipl2 2010) at the University of Michigan School of Information, and is now a service of the Ann Arbor District Library. Reviewers are expected to fill in their nationality, and whether they are reviewing a certain work for themselves or for school, before the text “[o]kay, please write the review in the box below” appears. They are then required to give their first name and their age before they submit the review. Although aadl World of Reading poses no leading questions to their reviewers, but allows them to comment freely on the works they have read, there is a list of books for children to choose from, which means that it is not possible to review just any book. It is not clear whether the reviews are controlled by site administration before being published on the site, but at least school teachers are encouraged to have their students send in reviews, which means that at least part of the reviews are controlled by adult teachers. (Aadl World of Reading 2003)

## 2.2 *The Hobbit* as Crossover

*The Hobbit* was written for J.R.R. Tolkien’s own children, and the first edition including the author’s own illustrations was published in 1937, after which it enjoyed an

immediate success both among children and adults (Beckett 2009: 106). Whether the editions read by reviewers in this study were illustrated or not is not explicitly stated in most cases, and nor have all readers read the same edition. In *Written for Children, An Outline of English-language Children's Literature* by John Rowe Townsend (1987: 156), *The Hobbit* is described as a children's book in style and manner, but one that does not exclude adult readers. Tolkien wished to produce a fairy-story within the measure of children when he wrote *The Hobbit* (Townsend 1987: 231), the prequel to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954–1955), which in turn developed into a darker story addressing an adult readership (Beckett 2009: 106). The influence these works have had both on children's and general literature is recognizable (Townsend 1987: 231), and Falconer (2009: 11) gives Tolkien as an example of authors who have, for a long time, attracted readers of varying ages, and has helped pave the way for the rise of contemporary crossover literature, especially in Britain. Beckett (2009: 106) just as enthusiastically states that Tolkien's works were instrumental in the establishment of fantasy as a crossover genre, straddling the divide between literature read by children and adults.

### 2.3 J.R.R Tolkien and Fantasy Literature

The author of *The Hobbit*, J.R.R. Tolkien, is one of the most influential writers of fantasy literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Rabkin 1979: 7). Tolkien was professor of Anglo-Saxon and an expert on the Northern sagas and Beowulf. His stories are largely influenced by ancient myths, fairy tales, legends, sagas and epics and take place in the fictional world of Middle-earth. The author himself spoke of his fantasy writing as fairy-stories, and did not primarily regard these as children's literature. (Rowe Townsend 1987: 155, 231) Tolkien's approach to fantasy stories thus represents a more historical view, as mythical stories had, until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, been recognized as serious material for adults. Especially sacred myths had been adapted as explanations for phenomena whose mysteries could not be unravelled scientifically. (Rabkin 1979: 10) As a separate children's literature emerged, fairy tales and stories of myth or legend were for the most part relegated to children's bookshelves (Beckett 254–

5), but Tolkien broke this trend by starting to write fantasy also intended for adult readers.

Fantasy literature easily bridges markets for different age groups and for many it is as good as synonymous with crossover literature. One reason behind the crossover appeal is that myth works ultimately for addressing readers at all stages of life, as it provides “archetypes that speak to the subconscious in ways that adult fiction often does not”. (Beckett 254–255) According to Harju (2012: 110), fantasy stories continue to form our conceptions of the world from childhood throughout adulthood. She does not regard stories such as *The Hobbit* as promoting escapism, but instead as offering readers “a safe, imaginary space where they can work out solutions to real world problems.”

The sense of wonderment and hopefulness in fantasy literature is yet something that appeals to most readers, both young and old (Harju 2012: 111–112). Even though such themes are nowadays often viewed as child-like or primitive, the fact remains that technical and scientific progress has failed to provide us with meaningful answers concerning life and death (Felski 2008: 76). Rita Felski (2002: 59) writes that “an affirmation of wonder is potentially enlivening, energizing, even ethical, encouraging a stance of openness and generosity to the world”, whereas spiritual bereavement, “sink us even deeper into the void of dispiriting, self-corroding scepticism”. Tolkien’s stories do exactly what Felski (2008: 58) encourages us all to do, and acknowledge the persistence of the magical in the present.

### 3 READING CROSSOVER LITERATURE

The first part of this section deals with the phenomenon of crossover literature, and the second with reader-response criticism. The tradition of crossover literature is studied in 3.1, as well as its broad appeal with readers of all ages. In 3.2, different approaches on reader-response theory, places of indeterminacy in a text, reading as play and the enchantment of reading are studied. Lastly, theories comparing adult and children as readers are presented.

#### 3.1 Crossover Literature

Crossover is a diverse group of literature, and there are no common features in themes or motives, in modes of address and narrative dynamics shared by all crossover works. Instead, crossover includes a varied group of novels and can therefore not be said to constitute a distinct class or literary genre. The term is open to interpretation, and suitably enough, it reflects the amorphous nature of the corpus of literary works defined by it. There is an endless number of literary works that could potentially be redefined as crossover, and works by authors such as Enid Blyton and J.M. Barrie, which used to be regarded as strictly children's literature, have found their way to a dual readership and been reissued as crossover literature. (Falconer 2009: 27) Rather than asking what crossover literature is, Falconer suggests the question of what crossover literature does. Her own answer to this question is that it

excels in increasing a reader's awareness of the areas of overlap as well as the differences between children's and adult fiction [and] prompts a reader to interrogate everything that happens in these in-between territories. [It] calls into question the boundaries which used to define children's fiction by prescribing what it should contain and exclude. [...] Crossover fiction provides a spotlight on [the] areas of intersection between the child's interests and the adult's. And cross-reading increases our consciousness of difference, even as we traverse and retrace the boundary lines. (Falconer 2009: 27, 31)

Harju's (2012: 12) answer to the same question is that crossover literature provides "opportunities to share knowledge, experience and culture". According to her, reading crossover literature is a way of constructing bridges between childhood and adulthood.

### 3.1.1 The Tradition of Crossover

Fairy tales, oriental tales and fables are all examples of early forms of storytelling that made no distinction between child and adult audiences, and literary classics such as *Arabian Nights*, Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables* (1668) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) are all early examples of crossover works enjoyed by adults and children alike (Beckett 2009: 2). As Falconer writes, it did not take long for 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction intended for adults, for example novels by Charles Dickens and Jane Austen, to cross over to child readers and still today such works can be found in older children's sections of libraries and book stores. In Britain, there is a strong tradition of children's nonsense, magic and fantasy fiction being read by dual audiences, among which works by authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Roald Dahl, Lewis Carroll, Kenneth Grahame, and A.A. Milne can be mentioned. (Falconer 2009: 11) Although the phenomenon of books being read and enjoyed by diverse age groups is not a new phenomenon as such, it was only with the great success of the *Harry Potter* series that this category of literature became highly fashionable (Beckett 2009: 179) and eventually more clearly defined. Today, crossover is a category recognized by writers, readers, critics and publishers alike. Due to the popularity of some bestselling crossover works many new books are deliberately marketed by writers and publishers as crossover fiction, and many authors have used the category to describe their books on their websites since the late 1990s (Beckett 2009: 180) The new theory and the recent label of crossover literature enables us to categorize such literary works in a way that we formerly were not able to, although a great number of diverse titles fit under this category.

### 3.1.2 Adult-Child Dichotomy

There have been some suggestions as to crossover works not being as greatly appreciated by the child audience they are marketed for as by adult readers. Beckett (2009: 2–3) explains in the introduction of her study that “[i]t has often been pointed out that a number of children's classics adopted by adults [...] were written by authors [...] who had trouble adapting to the adult world.” Some critics have claimed that crossover books “are merely adult literature in disguise” (Harju 2012: 33) and that adults’ engagement with children’s literature is predatory and invasive on what rightly belongs to children and should thus be seen as a colonization of children’s culture (Falconer 2009: 30–31). In her book *The Case of Peter Pan: Or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, for example, Jacqueline Rose (1984: 1–4) argues that all children’s books are written as investments by authors in children, which enables the author to demand something from the child and thereby frame and hold the child in place. In other words, children’s books are written to satisfy a desire held by the adult author, and in that sense it is impossible to create a common ground where children and adults would be able to communicate on an equal level. Harju (2012: 33) dismisses the Rose’s theory as implicitly supporting the view of adult literature as superior and more sophisticated, and at the same time reflecting common assumptions of the role and shaping of children’s literature. Also in Falconer’s view (2009: 30–31), cross-reading is not a question of colonization, but rather of an area where narrative and thematological interests of child and adult audiences intersect.

Children’s literature critic Maria Nikolajeva (1997: 24), among others, writes about ambivalence in texts, meaning that the narrative can be seen as divided into layers of difficulty, one being on the level of the adventure plot and regarded as suitable for children; and the other on a morally sophisticated level mainly appealing to adults. Beckett (2009: 86), on the other hand, warns us against drawing a simplistic line between the adventure plot and some deeper meaning that can only be decoded and appreciated by adults. According to her, enduring crossover classics have never been “schizophrenic or Janus-like texts that have one part aimed at children and another directed over their heads at knowing adults” (2009: 28–29). Beckett and Falconer thus

agree that differences in child and adult readings are more complex than that they can be explained simply by layers of difficulty in a narrative. Different responses, Beckett (2009: 260) argues, are rather a result of individual sensitivities such as imagination, emotional capacities and a reader's sense of humour, and do not mean that readers of a certain age would be excluded from the pleasures of the reading experience.

Harju attempts to explain why the idea of a shared literature for both children and adults, which is precisely what crossover literature is, might seem controversial or provocative. Considering how different the categories of child and adult literature are, it might be difficult to understand how children and adults could possibly appreciate the same books. In order to understand this, it is necessary to study how adult and children's literature were originally constructed, and how the separation of literatures goes hand in hand with social constructs of child and adulthood. It has already been mentioned how fantasy stories were not originally exclusively for children, but that it took until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century before children's books came to form a category on its own (Harju 2012: 23). Cross-reading implies that readers do not conform to traditional reading boundaries and thus challenge the segregation of child and adult cultures, something that can be viewed as inappropriate (Harju 2012: 17).

Except for not respecting readers' personal preferences, Harju (2012: 22–23) acknowledges several other problems that follow from the constructing of separate child and adult cultures. Although as sorting groups of individuals according to age can serve to bring forth the unique needs, aspects and vulnerabilities of different periods in our lives, it can also have a negative effect on the power dynamics between age groups. In the binary construct of child and adult cultures, the child, together with its values and experiences, is often labelled as inferior, whereas adult knowledge and culture are privileged. From this follows that adult literature is also regarded as more complex and sophisticated and thus of higher value. Harju (2012: 23) also mentions how it is problematic that literature for children is often based on what children assumedly appreciate in stories, rather than on their actual responses to what they read. All in all, working on the supposition that children and adults have different reading interests and confining readers to prescribed reading lists (e.g. by marking book covers with a

recommended reading level or ordering books in libraries and book stores according to age) are “serious detriment[s] to literacy education [and] limit the imagination, and impede ability to discover ourselves through books” (Harju 2012: 24–25).

Cross-reading can thus be regarded as a critical reaction against the socially constructed boundaries segregating child and adult readerships. According to Harju (2012: 21, 47), it reflects a weariness, among both age groups, with the limitations such boundaries pose on human experience. Readers are not uncritically willing to accept the conceptualization of child and adulthood, or to yield to social classifications such as adult, elder, child or young adult. This is not to say, in Harju’s view, that all age groups need to process and create meaning from their experiences in the same way, but that cross-reading can create new perspectives and thus engender a better understanding and greater respect between age groups. Felski (2008: 17–20), in the same way, stresses the first person perspective and an undogmatic openness to varying literary responses rather than turning to prescriptive textbook theories on what reading is supposed to be. If a dual audience of adults and children can enjoy reading crossover literature, then, Felski states, we should “honour our implication and involvement in the works we read, rather than serving as shame-faced bystanders to our own aesthetic response.”

While differences between age groups are acknowledged in crossover literature, they are considered insignificant in comparison to similarities. Crossover literature undermines the polarization and schismatic divide between child and adult readers and instead recognizes the continuity that connects readers of all ages. (Beckett 2009: 268–269) The view that there should be a natural continuity between child and adulthood is shared by crossover writer Philip Pullman (quoted in Falconer 2009: 84) who reminds us that all adult writers have once been children, in the same manner that all child readers will one day grow up to become adults, meaning that there must exist a certain continuity between these life stages. Traversing the boundary dividing children and adults should then rather be regarded as something positive, as it sheds light on and helps us comprehend the differences between the two readerships (Falconer 2009: 31).

Harju (2012: 13–14, 41, 175) writes about the crossover continuum, referring to the philosophical space in crossover literature where adults and children can share their common knowledge, desires, concerns and experiences. She does not suggest that our sense of identity remains the same throughout the various life stages, but that valuable experiences such as fear, achievement, love, intimidation or anxiety can be shared and related irrespective of the reader's age. According to Harju, this continuum linking the worlds of children and adults constitutes the main appeal of crossover literature as it offers a holistic understanding of what being human actually involves. Engaging in books that subvert socially constructed age distinctions provides readers with a chance to freely explore their own identities by connecting their childhood and adulthood experiences. Both Harju and Beckett (2009: 269) suggest that understanding the adult and child continuum ultimately creates a greater intergenerational understanding and render readers more empathetic towards members of other age groups. In other words, "crossover literature reflects an attractive, alternative life philosophy that recognizes and explores continuity between human experience in various life stages" (Harju 2012: 41).

### 3.1.3 Behind the Crossover Appeal

Many successful crossover works, by for example Philip Pullman and Jostein Gaarder, have dealt with topics of philosophical nature, and some critics have attributed the popularity among adult readers of these works to their discussion of such existential questions. It is, however, overly simplistic to claim that child readers would not take an interest in existential questions, and that such topics would be out of reach for them. The pondering of psychological, metaphysical and existential questions, of some greater purpose, is not something that is restricted to adulthood but is of interest to readers at all stages of life. Although adventure and fantasy appeal to many young readers, it is not only adults who search for deeper meanings in texts. (Beckett 2009: 96, 145,268) Falconer (2009: 28–29) has read children's reviews of Pullman's bestselling crossover trilogy *His Dark Materials* and found that they also take an interest in complex themes such as the ethics of science or the existence of God. In the reviews on *The Hobbit*, one

12-year-old reviewer commented that “[t]he moral of this book is, trust in your teammates and work together. That way, all will turn out fine”, and many children have commented on Bilbo's development into a heroic and adventurous character, signalling a tendency in the reviews to focus on something beyond the actual adventure plot.

Crossover books are largely based on themes and descriptions that are regarded as appealing to an audience of children, which means that what is seen as socially accepted in these works is much more liberal than in typical adult works, where they would seem too delicate or even embarrassing. Whereas adult literature is largely restricted to themes of personal relations and of man in society, children's fiction offer adults a certain freedom by enabling them to explore fantasy, adventure, other time periods, personal growth, dichotomous morality patterns and so on. Pullman, the author of *His Dark Materials*, explains how writing children's literature allows him to deal with complex themes such as loyalty, love, science and religion. Pullman admits that he would not choose to write about alternative moral universes if he wrote explicitly for an adult audience. The basic human and universal themes could well help to explain why crossover stories so effectively transcend boundaries and why adults wish to reclaim these stories (quoted Beckett 2009: 267–268). They provide a ground where readers are not so much defined either by age, common experience or knowledge, but where such factors become less relevant for being able to read and enjoy the text.

Another commonly articulated explanation as to why crossover literature has been adapted by a dual readership is that many readers, of all ages, have a preference for strong and clear narratives. Such narratives, with their origins in the oral tradition, are nowadays typically to be found in children's literature (Falconer, 2009: 131). Novels crossing over from child to adult audiences prove that the need for story is ageless, and that good narratives appeal to adults as well as children. In children's literature there is no room to “put the plot on hold while cut[ting] artistic capers for the amusement of [...] sophisticated readers.” (Beckett 2009: 265–266) The simple and uncluttered language of children's literature can also be understood by readers as expressing “something elemental and universal about the human condition”, and therefore be equally appealing

to adults as to the “more instinctive literary judgement” of young readers (Falconer, 2009: 132).

In short, a successful crossover work satisfies readers’ need for a good narrative at the same time as it provides them with concepts that engage both intellectually and emotionally (Beckett 2009: 267, 270). From this can be concluded that even though adults have a greater amount of experience and higher developed power of judgment and reasoning (Shrivastava 2010: 56), they are not the only ones who discover deeper meanings in a text. Ultimately, it is not only a question of which topics children and adults as readers are concerned with or interested in, but also how these topics are treated and interpreted in their readings that should be in focus when making comparisons between the two groups.

### 3.2. Reader-Response Theory

Falconer (2009: 28–29) observes that possible differences in child and adult responses have little to do with the author, the narrator or the level of address. Instead, a book can be read and interpreted in a number of different ways by an individual reader. Also Beckett (2009: 145) supports the idea by adding that readers of all ages construct the multi-layered crossover works differently. The view shared by Beckett and Falconer, of reading as an activity largely shaped by the individual reader, corresponds well with theories of reader-response criticism, the aim of which is not to separate literary works from their readers and the process of reading.

Reader-response criticism, an approach that has gained ground in the field of literary study since the 1960s, does not consist of one undiversified theory. Instead there are different orientations that all share a common focus on the reading process in the study of literary texts. Rather than studying the meaning of texts as already achieved structures carrying a certain meaning, reader-response critics study the ongoing operations and responses that take place in the reader’s mind. (Abrams 1999: 256) The most well-known names in the field, Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser, Roland Barthes,

Norman Holland and Stanley Fish, all have different views on the “primary factors that shape readers’ responses;” on where to “draw the line between objectively given information and readers’ subjective responses”, and on the extent to which texts constrain readers’ responses. They all agree, however, that the meaning of a text is “at least to some considerable degree” produced or created by an individual reader. Consequently, there can be no one correct way of reading and interpreting a text (Abrams 1999: 257), and all literary works can be argued to consist of, on the one hand, an objective text constituted of the textual fact and, on the other, a subjective experience which is the reader’s interpretive act (Freund 1987: 43, 118).

With his canonized 1967 essay *The Death of the Author* (1989), Roland Barthes is the first to have emphasised the importance of the reader in literary study. Until then, all attention had been diverted to the authors in order to understand the meaning behind literary works. In his essay Barthes (1989: 49–55) explains literature as consisting of multiple cultural layers and quotations, which all become focused in the reader. “A text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination”, Barthes writes, and in his view it is the reader who has the capacity to combine all the elements through which a text is constituted. By this can be understood that the reader’s knowledge and experience create a literary work, and that reading thus is synonymous with the production of the text. It is therefore important not to view readers as one single impersonal mass, without biography, history or psychology, but rather as individual creators of a text.

In Janice Radway’s (2007: 337) words, we should see reading as a generative activity and a process of performative production, instead of viewing readers as being “either under the sway of the book or resistant to its pleasures and incitements.” Radway (2007: 331) attributes the tendency to regard reading as secondary to writing to literary scholars’ attempt to secure their own authority. The traditional practice of textual interpretation, where literary works are strongly connected with aspects such as genre or author, in Radway’s view, “constrain[s] our understanding of reading and the effects engaging with books, stories, texts and images has” on us.

The phenomenological approach to literary study, in the tradition of German

philosopher Edmond Husserl, studies how reality is organized and experienced by an actual individual subject (Eagleton 2011: 51). Polish theorist Roman Ingarden, in *The Literary Work of Art* (1931) and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (1937), adopted Husserl's phenomenological approach in the field of literary study, in an attempt to explain readers' understanding and responses to literature (Abrams 220). Felski (2008: 75), also with a phenomenological approach to reader-response theory, describes the process that occurs in a reader's mind as an act of decoding, where the reader draws upon accumulated reservoirs of tacit knowledge. She understands reading as an act influenced by "structures of pre-evaluation, including contextual clues, institutional norms, and ingrained expectations". In her words, readers are "always involved in translating signs into imaginary scenarios, responding to subtle textual cues, filling in the blanks, elaborating and expanding on what a text gives [them]."

On the grounds that texts can be rightfully read and interpreted in many different ways, and that the aim of study is the reader's experiences during the reading process, there should be no need to focus one's attention on determining the correct reading of a text. Instead, focus should be on analysing actual reader-responses to a certain work. However, analysing reading is not a problem free process, as reading is something that takes place in the mind of individuals and is therefore too fluid and heterogeneous an act to be fully expressed or apprehended simply by writing or speaking of it. Literary critic Patrocínio Schweickart (2007: 16) describes readers' communicative agencies as a "readerly" way of understanding and interpreting the utterances of others, and he thereby separates the act of reading from the "speakerly" and "writerly" acts of speaking and writing. Still, although something never completely apprehensible, reading is something we can talk and write about, and writing book reviews is one attempt of readers to express how they experience a certain literary work – whether it evokes positive or negative feelings, which characters they feel that they are able to identify with, if they think others would appreciate the same text and so on. By studying the readers' actual responses to *The Hobbit*, it should thus be possible to determine if there are general tendencies for how children and adults read and interpret – and thereby construct – the narrative differently.

### 3.2.1 Places of Indeterminacy

One suggested reason for the various interpretations reading can inspire is that literary language itself is of an interpretable and indeterminate nature. It is not possible to decode any exact meaning from the language of a written text, as its meaning is always shifting, multiple and undecidable. (Goldstein & Machor 2007: 6) Ingarden is the first to have acknowledged that texts are full of gaps and other places of indeterminacy, and Iser later applied Ingarden's theory in the study of certain literary works (Abrams 1999: 220, 257). By filling in the places of indeterminacy, a reader can restore what would otherwise be a mute and self-sufficient text, with features of "rhetoricity, infinite regress of figuration, doubt, uncertainty, irony, strangeness and 'otherness'", to something that can be recognized as ordinary and familiar. In other words, strangeness, formality and fictional aspects of a literary text need to be naturalized through the reading process in order for readers to make sense of it. (Freund 1987: 77–78, 110)

As authors cannot delve into every aspect of their narratives, texts are full of places of indeterminacy open for readers to interpret based on their own individual experiences (Steffensen 2005: 85–86). Steffensen (2005: 88) describes places of indeterminacy as opening up to additional places of indeterminacy which in turn results in more additions by the readers. This means that there is no end to the possible interpretations readers can make. Places of indeterminacy thus function to increase the readers' choices, which is something that should not necessarily be viewed as negative, as it enables fictional texts to carry broader meanings. The places of indeterminacy are the numerous facts overpassed in a narrative, either because they were not central enough to the text, or simply due to the fact that authors cannot include absolutely everything in their writing. This leaves the readers with the task to complete the narrative throughout the reading process by adding their own material to the narrative in order to complete it, something known as blending. The readers' additions are always reflections of their own perception of reality, and referred to as the principle of the least deviation (*den minste afvigelsens princip*). More precisely, readers will always perceive the literary reality as they do their own unless they can find something in the text that explicitly speaks against it. (Steffensen, 2005: 49, 88) Reality is likely to look quite different perceived

by a child compared to by an adult, and children's and adults' additions to a narrative and way of filling in places of indeterminacy are therefore likely to differ more greatly than between two readers of the same age group.

### 3.2.2 Reading as Fantasy or Daydreams

The notion of reading as a form of play was first expressed by Norman Holland in works such as *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (1968) and *Five Readers Reading* (1975). Holland bases his argumentation of the Freudian concept of adult fantasies and daydreams as a disguised continuation of childhood play. Reading can thereby be seen as a means of transforming apparently childish fantasies into socially accepted form. (Freund 1987: 115, 118). German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975: 103–109) also supports the notion of art and literature as a form of play. In his view, play reaches presentation through its players, and the players are thus not the subjects of play. Those partaking in a work of art, the spectators of a play or the readers of a literary work, are the ones who complete the work and give it its true significance.

Gadamer (1975: 105–106) further states that play is exciting and enjoyable because its structure frees the players from the bothersome task of taking their own initiative, and thus releases them from the everyday strain of existence. Gadamer's example of this is how a child playing with a ball experiences this as playful and not strenuous because the game is without purpose or intention and all that the child needs to do is to order and shape the movements of the game. In the same way, readers of literary works do not take the initiative of creating the text but merely process it by shaping and ordering what is already there. Readers fill in the gaps of the text, effortlessly creating images of the text in their minds. Gadamer (1975: 109) thus views the reader as the player of the literary work, which constitutes the play itself. In other words, just as no play can be effected without its player, nor can a work of art be completed without an audience.

According to Harju (2012: 92, 138), our ability to engage in imaginative activities is formed in childhood years, and still affects how we identify through and create stories

throughout adulthood. Make-believe games in one's early years can thereby lead to a richer imagination and generally to a better life experience in adulthood. In Harju's (2012: 1, 33, 119–120) view, not only children but also adults "proclaim their affinity with story worlds through some form of play", and her research on storied formation, or how cross-readers understand themselves in response to stories, suggests that there are instances where adults experience the desire to return to childhood play. Play thus functions in order to extend story experiences, and young and older readers alike reflect the desire of participation in stories and of identifying with characters. Singer and Singer, in *The House of Make-Belive* (1992: 227) explain how our imaginary skills do not disappear as we grow older but take on "new forms [...] responsive to the task-demands of each age level in a culture", and that when we reach adolescence and adulthood, play and fantasy rather become internalized, taking place inside our minds.

Steffensen (2005: 46) describes reading fiction as a form of daydreaming where readers are free to write their own dreams and play, but with the help of another (usually better skilled) author to create the structure and the setting of that dream. The effect is that readers, although active participants, are unable to control where the narrative is going, and this results in feelings of anticipation and expectation throughout the reading process. This notion is expressed by an 11-year-old reviewer who enjoyed *The Hobbit* because, as she writes, "it made great pictures in my head" (Spaghetti Book Club 2012). One of the adult reviewers of *The Hobbit* describes him/herself as actively taking part in and using his/her own imagination in the reading of the book in the following way: "As I joined the hobbit on his remarkable quest to defeat the dragon Smaug and reconquer the dwarves long-lost treasure, I met a wonderful array of friends and foes – wizards, dwarves, elves, trolls, goblins, and a myriad of other fantastic creatures – and my imagination and interest never waned" (Amazon.com 2012), and a 14-year-old reviewer wrote that "it was very vivid and really made my imagination work" (Reading Matters 2007).

### 3.2.3 Enchantment

Felski (2008: 54, 57, 76) uses enchantment as a term for describing readers' aesthetic engagement with texts, arguing that one of the main reasons for engaging with literature (or any other form of art) is the wish to "be pulled into an altered state of consciousness", often referred to as a willing suspension of disbelief. Enchantment is not a frequently adapted term in literary theory due to the current strive towards disenchantment and demystification. Any term with connotations of occultism or sorcery would thereby immediately be discarded as anti-intellectual.

Felski (2008: 54–55, 60, 75) describes enchantment as total absorption and involvement in a text, bringing intense pleasure and causing the reader to become self-forgetting. Quite distinct from everyday perception, the reading experience becomes unusually intense and detailed, and enchantment is therefore often compared to states of dreaming or intoxication. Enchanted readers' autonomy and self-control are numbed, and they cease to read analytically, letting themselves become oblivious to their surroundings and their past. When the reading process comes to an end or is interrupted there follows an awkward moment of readjustment, where reality suddenly appears unwelcome or even intrusive, causing a sense of sorrow and regret. Yet, readers are aware of being immersed in a fictional world and enchantment takes place in a state of double consciousness. Felski states how "even as we are enchanted we remain aware of our condition of enchantment, without such knowledge diminishing or diluting the intensity of our involvement". She adds that enchantment often is described as an arresting of motion or as a sense of being transfixed or spellbound, and further compares enchantment to a sense of being swept up, transported, spirited away, sucked in, possessed, hypnotized, mesmerized and taken out of ourselves. This is similar to the comparisons many adult and child reviewers have used to describe their experiences of reading *The Hobbit*.

### 3.2.4 Comparing Child and Adult Readers

It will also be necessary to establish how reader-response theory applies to the comparison of child and adult readers. It has so far been argued that a literary text is constituted of a textual fact together with an actual reader's subjective experience, and that the text can be interpreted in a number of ways by an individual reader. The histories, biographies and psychologies of individual readers affect the outcome of their interpretations, and consequently, child and adult readers – since perceived reality, knowledge and experiences differ with age – are likely to produce different interpretations. Beckett (2009: 114), more specifically, gives some examples from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, which are all multi-levelled texts that appeal to both children and adults. She explains how all readers can appreciate the story of a boy growing up, the complex plotting, Rowling's attention to detail and her humour. Children, however, might be more prone to enjoy the broad slapstick of the books, whereas adults may pay more attention to such aspects as parody, pastiche, satire, subtle wordplay and the intertextual references to mythology, folk and fairy tales and classic fantasy. It is also adult readers who may be able to feel nostalgic about the Hogwarts steam train or the old Ford Anglia.

Bo Steffensen (2005: 87–88) writes about children as readers of fictional literature, and argues that the concept of reception plays a crucial role when readers construct their interpretations of a text. This means that they will for instance have to make sense of words and expressions from other times or cultures in coherence with the text. Despite the fact that children and adults have different backgrounds and different standpoints, successful crossover works should provide a functioning basis for both audiences to complete with information from their own realities, creating interpretations that satisfy both groups. Steffensen (2005: 87–88) further argues that the reason why we have classics is that some works are so well written that they can generate various interpretations while the core of the narrative stays intact. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* also enjoys the status of a literary classic and one potential explanation for its popularity, according to Steffensen's theory, could be a strong openness to a broad range of interpretations for individual readers of various ages and with diverse experiences.

A number of things can be said about adults as cross-readers based on the studies on crossover literature. First of all, cross-reading, rather than reading books intended for their own age group, is in no way a hindrance for adults to gain a greater self-knowledge (Harju 2012: 146). Harju (2012: 11) describes her own experience of cross-reading as an adult as follows: “I gained something familiar and foreign by engaging with ‘children’s books’ as an adult reader, a remembrance of self, a revival of spirit, a chance to re-experience wonders and embark on new adventures. It was surprising, heady, and addictive.” Because cross-reading requires a shift of perspective, Falconer (2009: 133) comments that it is presumably only possible for an older reader to feel and experience a text *as if* one were a child. Much in the same way, she adds, the recurrent themes in children’s literature, such as lightness, could be expected to appeal more to adult readers since they are likely to have experienced the opposite, in this case darkness.

Harju (2012: 148–149), having researched cross-readers’ storied formation, stresses the importance of early reading experiences and our nostalgic memories of reading. According to her, these factors are so strong that “adults who do not carry souvenirs of early experiences in fairy and fantasy world [may not be able to] commit wholeheartedly to fantasy worlds”. Our childhood story experiences can thus have a great effect in determining how and what we read in adulthood. Adults may also, when forming their storied identities, “deliberately reconstruct their childhood memories in a way that gives them a sense of agency that they did not feel as a child” (Harju 2012: 175). For adult readers, reading and rereading crossover literature is potentially a search for identity. Falconer (2009: 129) ascribes the nature of children’s fiction as enabling adults to (re)discover “a sense of the energy and potential embedded in the beginnings of life and art”, and to “recover the earliest memories of childhood, the perceived roots of language and culture, and narrative in its allegedly most archaic and primitive form.” Cross-reading then serves as a protest towards disorienting aspects in contemporary society. In addition, crossover fiction not only opens up a path for adult readers back to their childhood roots, but also enables them to “re-experience, or experience for the first

time, any of the crisis of the so-called earlier phases of life”, such as adolescence existential angst or childhood insecurities (Falconer 2009: 81).

Falconer dedicates one chapter in *The Crossover Novel* (2009) to discussing the enlarging gaze of the child; demonstrating how adult readers often interpret crossover literature from a child’s perspective, reading with the eyes of a young person. When reading crossover literature, adults can also perceive the world as if they were small persons, with the result that the world will seem infinitely large and with sharper details than usual. Falconer (2009: 98, 101–102, 117) reminds us, however, that the enlarging gaze of children can only be experienced as something extraordinary by a readers who normally perceive things at a larger scale. For example, adult readers may experience a stronger sense of horror if they read about violence from the viewpoint of a young and naive character. For children, perceiving the world as big and themselves as smaller than adults is part of their everyday experience. For adults, the child’s gaze has as defamiliarising effect, making their experiences seem fresh or as happening for the first-time. Crossover literature can, in other words, help adults to recover “the special intensity, and the special focus, of the pre-adolescent vision” (Falconer 2009: 258).

#### 3.2.4.1 Identification

Identification may also work differently between child and adult readers. According to Steffensen (2005: 42), personal associations with the text evoke interest among young readers. Readers can react to a text either through cultural, literal or personal associations (cultural associations being for instance references to the Bible whereas literal associations have to do with the form of a text, e.g. a novel or a sonnet). Of these three types, however, child readers will mainly focus on the personal associations, not paying much attention to the form of the text, and cultural associations are either perceived as self-evident or they remain invisible to this group of readers.

Identification with fictional characters can be divided into two types, and are either interjections or projections of the self onto the characters. If identification takes place

through interjection, it means that the readers recognize certain qualities that the characters possess in themselves, and through the characters readers are also able to partake in fantastic adventures. The reading process thus becomes a sort of expression of escapism, where the reader can flee to a reality otherwise only possible in daydreams. The other type of identification is projection, meaning that the readers project their own feelings onto the literary characters described in a text. What is central to this kind of identification is that the reading process serves as a means of dealing with developmental conflicts that all of us are faced with at some point in life, such as separation, jealousy or ambivalent feelings towards one's parents (Steffensen 2005: 42–44).

However, in order for the identification to take place it also requires that the readers are familiar with, or have experienced these conflicts (Steffensen 2005: 42–44). As all adults have once been children and have lived longer to experience more of these conflicts, adult readers will possess an ability to identify with a broader range of characters, both child and adult. Falconer (2009: 133) expresses this in the following way: “every [adult] reader in the world, after all, either has been – or remains – a child, with access at some level to the child's capacity for rapture, terror, boredom and excitement.” Steffensen (2005: 44) claims that identification is closely linked with the building of one's own identity and that children's identification therefore primarily takes place with characters of their own sex and age, social factors being only of secondary importance. Harju (2012: 37–38) likewise shares the view that adults possess a greater ability to identify with age groups other than their own. In her words, adult readers “spiral between temporal planes – at the same time remembering their own childhoods *and* relating to the text from an adult perspective through their response to story”. Adults are thereby able to identify with younger characters thanks to similar experiences from their own past. Since cross-reading in many cases requires the ability to read beyond one's own identity, it is in Harju's (2012: 177) own words: “all about multiple reading identities[, about] making readers remember themselves, and [...] reminding them that they are not alone in the world.”

The freedom of identification becomes especially clear in the case of reading crossover literature, as readers “retain a sense of transgression” in the age-neutral story space. Any reader, regardless of age, can adopt a reading identity quite different from the actual self, and can read from the viewpoint of an adult, an adolescent, a child; or even of a cat, a plant or a wizard. (Falconer 2009: 28–29, Harju 2012: 13) Harju (2012: 175) adds that identification in cross-reading may function metamorphically and affect readers’ self-knowledge and their sense of identity.

## 4 CHILD AND ADULT REVIEWS COMPARED

The analysis of children and adults as readers of J.R.R. Tolkien's crossover novel *The Hobbit* is carried out based on findings in children's reviews on [spaghettibookclub.org](http://spaghettibookclub.org), [readingmatters.co.uk](http://readingmatters.co.uk) and [worldreading.org](http://worldreading.org). The adult reviews are all taken from [amazon.com](http://amazon.com). The analysis is divided into three main categories, the first one dealing with the actual readings of the book, the second one with the contents of the book as perceived by the readers and the last one with external references found in the reader reviews. The categories are based on the aspects most frequently commented on by the child and adult readers themselves.

### 4.1 Reading

The analysis starts by exploring how the reviewers themselves describe their reading of *The Hobbit*, and includes comments on the reading experience and readers' evaluations of the book. More specifically, this section studies the readers' views on the suitable age for reading *The Hobbit*, experiences of enchantment, and adult rereading of the book.

#### 4.1.1 Suitable Age

As this thesis studies the question of crossover literature as read by dual audiences of children and adults, it analyses for whom the readers themselves judge Tolkien's crossover book as suitable. Is there a tendency among readers to think the book suitable for their own age group if they themselves enjoyed reading it, and is there a consensus among all the readers? Although not every reviewer comments on what age group the book is suitable for, quite a few do.

Children's opinions are rather split concerning the suitable age for readers. They do not only comment on whether *The Hobbit* should be read by adults or children, but also divide young readers into more closely defined age groups, usually according to which

grade they are in. It seems that children are more sensitive to age differences, and that age matters more to them. Children also have a tendency to determine the suitable age for reading the book from their own age perspective, not recommending it to readers much older or younger than themselves.

Some of the children do not view the book as suitable for too young children, and do not recommend it for children roughly under the age of ten, but still view it as suitable for older children. The recommended age according to these readers ranges from “anyone that is a good third grade reader and above”, “boys in 4th-10th grade”, “4th graders through adults”, to “any reader above the age of eleven” and thirteen year olds. Reviewers who discourage too young children from attempting to read the book do so “because it is a fairly difficult book”. One reviewer explains how “i didnt like how they made the names so hard to understand and read but maybe i was just to[o] young for this book and didn[']t really understand so i would think that people of an older age should maybe try it if they are interested in adventures.” On the other hand, there are children who think that adults would not appreciate the book because they would perceive it as childish. Instead, such readers recommend the book for “kids who like magical adventure books”, “young readers”, “people who are around 5th to 8th grade” and “3rd and 4th graders.” One reviewer confidently states that “[i]t's a book more for children, so it wouldn't be as good reading it as an adult.”

They were also some children who considered *The Hobbit* suitable for readers of any age. Such readers write how the book “can be enjoyed by children [...]as young as six, and adults of any age”, “all ages who like adventure, fairy tale creatures, and fantasy” and “anyone (kids or adults) who might have a wild imagination.” The only condition these readers give is the ability to enjoy fanciful stories, but they mean that such ability is not dependent on age. Although many of the children seem to be convinced that adults do not take an interest in fantasy stories, cross-reading adults have a different view of adult interests. Quite in accordance with the theory on crossover literature, adult readers, with experiences of both child and adulthood, do not see age as an obstacle for reading fantasy literature. Adults, on their part, seem convinced that *The Hobbit* is a true crossover, and comments such as “[it] is mainly appreciated by two very separate

audiences” or “this one is for all ages to enjoy!” occur in their reviews. “I recommend it to people all ages, especially those who have an interest toward mythology and fantasy” writes one reader, who seems to share the younger reviewers’ idea that readers need to be able to appreciate imaginative narratives. Another reviewer states that the book is “relevant for all ages.”

Not a single one of the adults wrote about a minimum or maximum age for being able to appreciate the books. One wrote that “[u]nfortunately, the ‘bed-time story’ style of writing can put off some older and most young adult or teen readers who find the book too childish for their likings.” This reader, however, added to all those who might feel that way after having read a few pages that they need to “allow [themselves] to get past the all of that”, again suggesting that adults possess the ability to enjoy adventures and fairytale-like narratives although it is first and foremost connected with children. Another reviewer, supporting Maria Nikolajeva’s (1997: 24) idea of children and adults reading at two different levels, writing that

[a]s a fairy tale style story it can be read to young children and generally enjoyed, but the true depth of the story is mainly appreciated by those old enough to read between the lines and understand what an amazing and detailed world Tolkien has created and placed this story in.

This reader thereby suggests that children’s readings are more superficial. Beckett (2009: 86), however, warns us against such a view, claiming that not only adult readers search for and appreciate deeper meanings in a text. Likewise, most adult reviewers oppose social age boundaries and the child-adult dichotomy simply by reading *The Hobbit*, as they are conscious of the fact that the book might be considered too childish for them. Rowe Townsend (231), for example, writes in his anthology that “*The Hobbit* is undoubtedly a children’s book”, and adult cross-readers have to overcome such attitudes.

Although children seem to doubt adults’ ability to enjoy something as imaginary and adventurous as *The Hobbit*, adults seem to have a different view of themselves in this regard. One adult even writes that “The Hobbit can take any average overscheduled

adult away from his/her everyday stresses and return them back to their untainted childhood imaginations”, suggests that although adult readers might be less inclined to be fascinated with fantastic stories, even adults can enjoy “childish” play and fantasies and let their imagination run freely again with a bit of effort, and that the greatest problem lies in their own attitudes. This statement also supports Harju’s (2012: 119) description of adult readers as experiencing the desire to return to childhood play, and Singer and Singer’s (1992: 227) theory of adult play and fantasy as an internalized – and thereby socially accepted – activity.

#### 4.1.2 Enchanted Reading

Very much like in Rita Felski’s (2008: 54–55) description of enchantment, or the sense of total absorption and involvement in a literary text, children and adults alike generally describe how they were captured by *The Hobbit*. Many children used expressions such as “to get hooked”, “to be caught”, “to be gripped”, “to be absorbed in” or “to be lost in” in order to describe what the book did to them. Also adults have used expressions such as “to lose yourself in”, “to be launched into”, “to be taken through”, “to go on”, and “to join the hobbit on” the adventure of the story. It seems quite evident that many children have experienced a strong sense of enchantment throughout their reading experience.

In addition, children describe their reading experience as effortless, which brings us back to the theories of Holland (1968, 1975) and Gadamer (1975) of reading as a form of play. When enchanted by a work of literature, readers experience the reading as exciting and enjoyable because it is without purpose or intention and frees them from the strain of taking their own initiative (Gadamer 1975: 105–106). It thus seems that the notions of play and enchantment are strongly connected. “It was not hard to get through (like some books) but was a page-turner, always making you want to read on” assures one child reviewer. The reason for this captivating effect, as described by the children, is simply the thrill and the excitement that they gain from the reading experience, and which makes them want to continue reading. “[O]nce you pick it up you just can[’]t put

it back down again” warns another young reviewer. Children seem to appreciate it when something happens, and the explanations that are used most frequently to describe what they enjoy about *The Hobbit* is that it is exciting and filled with adventure. Those who criticize the book do so because they found it long and boring and thus demanding too much effort on the part of the reader, neither offering the reader a sense of enchantment or playfulness.

Many children express the notion that during the reading process they were convinced that they were in the story. In other words, they experience their reading through interjection, described by Bo Steffensen (2005: 42–44) as a form of identification with fictional characters which enables readers to, in an escapist manner, partake in the dreamlike adventures of the story. Such deep involvement can also be seen as an expression of enchantment. “[W]ho says middle-ear[th] isn't real[?]” one child inquires. Child reviewers quite precisely express this feeling by writing that “it made me think I was actually in there as I read the book” or “I felt as though I were a part of the great adventure taking place”. Others have in a more indirect manner described how they felt involved in the adventure through the reading experience. A young reviewer who had recently travelled to Italy wrote: “the book i took to Venice and back, and also the book that took me there [and] back”, thereby referring to the full title of the book *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*. Another child wrote: “a whole new world in which there are many dangers and adventures to have”. As one of the child reviewers writes, the narrative functions as an “escape from this world and into another”, just because readers become so absorbed in it. Even though these readers, in their experiences of enchantment, become totally absorbed and oblivious to the outer world, this is not at all an unhealthy sign. These readers, although self-forgetful, are still fully able to separate the reading experience from reality, without this negatively affecting their sense of involvement in the story (cf. Felski 2008: 74). In Harju’s (2012: 110) view, this fictional world, full of dangers and adventures, does not merely promote escapism, but functions as a space where readers can potentially “work out solutions to real world problems.”

Children also comment positively on other aspects of their experience, such as the remarkable world, characters and other creations in the text. They appreciate how

detailed the text is, and one reviewer writes that it is “put together like a magnificent jigsaw”. Some child readers have also commented on the impact the reading experience has on their own imagination, and on the images it creates in their minds. “I thought this book was a very good book, because it made great pictures in my head” writes one content reviewer, and others agree by adding that it “creates [...] an entire fantasy world in the mind of the reader” and that “it was very vivid and really made my imagination work.” The children describe how the book helped them to actively use their own imagination and thereby form their own experience through the reading process. Steffensen (2005: 46) also describes reading in a similar manner, as a form of daydreaming where readers, as active participants, write their own dreams and play based on the structure of the book.

The children have also dropped some negative comments concerning the reading experience, and these are often related to the problem of the book being too long and not exciting enough to maintain the reader’s interest. One reviewer who claims to like adventures writes that “this one just bored me the whole way through”, and is supported by another child writing that “i found it a pure chore to get through and it really seemed to drag for me!” Another reason for not enjoying reading *The Hobbit* was that the readers found it confusing. One reader explains how *The Hobbit* “has a smooth explanation for things, but [...] can also be confusing at times considering it is a book of magic and mystery.” Quite surprisingly, since most children claim to be fascinated by the fantastic and magical content of the book, a couple of child readers also found that it was not realistic enough. “If you like books about real life situations then this is not the book for you!” warns a critical child. Such a response is evidence enough that we should not take it for granted, either, that all young readers are fond of fairy and fantasy stories simply because fantasy narratives are usually intended for children. Harju (2012: 23–25) warns us that assumptions on what different age groups gain from their reading might not always reflect individual readers’ preferences.

Adults have been very keen to leave comments on their reading experiences. “Looking to be drawn into a portal that leads to the world of fantasy?” one of the reviews begin, and again the notion of being captured by the story, or enchantment, is expressed.

Similarly to the children, the adult readers write about how *The Hobbit* “immerses you into a world that [you] will not be able to come out of until you have read the very last word!” and how fascinating and addictive the narrative is. Adults experience their reading of *The Hobbit* as an opportunity to partake on Bilbo’s adventurous journey and consequently as a welcome getaway or an escape from everyday life. In terms of how they describe their feeling of enchantment, the adult readers are not much different from the children, and use the same kind of metaphors as the younger reviewers to put their reading experience into words.

Adults also give excitement as a reason for not wanting to pause in their reading, but tend to describe it as a form of continuous action. One adult reader, for example, refers to the book as “a world of never-ending adventure”. Rather than simply stating, however, whether the text was exciting or not, adults seem to be more interested in what in the text it was that gave rise to that excitement. They provide possible explanations by writing how “[t]he plot moves along at a good pace” and how there are “never-ending climaxes throughout the book.” “Bilbo and company pull off one miracle after another” writes one reviewer and another explains how the story “force[s] you to read on in order to see what will happen next.” Adults describe the reader as being brought together with the characters “out of the frying pan and into the fire”. The notion of the reader as partaking in the adventure is also described by one reviewer who writes that “you are dawning on another expedition right after you just finished one.”

Except for the excitement of the adventure itself, adult readers find the fantasy world in which it takes place convincing enough to feel believable. Judging from their reviews it seems that adults in general find themselves more reluctant to yield to the fictional world of the story. Adult readers might, at least initially, be more critical and more distanced to the narrative than their child counterparts. However, for enchantment to take place it is necessary that readers relinquish their autonomy, self-control and analytical judgement (Felski 2008: 55), and many adults also do. “[The world] is so vivid and well-conceived that it is easy to lose yourself in the forests of Mirkwood, the Misty Mountains or the desolate Lonely Mountain”, one adult comments the setting of the story, and another reviewer adds about the characters that “I met a wonderful array

of friends and foes”. Other positive aspects adults have commented on are, for instance, how well *The Hobbit* captures the human spirit and how authentic the interaction between characters is, what intriguing characters hobbits are, how “the right atmosphere [is set] for each scene to make the story even more intense”, and how the storyline “is very solid and well-knit together [and] there probably isn[’]t a single loophole to taint its value”. One reviewer, however, found that all the thirteen dwarf characters were not relevant for the story, and considered this a structural problem.

Although a few adults describe their reading of *The Hobbit* as having had an impact on their own imagination, for the most part they mention Tolkien as the creator of their experience, and refer to him as responsible for and the creator of their experience. It seems that adults are more attentive to the structural aspects of the narrative, and if they are convinced by the story they tend to attribute this to the author’s style of writing: “Tolkien describes exactly what’s happening in every scene and enables you to picture every plant, every cloud in the sky, and every character” writes one reviewer, and “[h]is descriptive abilities cannot fail to imprint his imaginary world in your memory” adds another. Experiencing the narrative as real is, in other words, attributed by adult readers to Tolkien’s style of writing, one stating that “[e]ven though the story is completely unbelievable, Tolkien describes everything in such incredible detail that the reader starts to believe that Hobbiton is a real place and being Bilbo Baggins is not fictional anymore”. It seems that adults do not have the same confidence in their own imaginative abilities as children do, something which is also supported by one of the adult reviews saying that “[Tolkien’s] literary intelligence gives every reader of *The Hobbit* a reminiscent taste of what it was like as a child with a wild imagination”. Adults thus experience that they are merely being passively fed with the images of the author’s mind during the reading process.

Very few child reviewers have used adjectives to describe the book as funny. Adults, however, remark how the book is full of “wit and humor” and “a bit of the whimsical factor too.” “It is fun!” exclaims one of the adults who also found the book humorous, and another comments that it will recurrently cause readers to “laugh out loud!” Adults and children might not experience the same elements in the text as humorous, and

humour could very well be interpreted differently by individual readers. As for the *Harry Potter* books, all readers seem to find it humorous, but whereas children tend to enjoy the broad slapstick, adults appreciate parody, pastiche, satire and subtle wordplay more (Beckett 2009: 114). Adults seem to have found more subtle humour, such as wittiness and vimsical elements, throughout their reading of *The Hobbit* as well.

Very few negative comments have been left by adult readers about the reading experience, which might be due to the fact that the adults have voluntarily chosen to review *The Hobbit*, whereas some of the children might not have had the choice. Adults might also be more patient in their reading, one of them urging other readers of *The Hobbit* to “stick with it” even though there are some “boring drawn-out scenes”. Another adult admits that the names in the book were confusing at first, but that this no longer proved a challenge after the second chapter, meaning that this is no reason for immediately rejecting it. However, one reviewer was not convinced by the narrative at all, and claims to have asked throughout the whole reading process why Bilbo did not “just leave these idiots and do it himself?” Again, this signals that adult readers may be more critical in their reading.

#### 4.1.3 Rereading

Not much can be found in the children’s reviews concerning the topic of rereading, since they are for the most part still too have read *The Hobbit* before. Just one child comments on previous readings of *The Hobbit*, writing that “I absolutely loved it when I first read it, and still enjoy reading it today!” Several adults, on the other hand, report as having memories of an earlier reading of the book, often from an early stage of life.

Many adults have provided nostalgic descriptions of their relationship with the book, which support Harju’s (2012: 110) view of fantasy stories as something that we bring with us, and that continue to shape us from childhood throughout adulthood. According to an adult reviewer, *The Hobbit* is “[o]ne of those childhood books that will be fondly remembered later in life”. Some of the adults explain how they first came in contact

with it and have since then reread it multiple times, one reviewer writing as follows. “I was given this hardbound, encased version of *The Hobbit* for my 6th birthday in 1978 [...] and have read it about ten times since”. Another reader discovered the book “back in the mid-sixties and ha[s] been an avid Tolkien fan ever since”, and yet another claims to have reread the book at least once a year since the age of ten, writing that “besides my Bible, there has never been a book that I have read more often than ‘*The Hobbit*’.”

As readers, we learn in childhood how to engage in imaginative stories and activities, and this impacts how we read stories later in life (Harju 2012: 92, 138). For these adult readers, *The Hobbit* seems to have had a great impact on their reading interests, and they are still able to enjoy the book now as much as they did when they first read it as children. The reader who first read the book at the age of six further writes that “[t]his book, and this version, are magical to me. I’ve looked at [the illustrations] SO many times over the decades, and they are simply special to me”. They know what they can expect from the book, and even though they have read it – in some cases multiple times – the sense of enchantment it evokes is still strong enough for these readers to want to re-experience it over again. One nostalgic adult reader is probably right when asking: “Am I biased, of course; but does that change the beauty of this book, no!”

Although feeling of nostalgia might cause some readers to appreciate the book better than they otherwise would, there are also positive reviews by adult readers with no memories of reading it in their childhood. One adult reviewer who read the book for the first time comments that the book “will stay in your heart forever” and adds that “[t]he only fault I can find is with me, for not reading it sooner”. Of course, there is no way of knowing whether this reviewer engaged in fantasy stories as a child, but this could plausibly be the case.

#### 4.2 Readers’ Interpretations

Child and adult readers, with their different backgrounds, are likely to produce different interpretations of crossover works. Steffensen (2005: 87–88) suggests that classics

usually can generate various interpretations while the core of the narrative stays intact, which is why *The Hobbit* is also likely to be open to a broad range of interpretations. This section analyses how readers experience and explain elements within the text, such as their identification with and descriptions of the characters. It further deals with readers' comments on the coming-of-age motive and the morals they have found in the text. Lastly, it studies which episodes adult and child readers have focused on the most in their reviews.

#### 4.2.1 Identification

Children do not only seem to identify themselves with the characters in the book through interjection, or through recognizing certain qualities that the characters possess in themselves (Steffensen 2005: 42), but there are also numerous example of explicit identification concerning the characters' actions and behaviour. As acknowledged by Bo Steffensen (2005: 42), child readers find personal associations with the characters more interesting. Young reviewers can recognize themselves in, for instance, the characters' eating habits, as in "he likes to eat two breakfasts, two lunches, and two dinners", interests, as in "we both love maps" or temperament, as in "Thorin reminds me of my friend Luke because he always argues when there's something wrong". Child reviewers have often found similarities between their own play and games and the adventures in the book, one reviewer writing that "Bilbo Baggins reminds me of myself because he lives a calm and peaceful life and can have a very exciting life filled with a lot of adventures too". Other examples of this are how the book reminds them of wanting to run away from home, of a cousin who "likes to go everywhere" and of playing sword fighting.

In the examples above, identification seems to take place through projection rather than interjection, as the readers project their own habits and characteristics onto the literary characters in the text. This can serve as a means of dealing with real life developmental conflicts (Steffensen 2005: 42–44), and reading about Thorin might possibly help the reader with a friend name Luke to deal with the friend's seemingly bad temper.

Whereas interjection can work as an expression of escapism, where readers can flee to a reality otherwise only possible in daydreams, one of the children feels that real life already is filled with plenty of adventures. Consequently, there might be no need for escape into an imaginative world. This does not necessarily mean that these children do not experience identification through interjection, but more likely through both interjection and projection, something that is supported by one of the children writing that “[t]he book made me feel like I was part of Bilbo's world -fighting dragons and giant spiders with him”.

Although the feeling of partaking in Bilbo’s adventures is expressed by child and adult readers alike, adults do not to the same extent project their own qualities or experiences onto the characters. One adult reviewer, however, describes undergoing similar changes as Bilbo while reading the book as follows:

it was not only the hobbit that had changed as a result of this adventure. As a reader, I had to confess that I too had changed. My initial lack of enthusiasm had entirely vanished. I had participated in the hobbit's adventures, and like him, returned the better for it.

As experienced by this reviewer, identification in cross-reading may function metamorphically and help readers to gain a greater self-knowledge and sense of identity (Harju 2012: 175, Steffensen 2005: 44). Another reader writes about there being

a tie between the reader and the protagonist [...] through the comparison of Bilbo’s sleeping patterns and that of the readers’ patterns. Whenever Bilbo has had a long stretch without sleep the reader has not put down the book, however when Bilbo goes to sleep it is in a recession in the story’s peaks. For example after Bilbo had left home he had slept very little until he went to Beorns house.

Other adults also comment on their identification with Bilbo’s character as follows: “the reader becomes overwhelmed and begins to believe that he/she is indeed the protagonist”, “it literally made me feel like I was walking along side Bilbo throughout his troubles” and “[w]henver he ran into tough situation, I would stop and think of what I would have done in his place.” One reviewer writes about hobbits being easy to relate to since they “love life; they love to eat, love companionship and a warm hearth”

and are “a homey kind of people who till the soil and tend their gardens.” Adult reviews seem to represent more realistic identification with the calmer sides of Bilbo and the hobbit community in general, quite unlike the children who see themselves as adventurous. Although appreciated by the adults, the calm and settled aspects of hobbit life is not much appreciated by younger reviewers. This will be further analysed in the discussion of the coming-of-age motive.

#### 4.2.2 Characters

Children have focused a great deal on characters and character description in their reviews, and the characters seem to be one of the main reasons for their appreciation of *The Hobbit*. “I liked the book, because I thought the characters were unusual”, one child writes, and another that “the characters [are] endlessly, enigmatically charming.” The children’s descriptions of the characters also reflect how they are drawn to the fantastic and the magical elements of the book, and this is also reflected in their descriptions of the characters. One child reviewer, for instance, states that the fact that there were no humans but only mythical creatures was what made the story unique.

Another thing that many children seem to appreciate is how the characters are named. “I loved the names of the characters”, “[the book] is creative because of [...] the characters [and] their names” and “[t]he names of the characters really suit their personality” three of the children comment. Children’s reviews include numerous listings of characters and their names, and especially the names of the thirteen dwarves seem to fascinate them, several reviewers listing all of their names. “The dwarfs names were Dwalin, Blalin, Kili, Fili, Dori, Nori, Ori, Oin, Gloin, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, and Thorin”, writes one child.

Antagonist characters are mostly just listed, most probably because readers are not able to identify with or learn more about them. “I also reviewed this book because it is very different from other books because of the goblins, monsters, and other things that are in it” writes one child without elaborating such characters further. They are simply

described by the children as “dreaded” “terrible” “dangerous” “horrible”, and even “cool”. The Nazguls, according to one reader, “are really creepy because they are so mysterious and are like silent assassins.” Gollum is the only antagonist described more in depth as a “maniacal creature who craves his precious” and as someone who “used to be a hobbit like Bilbo but when he found the ring it changed him. He was transformed into a terrible creature. The ring has power over him, he hates and loves the ring.” Although described in some detail, reviewers do not seem able to identify with Gollum as a character either.

The protagonists Bilbo and Gandalf are by far the most popular characters with the young readers. “My two favorite characters were Bilbo and Gandalf” explains one child. Some of the explanations children give for liking Bilbo are that he is “adventurous, caring, and is a good fighter with a short sword”, “a very popular hobbit in his town” “a hobbit and [...] smart” and “kind of curious.” Their reviews also include general descriptions of hobbits, explaining that a hobbit is “a mythical creature that is about three and a half feet tall and they don’t wear shoes” and “a short person who looks like a human, but has different behaviour.” They also write that hobbits “eat six meals a day, are fussy, and tend to be fat” and are “much like rabbits [but] are smarter and wear clothes.”

After Bilbo, the character that children like the most is Gandalf. The reasons for this are his magic abilities and his wisdom. Whereas Bilbo is a character whom children can easily identify with, Gandalf is rather one that they admire and respect. For the young reviewers, Bilbo seems to represent something close to the children themselves, whereas Gandalf is recognized as a respectable adult figure and thus not someone they can identify with. Children claim to find Gandalf intriguing because he “can make magic smoke rings”, “could be kind, powerful and wise at the same time” and “is so mysterious yet good and kind too.”

Many children, possibly because they perceive themselves as small in relation to adults, comment on Bilbo’s size and one reviewer explains that “adult hobbits are half the size of human adults.” Children, in other words, identify with Bilbo at least to some degree

because of his small size. One would, like Falconer (2009: 98, 101–102, 117), expect adult readers to be more affected by Bilbo’s smallness and his enlarging gaze, but adult readers do not focus on Bilbo’s size in their reviews. Instead, they seem more prone, in their identification, to turn Bilbo into something more adultlike. In the adult reviews hobbits are compared to humans in general, to ordinary people, folk, and humans, rather than to children. Bilbo’s size thus appears to be of more central importance to the child reviewers.

Adult readers seem to appreciate how realistic and convincing the characters are, as expressed by one reader writing how

the elves, the dwarves, and men have all kinds of history behind them to give them depth. I was really impressed with how well each new character was described, it really helped me picture what they looked like and how they expressed themselves, no matter how unhuman they were.

Another critical adult reader, who does not seem to be easily convinced by fantastic creatures, admits that those in *The Hobbit*

are not the elves and dwarfs of Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson [but] are REAL beings which are believable. No tiny elves that flit about here; these are the ancient ones, the healers, the wise ones of Middle Earth, the immortals. They are tall, elegant and powerful beings to respect, and indeed sometimes fear.

Adult readers have been economic in their description of the characters, except for when it comes to hobbits. These are described as “smaller, chubbier folk who have six meals a day, and have very hairy feet”, as having “perfectly boring and perfectly happy existences in their cosy homes” and as being humanlike “but much shorter and with twice the appetite.” Except for simply external descriptions adult reviews also contain instances of their own attachment to hobbits. One adult speculates that hobbits are possibly the “most well-loved made-up creature[s] ever” and another adult writes how hobbits are unusual creatures who “one cannot help but love from the start.”

Again, humour seems to work differently for child and adult readers, and the adult reviewers do not appear to find the thirteen dwarves in the narrative as entertaining as younger readers do. Instead of finding the dwarves as a source of amusement as they, one after another, enter into Bilbo's home at the beginning of the book, one adult reviewer complains how all except for two dwarves seem to be completely irrelevant for the story. This particular reader found it aggravating how the dwarves "did nothing accept slow the process down by either passing out, getting lost or being captured".

#### 4.2.3 Coming-of-age motive

The motive of growing up, suffering and learning is typical for the bildungsroman, a type of novel of education that first emerged with the publishing of works such as Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The bildungsroman can be viewed as a natural crossover as it describes a character's transgression from child to adulthood. (Falconer 2009: 74) Stories dealing with the themes of coming-of-age, of life change and transformation, are common in literature, and the theme of an adolescent attempting to understand the adult world (see Beckett 2009: 258) is also something that child readers have focused a great deal on in their reading of *The Hobbit*.

Child reviewers seem to have a tendency to focus a great deal on the changes that occur in the character of Bilbo Baggins throughout *The Hobbit*. They clearly find Bilbo's character changing and see it as one of the central issues in the book. This might be because they can identify with Bilbo in the sense that they are also on the verge of a great transformation – into adulthood.

Bilbo is first described by the children in a negative way, as not liking journeys or caring for adventures at all, as wanting to be left alone, being happy where he is and not wanting to leave his home, as loving parties but wanting to know about them beforehand and so on. Bilbo's character is, in other words, rather dull and not the least admirable to begin with. He seems to have no ambitions or great plans for himself, but

is quite content with life as it is. For young readers, who probably themselves dream of success in life, and of growing up to face an adult world full of excitement and freedom to make their own choices, Bilbo does not initially stand for these aspirations.

When Bilbo sets out on his adventure, some child reviewers describe the transformation he undergoes as Bilbo changing “from not wanting to do anything and being grouchy, to loving adventures and being joyful”, from leading “a simple comfortable” life to leading “a complex life filled with action packed excitement”, “from wanting to stay at home to wanting to go on an adventure”, from not wanting adventure to “want[ing] more adventure”, and to being braver. Each of these descriptions from the reviews includes the verb “to change”, which clearly shows that young readers experience a transformation taking place in Bilbo’s character. They also describe Bilbo in a positive manner, as being joyful, brave and adventurous, once he is transformed.

Children write with admiration that Bilbo “didn’t know it, but he was really brave” and that “even though Bilbo didn’t want to take part in the quest he surprised me and himself that he was quite a skilled burglar.” These quotes encapsulate the feelings that all young readers might have towards their own inevitable transformation into adulthood. They are hoping that in discovering themselves and their own identity, they will find that transformation in their case also means improvement, the way it certainly does for Bilbo. There is a pattern among child readers not to view Bilbo’s transformation as the result of him actively accomplishing a change, but rather as a consequence of the circumstances. “When Gandalf, a wizard, shows up at Bilbo’s house with fifteen dwarves, it starts to change the hobbits’ way of life” writes one child. Bilbo’s passiveness is shown, for instance, in how another child explains that the hobbits on Bilbo’s mother’s side of the family, the Tooks, enjoy adventures and poses the question “[w]ill the Baggins side win and he’ll stay or will the Took side and he’ll go?”

Adults do not focus on Bilbo’s transformation to the same extent as children, although it is commented on in a few reviews. “[B]asically the whole book reverberates the theme of maturing, demonstrated in Bilbo as he transforms from a timid creature to a more

heroic persona”, one adult comments. Contrary to the children, the adults always describe Bilbo’s transformation as an active change on his part. According to them, Bilbo is “a classic example of a comfortable, under-exposed being who breaks out of his comfort to challenge himself and rise to new heights of truth and daring”, or someone who ”discovers that he has more in him than even he ever expected.” One reader describes *The Hobbit* as a “story about a seemingly forgettable little creature and his impact upon great events”. The coming-of-age motive is not as topical for adults as it is for the young readers, and this is a plausible explanation as to why adult readers do not comment on it that much in their reviews. In this case, it is rather the children who seem to have found such a theme, or deeper meaning, in the text, as they are the ones who focus to a far greater extent on Bilbo’s transformation and maturation.

#### 4.2.4 Morals

Although one child reviewer complains that there were no “big ideas or lessons to be learned” from *The Hobbit*, other children have found ideas on the importance of friendship and companionship represented in it. One reviewer writes how the moral of *The Hobbit* is to “trust in your teammates and work together. That way, all will turn out fine.” Another found that the book “PORTRAYS A GOOD SENSE OF FELLOWSHIP”, and explains how it helped settle an argument with the reader’s brother, summarizing that “THIS BOOK TELLS YOU THAT YOU SHOULD NOT ARGUE ABOUT ANYTHING, AND THAT FRIENDS SHOULD ALWAYS STICK TOGETHER.” Again, it is mostly the young readers who have identified the theme of friends and friendship in the book. This might have to do with the fact that friends, and the issues of getting along with those friends (or elder siblings), are more important for school children in their social lives. Adults, on their part, are likely to have already established relationships to their old friends, colleagues and family members.

Adults have made a greater effort to find and explain the underlying meanings of the book, although some call it light-hearted, not deep, simple etc. Although friendship is mentioned as a theme, most adults focus on various other issues. One suggested factor

behind the popularity of fantasy as crossover literature are the themes of myth and magic, hopefulness, fear, achievement, love, loyalty and various psychological and existential questions represented in the genre. Most of the themes which the adult reviewers comment on are indeed of such nature. One reader calls the book “a perfect metaphor for the internal healing process” and means that it is about “taking risks for the betterment of our character and soul”. Again the engagement with crossover literature appears to have an effect on readers’ self-knowledge and sense of identity (Harju 2012: 175). Another reader suggests that it is about “good’s triumph over many evils”, whereas yet another reviewer states that it shows how “anyone can accomplish a goal, regardless of his or her physical abilities.” There is also one suggestion of the book conveying that “life is a journey, a quest if you will [...] but it is also (when lived to the full) an unexpected party.”

Adult reviewers also make broader associations to reality in their interpretations of the text. Some claim that *The Hobbit* reflects the real world, for instance writing that

The Hobbit addresses the problem of determining the “right” way for a hobbit, or any ordinary person, to live his life. Should one concern himself with great deeds and wars, and risk losing the humble perspective afforded by the simple life? Or should the ordinary person never look outside his or her own quiet existence, and risk ignoring the larger perspective that might have allowed him to do great things for the common good?

Another reader draws parallels between the final battle in the book and World War I stating that “there is some profound symbolism and allusions to real facts.” According to this reader, Tolkien must have been against the war “as he demonstrates that myriads of decent, innocent people were obliterated.”

Just this sample of morals identified in the reviews sheds light on just how differently individual readers can interpret the same text. Children and adults clearly have different interests and concerns which affect the meaning they ascribe the text. Whereas, for instance, the adults mention the importance of friendship as a theme, they do not stress it in the same way that the children do. Readers’ experiences and knowledge also affects their interpretation, and no child would, for example, draw parallels to the First World

War the way one of the adult reviewers does. It does not seem that children focus less on finding a meaning behind the narrative than adult readers do, but the child reviewers display a greater consensus in judging which the most central theme of *The Hobbit* is. Whereas many child reviewers mention the importance of friendship as the main moral offered by the book, the adults have found a variety of other themes and meanings.

#### 4.2.5 Certain Episodes

This section studies the episodes in *The Hobbit* that have made an impact on the readers and are therefore mentioned in their reviews. The main concern here is whether the same parts of the book have made an impact on both child and adult readers, or whether they have focused their attention on different episodes in their readings.

Children have been fairly keen to describe their favourite episodes in *The Hobbit*, and these often are the ones where Bilbo is faced with various dangerous creatures. Children's reviews indicate that when there is not enough action they find it hard to maintain interest, but in these episodes there is plenty of excitement. "[S]tone giants, wolves, orcs, and goblins", one reader lists the dark creatures which Bilbo encounters, and another child dramatically describes how "[t]here were a lot of big, big, big, big spiders that tried to destroy [the] dwarves and the Hobbit." Other children state how their favourite parts of the book are "when the humans and animals are fighting the dragon", "when they fight the giant spiders" and "when Smaug, the dragon got killed".

The episode in The Misty Mountains, where Bilbo encounters both goblins and the character of Gollum, is the most thoroughly described episode by the child reviewers. "My favorite part is when they were in the Mirkwood mountains" writes one reviewer, and another child how "[m]y favorite part was when Bilbo runs into Gollom" Their descriptions include how Bilbo found the ring, Gollum's hidden lake, Bilbo and Gollum playing riddles, and Bilbo finally fleeing from Gollum. Child readers supposedly think that the incidents taking place in The Misty Mountains are both exciting and of importance, to describe it in such detail.

Another popular episode is in the very beginning of the story: “My favorite part is when the dwarves keep on showing up at Bilbo’s house” and “I loved the bits when they were all getting ready to set off on such a long journey”. This could be due to the feelings of anticipation raised by this initial episode, or it could be due to the perplexed Bilbo striking readers as amusing. The latter assumption is supported by a reader who thinks that “[t]he dwarves [...] are funny because they have very similar names and are always drinking ale and confusing Bilbo.” Child readers also describe other episodes where the dwarves play a central role as amusing, for instance “when Bilbo and company are separated in the forest and Bilbo runs in circles yelling, ‘Dori, Nori, Ori, Oin, Gloin, Fili, Kili, Bombur, Bifur, Dwalin, Balin, Thorin Oakenshield!’” or when “there were three trolls who tried eating the 13 dwarves and Bilbo.”

As a rule, adults usually refer to the whole book in their reviews, and do not describe certain episodes more closely, or state which part of the book they enjoyed the most. Neither do they indicate which episodes of the book they find exciting, humorous or captivating in other ways, the way many of the children do. Adults seem to find it more relevant to explain the book as a whole, whereas children often divide it into parts. One plausible explanation could be that adults are not as fascinated with the episodes where Bilbo fights against or flees from dangerous creatures as the children are, and that they can appreciate the calmer passages as well. Another explanation is that children tend to focus more on details, and do not as easily perceive the narrative as a whole. Falconer (2009: 98, 101–102, 117) writes how reading with a child’s gaze makes the world appear infinitely large and with sharper details, and this could be applicable to how children “see” as readers.

### 4.3 Knowledge and Experience

Readers’ own realities, experiences and previous knowledge affect how they reproduce and interpret literary works (cf. Felski 2008: 75). Such aspects are likely to differ to quite an extent between child and adult readers, and could also influence the child and

adult reviewers' reading experiences and affect their expectations and interpretations of *The Hobbit*. This section deals with the references and connections that the reviewers make to aspects outside the text itself, mainly to other texts, to adaptations of *The Hobbit*, to other works by Tolkien and to the author himself.

#### 4.3.1 *The Hobbit* as Fantasy

Not all child readers recognize *The Hobbit* as fantasy, but many of those who do not know about fantasy could still connect it with other works of that genre. "The Hobbit is like a book I[']ve once read about mythical creatures named The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe" comments one reader who is able to recognize that C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* series (1950–1956) shares similar elements of fantasy. Others, on the other hand, had no problems in defining the genre for what they had just been reading and refer to *The Hobbit* as a "fantasy book" or a "fantasy novel". One reader recommends the book to readers who like mythology or fantasy "because it has a world full of trolls, hobbits, dwarfs, goblins, elves, dragons, etc.", thus listing typical elements of fantasy in it. Reviewers also refer to genre as a means of defining their own or others' taste in literature, for instance by writing "i am a lover of every fantasy book i have come across so far except this one", "I[']m not the sort of person who likes stories about fantasy" or "[p]eople who like fantasy [...] would really enjoy this book."

Perhaps not so surprisingly, when considering which books have been popular with the young audience for the last decade or so, quite a few of the child reviewers compare *The Hobbit* to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which is also fantasy, and typical crossover works: "They both have magic and magical animals, evil animals and humans", and "The Hobbit is like the Harry Potter series because there are always extraordinary events happening time after time", two readers compare the texts. Still another young reader writes that both Tolkien's and Rowling's books share "the same setting and creatures", and draws parallels between the characters of Dumbledore and Gandalf. "Gandalf is like how Dumbledore is in Harry Potter. They give the questions or the answers, but make you find out the answers or the questions yourself." Still

another child recommends *The Hobbit* to *Harry Potter* readers, but continues “I would also recommend it to those who might not like Harry Potter, but do like magic and adventures”, suggesting that not being fond of one of the works does not exclude enjoying the other, but that there is a great chance for readers who enjoy the magic and adventure of *The Hobbit* to also like *Harry Potter*.

Adults seem to be more inclined to read in accordance with what Radway (2007: 331) calls “the traditional practice of textual interpretation”, focusing to a greater extent on aspects such as genre or author rather than on understanding the effects that *The Hobbit* has on them personally. Most of the adults also tend to share the supposition of their readers as having at least some previous knowledge of Tolkien and his works and of fantasy literature, as one adult reviewer writing “I am sure you have either heard of or read J.R.R. Tolkien’s great fantasy classic *The Hobbit*”. Another reviewer similarly writes “I advice every fantasy lover to read the Lord of the Rings series if you haven’t already”, suggesting that it would be unlikely that a fantasy lover would not have. Adult reviewers emphasise the position of *The Hobbit* (and the trilogy) as a classic in literary history. One of the adults writes, for example, that the book “is one of the most invaluable and indispensable classics given to the world of literature by Tolkien.” Another adult reader, who calls the book “the defining novel of the fantasy genre” explains how *The Hobbit* “set the bar for a modern fantasy staple: the quest story. Without ‘The Hobbit’ there would be no Dark Tower, Drizzt, Demon Wars, Robert Jordan, Terry Brooks, etc.”

#### 4.3.2 The Trilogy and Adaptations

Young readers seem to have varying knowledge about the *Lord of the Rings* series, about *The Hobbit* being a prequel to the trilogy, and about Tolkien himself as the author of the books. One reader contemplates the connections between *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by commenting that it is the same creatures that appear, and another reader that the main character is a hobbit in all the books, and that the story is always set in Middle-Earth. Other connections that young readers find between the

books are that “[t]he hobbit also finds a magical item that does the same thing as the item that Bilbo found” and that “the whole series has to do with the ring, its powers, Middle-Earth, mythical creatures, and the Baggins family.” *The Hobbit* is also, although regarded as connected to the latter works, seen as a separate part. One reviewer, for example, remarks that *The Hobbit* “is different from the other three Lord of The Rings books, because [...] Frodo, Merry, Pippin, Sam (hobbits) and Aragorn do not appear at all”, and another reviewer explains that “The Lord of the Rings is actually the sequel to The Hobbit.”

Child reviewers do not take it for granted either, that those reading the reviews know about Tolkien or his works, a plausible reason being that their own knowledge on the books has so far been limited, and that this is perhaps their first encounter with Tolkien’s works. Such limited previous knowledge of the book does not, however, seem to affect the children’s ability to read and enjoy it. Instead they can draw upon information from their own realities to complete their reading (cf. Steffensen 2005: 87–88). One reviewer starts by explaining that *The Hobbit* “is part of a series called the Lord of the Rings”, and another informs that “you[’re] in luck because there are three more books called ‘The Lord of The Rings’”. These are facts that most adults seem to think that others are aware of. One child reviewer, who is critical of any negative feelings towards the book, writes that “people who think that the Hobbit is boring obviously don[’t] understand that this is the first book in the LORD OF THE RINGS (LOTR) seri[e]s.” Another child wonders if those who find the book boring “know that The Hobbit was written by the same person that wrote the original book of The Lord of the Rings?” suggesting that if they only knew this, they would understand to appreciate the book better.

Whereas some child readers did not seem to know about Tolkien’s works beforehand, others seem to have been aware of the trilogy, the motion pictures based on it and even the recent *The Hobbit* motion picture. This is evident from comments such as “I also recommend this book because [...] it would be good to read before seeing the movie” or “[a]fter you read the series you can watch the movies too!” For readers who are aware of the trilogy, reading *The Hobbit* provides them with additional information. Child

readers write how the book “gave me an insight on what actually happend before Frodo left on his journey to destroy the One Ring” and “showed me how Bilbo got the ring, and how he lost his reputation in The Shire.” One reader urges others to read *The Hobbit* before the trilogy since “it[’]s got a lot of useful background in it!”

It seems that for the adults this was not their first encounter with Tolkien’s works, and they would have had other expectations from many of the child readers. Two of the adults have commented as follows: “This is the best book I have read in several years, but from what I’ve heard best books are just ahead” and “[b]ecause of Tolkien’s reputation as a master story-teller, I began reading this book with absurdly high expectations.” These readers, clearly, had heard of the books beforehand.

#### 4.3.3 J.R.R. Tolkien

Although this is a study of how readers experience and interpret literary works, reader’s ideas of the author should not be separated from this experience as their knowledge of the author will also affect the reading, and is thus part of it. Many children have learnt how esteemed Tolkien is as an author, and pointing this out works as a means of trying to convince others of how well worth reading the book is. Children’s references to the author nearly always occur with such an intention. “The only person more unique as an author is J.K. Rowling” one reviewer writes, expecting those who are admirers of *Harry Potter* to also want to read *The Hobbit* thanks to this comparison. Other comments aim to convince others to read Tolkien’s books by assuring them that he “was one of the 20th century’s most loved authors”, “was one of the most gifted writers of all times”, “has done an amazing job with his fi[r]st, and best, book of Middle Earth” and “SHOULD BE CROWNED THE KING OF ALL FICTION WRITERS, EVER!” There are exceptions, however, and one reviewer who is less willing to admit Tolken’s genius comments upon having read *The Hobbit*: “The book made me wonder why Tolkien wrote a whole series about destroying a ring and why it was so long.”

Adults' reviews often contain information on Tolkien as an author and the process of creating the works, which does not always seem relevant for the reading of *The Hobbit*. Although not exactly relevant, it might be of interest to other readers, and this kind of extratextual information might to some extent form readers' expectations on and understanding of the book, and thereby the reading experience. They mention, for instance, that it was only upon finishing *The Hobbit* that Tolkien "envision[ed] the importance of the Ring", how Tolkien "despised allegory", and how he did not think that his book "would even be successful, much less attain its almost mythic status". Others again have commented that creating *The Hobbit* was partially an attempt "to write a story for children" and that Tolkien's trilogy was originally written "as one book."

## 5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explain why some literary works, so called crossover books, have become popular with a dual audience of both children and adults. A number of explanations for this phenomenon have been suggested. First of all, crossover literature deals with themes that are relevant throughout different life stages and of interest to readers of various ages. Secondly, the fact that the splitting of child and adult literatures is not based on actual readers' preferences enables us to question the necessity of such a divide at all. Lastly, the universal themes and strong emphasis on a good narrative in crossover literature most likely contributes to its appeal among readers of all ages. A better question than why crossover literature is read by dual audiences, then, would seem to be why readers of all ages should not be able to take an interest in the same literature. In the case of *The Hobbit*, most child and adult readers were fully able to enjoy their reading experience, even if they did not read it in the same way.

In analysing the online book reviews of child and adult readers, some tendencies as to how these two age groups differ as readers were found. First of all, adults and children view themselves and each other as readers in a somewhat different way. The adults, having been children once, have a greater understanding for readers of all ages engaging with this type of fantasy story. Children tend to see themselves as the sole readers to enjoy play and fantasy, and usually recommend the book to readers of their own age. In addition, children appear to find it easier to engage with the book, and usually view themselves as adventurous. Adults, on their part, seem to be more critical as readers and find it harder to yield to playfulness and enchantment. A plausible reason for this may be that adult readers are more experienced. However, not every child found the reading joyful either, and the fact that many adults found the story convincing enough to experience enchantment supports its crossover appeal.

Secondly, there is an apparent difference in the way children and adults identify with the characters. It seems to be mainly children who identify with the book through projection, drawing parallels to people and situations in real life. However, they also

identify through interjection, just like the adults. All readers can identify with Bilbo, but both children and adults identify with aspects and characteristics of him that are similar to themselves. For the children, Bilbo's small size and his relationship to the older and wiser Gandalf makes them identify with him as a child. In the adult reviews, on the other hand, hobbits are generally described as humanlike and Bilbo is a person much like the adults themselves. Whereas the adults are able to identify with Bilbo's calmer sides, the children appreciate the adventurous Bilbo more. Several adults also claim that they change with Bilbo through the story, supporting the notion that cross-reading can help readers to strengthen their sense of identity.

Thirdly, there are differences in adult and child readers' expectations and previous knowledge about *The Hobbit*. Several adult readers have reread the book once or several times since their childhood. In other cases, too, adults generally appear to have more knowledge of the book prior to their reading and thereby clearer expectations on the reading experience. Such prior knowledge could, for instance, be in terms of fantasy as a genre or of Tolkien as the author of the book. The children usually had less formed opinions when they started reading the book, but noticed through their reading that they could find similarities with, for examples, other works of fantasy by authors such as C.S. Lewis and J.K. Rowling.

Lastly, there is an apparent overall shift in focus between readers of different age groups. Whereas children focus more on certain episodes of the book, adults usually comment on it as a whole. Most of the children focus on the themes of friendship and coming-of-age, whereas adults – through broader associations – discovered a number of different themes and morals. The adults usually only mention Bilbo in their descriptions of characters, whereas the children, with a greater focus on detail, include descriptions of several more characters. They even mention the antagonist characters that they are unable to identify with. Another difference in focus has to do with humour, where the children find the dwarves in particular to be amusing, whereas the adults found witty and amusing elements throughout the whole narrative.

As the analysis shows, adults and children might have a different focus in their reading,

but both age groups are still equally competent to enjoy and interpret the different aspects of the book. In other words, gaining valuable experiences from reading crossover literature has nothing to do with the ability to read and interpret texts in any particular manner. Different experiences, knowledge and expectations will steer readers' interpretation in different directions, but a successful reading is not dependent on these.

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