“ADVANCED, FORTHRIGHT, SIGNIFICANT”:
A BAKHTINIAN ANALYSIS
OF
GEOFFREY WILLANS’ AND RONALD SEARLE’S
MOLESWORTH SERIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Geoffrey Willans’ and Ronald Searle’s Molesworth books, published in four volumes between 1953 and 1959, are a series of boarding school parodies. Despite great sales success and cult popularity, the books have been dismissed by academics and book reviewers alike as dated satires. Isabel Quigly calls them “pure farce” (276), while Thomas Jones claims they are “terribly cosy” (para. 7).

This thesis adopts three pertinent theories of Mikhail Bakhtin in order to reconsider the four books in the series – Down with Skool!, How to be Topp, Whizz for Atomms, and Back in the Jug Agane. Through the application of Bakhtin’s concepts of chronotope, heteroglossia and carnival, I show that the Molesworth books are more complex and radical than first assumed, and therefore constitute a remarkable response to the phenomenon of the boarding school genre.
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Origins of Interest

This is me e.g. nigel molesworth the curse of st Custard’s which is the skool i am at. It is utterly wet and weedy as i shall (i hope) make clear but of course that is the same with all skools.

e.g. they are nothing but kanes, lat. french, geog. hist. algy, geom., headmasters, skool dogs, skool sossages, my bro molesworth 2 and MASTERS everywhere.

The only good things about skool are the BOYS wizz who are noble brave fearless etc. although you hav various swots, bulies, cissies, milksops greedy guts and oiks with whom i am forced to mingle hem-hem.

In fact any skool is a bit of a shambles

AS YOU WILL SEE

(Willans and Searle 5)

Nigel Molesworth and I go back a long time. I first noticed him as a young child; he was always perched on my mother’s highest shelf alongside her other special or unusual books – a fairy tale book in Russian, Hungarian for Travelers, and a beautifully illustrated edition of Moby Dick. When I was a bit older, I remember trying to understand what he was saying, but there was a lot that was lost in translation. Years and years later, after finishing university and starting my teaching career, Nigel and I finally clicked, and my life has never been the same since.
Molesworth appeals to two parts of my psyche: a fascination with boarding school, and my sense of humour. First of all, like most Canadian children, I went to public school. Monday to Friday, I woke up, ate my cereal, chose my clothes, and walked three blocks down the hill to school. At three o'clock, I packed my bag - usually leaving some vital piece of homework or my lunch box full of half-eaten perishables in my desk - and walked up the hill to my house, where I would promptly put all thoughts of school behind me in pursuit of leisure.

Consequently, the whole idea of boarding school was a foreign yet captivating one. My father, who grew up in England, was sent to boarding school from the age of six. The pupils of Ashville College were evacuated from the city of York to the rural Lake District during World War II, where they took over a hotel in Windermere. This fact only added to my utter enchantment with boarding schools. In addition to the usual stories of school life - the canings, the food, the camaraderie - the whole notion of hundreds of boys living - living! - in a hotel was wonderful. Reading books such as *The Worst Witch* only cemented my sincerest desire to be sent away to some magnificent stone-clad boarding school where I would make lots of friends, ride horses, have a tuck box and possibly learn my times tables too. Apparently, I am not the only one. A dear friend of mine was equally enchanted by Enid Blyton's Naughtiest Girl and Mallory Towers series as a girl, and the lingo of 1940's girlhood still peppers her conversation. We both secretly boil with disappointment that our parents never sent us away.

Boarding school stories have always had popular if not critical appeal, and the phenomenon is considered to be a minor genre within children's literature. And, like any genre, boarding school stories have been parodied. This leads naturally to the second part of Molesworth's appeal: the books' humour. I find them hilarious. I cannot read them on
public transport for fear of snorting out loud and looking like a weirdo. This happened to me recently. I was re-reading a passage involving Fotherington-Tomas and his sister discussing fairies as I was heading home from campus one day. The fits started slowly and quietly, but soon I could not contain them, and before long I was almost giddy. I was obviously making the lady sitting next to me very uncomfortable, and after only a few minutes of my badly stifled hysterics, she stealthily moved to another seat.

I have read the books numerous times, sometimes from front to back, but more often dipping into different sections, at different points in my life from childhood on; and each time I find something new that is funny. I never went to boarding school, and although I have a lot of personal and familial connections to England, I must admit that many of Willans' and Searle's cultural references were lost on me at first. Researching the historical context has finally allowed me to get a lot of the jokes that I knew--somehow--were meant to be funny. I also know that Molesworth is not everyone's cup of tea. The books are very much products of their time. The spelling - which always makes me chuckle - can often be difficult to interpret. Searle's illustrations are often creepy and seldom make sense without Willans providing the written commentary. People who favour logical, linear narratives with neat closure would do best to avoid them.

1.2 History of the Books

By the early 1950s Ronald Searle was already well-known for his cartoons and graphic art. In the 1940s and early 1950s, his St. Trinian's cartoons, which depicted a deliciously macabre girls' school, were wildly popular with magazine readers. In 1952, Searle and Timothy Shy (a pseudonym for D.B. Wyndham Lewis) published a full-length St. Trinian's book, *The Terror of St. Trinian's*, which was a bestseller that year (Davies 99). Max
Parrish, the publisher, was very keen to repeat that success the following year, but Searle had grown tired of his schoolgirls. Nonetheless, he pledged to produce a best seller for the Christmas of 1953. He found his material in the work of an acquaintance, Geoffrey Willans, a former teacher who then worked as a journalist at the BBC. In the 1940s, Willans had written a sporadic series in *Punch* magazine featuring the “fanatical schoolboy-chauvinist pig, Nigel Molesworth” (Davies 99). The two agreed to team up and create the book, and armed with a £300 advance from Parrish, they produced *Down With Skool!* for the Christmas season of 1953. It met with immediate success, selling nearly 54,000 copies in its first six months alone (Davies 99), and Willans and Searle went on to create three sequels before Willans quite unexpectedly had a heart attack and died at the age of 47. Of his collaborator and friend, Searle said that he was "the sort of writer who made collaboration sheer enjoyment" (qtd in Davies 126).

1.3 All About Molesworth

In these books, there is no plot *per se.* The series is a classic postmodern pastiche of scenes, musings and sketches. Nigel Molesworth is a “tiny pupil” at St. Custard's, a boys’ boarding school located in a drearily nonspecific part of England. Molesworth acts as a guide to school life, focusing his narrative mainly on the day-to-day activities of a typical schoolboy: dormitory life; classes; exams; sports. His style is, for want of a better word, manic. The text jumps from straightforward narration, to scripts, to diagrams, charts, bureaucratic forms and poems – all spelled ingeniously badly. Searle’s illustrations are an integral part of the text, and include brilliant caricatures of pupils, parents, and teachers. In a distinct nod to the boarding school tradition, St. Custard’s is populated by stock schoolboy types: there is Molesworth, of course, as well as Molesworth 2, his younger
brother. The cast of characters is rounded out by Molesworth’s “grate friend Peason”; the aristocratic Gillibrand, son of a general, and Grabber, “captane of everything” and the perpetual winner of the Mrs. Joyful Prize for Rafia Work (Willans and Searle 8). The most memorable character is arguably Basil Fotherington-Tomas, the school sissy, who “kepes dollies at home,” skips about saying “hullo trees, hullo sky” (125) and steals almost every scene he is in. The St. Custard’s faculty includes the stern headmaster, Sigismund the mad maths master, and various unnamed but brilliantly caricatured Latin, French, English and Sports masters.

The series’ classification as children’s literature is a problematic one. In the introduction to the 2000 Penguin Classics edition, Philip Hensher states that “I thought they were children’s books, when I was a child, and now that I am an adult, I think they are books for adults about childhood” (xiii). It would be difficult to imagine a 21st Century child being able to understand the books, and in fact when I presented Down With Skool! to one of my grade 4 students in England – a child who reminded my of Nigel Molesworth and who I thought would find them hilarious – he tossed it back at me twenty minutes later with a perplexed look upon his face, and went back to Captain Underpants. A different student, two years later, brazenly stole my classroom copies of Down with Skool! and Whizz for Atomms, which made me incredibly angry at the time, but also secretly delighted me that the good word about Nigel Molesworth was being spread, even if by dishonest means.

These are books written from a child’s point of view and set in a school. According to Ronald Searle himself, headmasters used to give editions of Molesworth to students as end of term prizes (Davies 114). By that definition, they are children’s or young adult books. On the other hand, there is a lot of adult humour. Not many ten year olds, either now or in the 1950s, would understand an offhand remark about Schopenhauer (Willans and Searle
91), for example. (In fact, I don’t get it either.) I tend to agree with Hensher’s conclusion above, but I also believe the books’ primary audience has shifted over time. *Punch* was an adult-oriented humour magazine, so Molesworth’s genesis in that publication suggests that Willans’ original audience would have included adults. The original Max Parrish editions, however, look like children’s books of the time, in terms of size, layout and jacket design. A paperback Collins Lions reissue, published in 1973, is clearly geared toward child or adolescent readers, evidenced by its back pages, which advertise other children’s books and series, such as *The Outsiders* and *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Moreover, Nigel Molesworth “wrote” an occasional column in the *Puffin Post*, a popular children’s magazine and the brainchild of Kaye Webb, chief editor at Puffin during the 1960s and 1970s – who also happened to be one of Ronald Searle’s ex-wives. The 2000 Penguin Classics anthology, on the other hand, is obviously marketed to an adult audience, the same people who might buy the Penguin Classics edition of *Wide Sargasso Sea* or *Orlando* with their distinctive silver covers and spines. I believe that Willans had a dual audience in mind, and that he included parts that appeal to children, and others appealing to adults. This is not such an unusual phenomenon, even today. For example, *The Simpsons* has been an iconic television programme for almost twenty years, and is enjoyed on different levels by both children and adults. Numerous viewings result in different interpretations as time goes by – and I believe this is very much the same for Molesworth. Whether or not there will ever be a final say on the matter, I believe the series’ exclusion from the boarding school canon and attendant critical commentary warrants its examination as children’s literature.
1.4 Historical Context

Willans and Searle created the Molesworth books during a period of great change and upheaval in England. The country had just emerged from the devastation of the Second World War, which was closely followed by terrible winters and flooding; food stamps and rationing continued for several years following the war. Elizabeth II was crowned in 1952, ushering in a paradoxically hopeful and cautious era. Dominic Sandbrook summarizes the general atmosphere of Britain in the early 1950s, around the time of *Down With Skool!*’s publication: “The euphoria of the New Elizabethan Age was all the more striking when set against the backdrop of the deprivation and austerity of the immediate post-war years. For many people, things had actually got worse after the war” (45).

Important changes to the schools and to the education system as a whole also took place in this period. In 1944, Parliament passed the Education Act, which aimed to increase the availability of publicly funded secondary schooling to children. This resulted in the creation of a two-tiered state school system: after writing an examination at the age of 11, children were either streamed into the grammar schools – aimed at preparing pupils for university – or into “secondary modern” schools, which catered to less academically promising pupils. Not surprisingly, even with such an apparently equal approach to schooling, most grammar school students came from the middle classes, while working-class children went on to secondary moderns and vocational training. Moreover, despite halfhearted attempts to integrate the independent and state systems, historian Francois Bedarida reminds us in *A Social History of England 1851 – 1990* that the introduction of the
Act of 1944 did not spell the end of England’s elite public schools: “they survived, unshaken, all the nation’s crises and any outward signs of democratization imposed on them” (237). Consequently, Molesworth emerged at a time when, despite increased democratization and greater equality in schooling, boarding schools still maintained their status as “hot-houses for the elite” (Bedarida 237), aimed at preparing the leaders of the future for their roles.

However, with the rise of the affluent middle class in the 1950s, more and more families were able to afford independent schooling for their children; and indeed, many middle-class parents enrolled their children in independent schools to give them a better education than that offered by the secondary moderns. Certainly, in the glimpses of the Molesworth home Willans and Searle give, it is not a stately mansion but rather a decidedly cozy middle class home and family – Molesworth is hardly part of the landed gentry. This minor detail is quite significant in marking the shift in educational trends in the late 40s and early 50s in Britain, as the increasing economic and social power of the middle class meant that an elite education was no longer reserved for the sons of aristocrats. Hence, characters such as the aristocratic Gillibrand, son of a general, are remnants of the public school past; whereas Molesworth and his brother represent a new generation of middle class students.

Not only is the Molesworth series a product of its historical context, it also has a place in the literary and other cultural movements of the time. Because of the series' uneasy classification as both children's (or young adult) literature, and also adult literature, it is worthwhile contextualizing the books in both categories.

1 It should be noted here that the term “public” school will henceforth refer to private, elite English boarding schools exemplified by Eton, Harrow and Rugby – and perhaps St. Custard’s, as well. I shall use the term “state” school to refer to Britain’s publicly funded elementary and secondary schools.
Arthur Marwick believes that British novels published in the 1950s have a “national, even parochial, quality” that mirrors the “inward-looking” social and political thought of the time (54). Marwick classifies most of the authors of this time as “middlebrow” (55), but completely neglects any mention of children's literature. Dominic Sandbrook, on the other hand, includes children's literature in his roundup of the major artistic and literary achievements of the 1950s in his exhaustive history of Britain during this era, *Never Had It So Good*. In particular, Sandbrook notes that

school stories of all kinds met with great success. The most popular school stories tended to be those set in boarding schools, despite the fact that most children had never seen the inside of such an institution, and it is often argued that these were therefore tales of hierarchy and tradition imposed on unwilling children by their elders. The obvious explanation for the success of boarding school stories is that they reflected some aspects of the reader's existence (classroom situations and so on), while adding an element of the unfamiliar. (394)

Sandbrook cites Anthony Buckeridge's Jennings series as the most successful and "quintessential" boarding school series of this period (394). Jennings and Molesworth are contemporaries, their initial volumes having been published only one year apart.

As a response to the stuffier adult literature produced in this era, writers such as Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin emerged to chronicle the everyday experiences of people, without the “emotional hoo-ha” (Amis, qtd in Sandbrook 150). Likewise, Willans and Searle
do capture the nuances of everyday life and contemporary obsessions in the Molesworth series, while avoiding any high-handedness or moral didacticism.

The 1950s also saw the rise of satire in popular culture, especially in the *Goon Show*, an extremely popular radio comedy show starring, among others, a young Peter Sellers. At many times, the Molesworth series is structured like radio or television scripts, not novels, and this reflects the emergence and popularity of these forms of entertainment. Molesworth also foreshadows the “satire boom” (Sandbrook 535) of the early 1960s, where stage reviews, radio and television programmes and comedic writing built upon the work of the Goons and took aim at politics and culture at large. Satire was a very popular form of expression and suggested, to Sandbrook, that “British audiences did have a hearty appetite for laughing at the failings of their own country” (536).

1.5 Molesworth and the Boarding School Story

The move towards more widely available publicly-funded schooling, as well as the social and economic chaos of the War, led to the decline of the classic boarding school story, if not of the schools themselves. The genre did not die out entirely, of course, as the ubiquity of Harry Potter reminds us, but series written from the 1940s through today tend to be lighter, more escapist and less elitist than their predecessors during the genre's heyday. Molesworth therefore occupies a unique and precarious position, both as a crossover adult/children's series, and as a boarding school story produced during a tumultuous time in education and in the history of this genre.

Geoffrey Trease aptly summarizes the appeal of boarding school stories:

The idea of boarding-school – the escape from at least parental authority, and the companionship of the dormitory
– fascinates millions of English children who realize that they have not the slightest chance of experiencing the reality and are thankful, with the more rational parts of their minds, that they have not. (119)

There are literally hundreds of boarding school stories, epitomized by Thomas Hughes’ *Tom Brown's School Days* and continuing up to the present day with the Harry Potter phenomenon. The majority of these novels are parts of series, usually following a protagonist from his or her first day at school through their graduation. They also appeared as illustrated serials in popular boys’ magazines such as *Magnet*. Similarly, Molesworth began life as an occasional serial in *Punch* in the 1940s, and due to popular appeal, was transformed into novel form. Molesworth is thus part of a larger literary phenomenon, but the series obviously stands apart in many ways. My literature review will examine critical commentary on historical boarding school stories, and the successive chapters will examine the ways in which the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin illuminate these unusual books’ engagement with and distancing from the genre.

### 1.6 Bakhtinian Theory and Molesworth

As a scholar of children's literature, I can appreciate this series even more for its irreverence, and looking at the books through a Bakhtinian lens allows me to see that these books are far more than simple, nostalgic parodies. Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories are particularly appealing for this study because they give serious consideration to popular literary forms – genres that, like school stories, have not received much scholarly respect. When I first came across Bakhtin in a class with my advisor, Dr. Theresa Rogers, I was struck by how very Bakhtinian Molesworth is – even though it is highly unlikely that either
Willans or Searle was aware of Bakhtin’s works. Open any page in the Molesworth series, and you will be guaranteed to find some sort of wildly heteroglottic utterance, carnivalesque illustration, or unexpected play with chronotope. Thus, using Bakhtin to analyze Molesworth was a natural, and oftentimes surprisingly easy, step. Using Bakhtin's theories is an ideal way to bridge the gap between the series' datedness and quaint attributes and its more radical and arresting features.

1.7 Rationale and Purpose

This thesis has a number of purposes. It aims to be the first in-depth, scholarly study of Willans’ and Searle’s Molesworth series – books which, at best, find themselves in indexes but which have never had a piece of the spotlight themselves. Having been shut out of the increased interest in the boarding school story phenomenon, the series is in danger of being forgotten. However, I believe that it is too unique to be forgotten; and moreover, I believe that applying the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin allows us to go beyond the books’ dated qualities and finally see them for the radical and innovative texts that they are.

Another aim of this thesis is to add to the growing body of work that examines children’s literature through a Bakhtinian lens. As my literature review will demonstrate, numerous critics of children’s literature have found that Bakhtin’s theories about Medieval literature have great appeal and relevance when examining children’s books. I believe that my Bakhtinian analysis allows Molesworth, an otherwise overlooked series, to speak for itself as a radical text on numerous levels. This in turn could lead other scholars of children's literature to re-examine marginalized, uncannonized texts so that they might be appreciated and remembered as significant in the history of writing for children.
1.8 Research Questions

I address only two broad research in this thesis. First, what – beyond the obvious – makes the Molesworth series stand out from other boarding school stories? And second, what is it about “the obvious” that makes the books so remarkable? To help understand this, my literature review considers how the series evolved out of the boarding school story tradition. In the three chapters of literary analysis, I examine how the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin can help to explain the series’ departure from, yet homage to, a major trend in children’s literature, particularly by investigating time and space, dialogism, and carnival expressions.

1.9 Methodology

Instead of organizing each chapter of my thesis around one particular text, I have structured my research around three pertinent theories of Mikhail Bakhtin – chronotope, heteroglossia and carnival – theories that find particularly strong expression in all four of the Molesworth books. Each body chapter is therefore an exploration of one of Bakhtin’s theories, followed by an application to the Molesworth series as a whole. That being said, particular volumes from the series readily lend themselves to certain theoretical constructs. For my chapter on chronotope, which deals with the relationship between narrative time and space, I focus on *Down with Skool!* and *Back in the Jug Agane*, because they represent the beginning and end of the Molesworth series. In my chapter on heteroglossia, I focus my analysis upon the middle two books, *How to be Topp* and *Whizz for Atomms*, where different speech forms and motivations are strong indeed. My chapter on carnival discourse considers examples from all four books in the series, with more emphasis on Ronald Searle’s
illustrations. I base most of my analysis upon Bakhtin’s work itself, but I also draw upon Bakhtinian critics such as Michael Holquist and John Stephens who expand many of Bakhtin’s original notions in useful and illuminating ways. To simplify my citations, I have chosen to use the 2000 Penguin Classics anthology of all four Molesworth books, although some reference is made to some of the earlier, separate editions of each book.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview

The Molesworth books have not been the subject of any academic study, and have received only passing mention in one scholarly work on boarding schools, *The Heirs of Tom Brown*, by Isabel Quigly; and also in newspaper or online reviews. Thus, to inform my study I have reviewed pertinent research in two main areas related to my topic: research on boys’ boarding school stories, and Bakhtinian analysis of both children’s and adult literature. I have also reviewed the meager critical material that does exist about the Molesworth series, or about Ronald Searle’s work.

2.2 Boarding School Stories

For a genre that is largely considered to be low-brow, commercial and outdated, the phenomenon of the boarding school story has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention, especially, it seems, during the 1980s. Most critics tend to agree that the genre is not a highly literary one; but some believe it does have value as a cultural artifact. For instance, Beverly Lyon Clark believes that the genre’s very temporality – one of its downfalls, according to Frank Eyre – is one of its most significant features. Gill Frith believes that the predictable plotline of the typical formula boarding school story can in fact make a positive contribution to young readers’ skill development. The greatest proportion of available criticism concerns what might be considered the “classic” boys’ school story, epitomized by Thomas Hughes’ *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857) but also including titles by Talbot Baines Reed, Rudyard Kipling and P.G. Wodehouse, among many others. Books published after the 1930s are largely omitted from study, even though writers such as Anthony Buckeridge,
Frank Richards and Enid Blyton produced wildly popular series following a similar template as the classics. Critics such as P.W. Musgrave, Isabel Quigly and Jeffrey Richards – all of whom focus their energies mainly on the classics – comment upon three pertinent aspects of the boarding school genre: its relevance as a mirror of changing social and cultural values; as a phenomenon that promotes a certain ideology; and its purported “death.”

Declaring that the genre has “died” is wildly inaccurate, of course, because J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series has met with unprecedented critical and popular acclaim in recent years. Rowling’s books have become the subject of numerous studies, and a common theme that emerges is the books' place within the boarding school story tradition. However, I have chosen not to include extensive criticism on Harry Potter in this literature review, because the books were written over 40 years after Molesworth was published, and as a result, much of the available scholarship does not have much application to my particular study. Moreover, their fantastical and magical elements mean that their place within the “realistic” tradition of the boarding school story is an unstable one. However, as any Molesworth aficionado would be remiss to ignore, there is little doubt that J.K. Rowling included a nod to Willans and Searle by naming Harry's school Hogwarts: “Hogwarts” is both the name of the headmaster of St.Custard's rival school, and is also the name of an imaginary Roman academy that appears in one of Molesworth's countless daydream sequences (Willans and Searle 131).

I am also limiting my literature review to research on boys’ boarding school stories only. This is mostly because of their longer literary history, and because Willans and Searle so obviously play to many of the classic traditions of this minor genre. Girls’ school stories receive relatively less critical attention, and I have not found it to be particularly insightful for my study.
2.2.1 Verisimilitude

As we will see, among the reasons for the supposed decline of the genre were the massive changes that gradually overtook Britain's education system, and subsequent changes in public attitudes towards boarding schools. This recognition implies a correlation between these books and the society in which they were produced and consumed. Thus, not surprisingly, an important theme that emerges from my literature review involves the ways in which boarding school stories mirror society at large. As she states in her 1996 book *Regendering the School Story: Sassy Sissies and Tattling Tomboys*, Beverly Lyon Clark makes the point that school stories inevitably reflect the “crises and values of their age” (9). Clark chooses an unusual sample of older school stories to study: boys’ stories written by women, and girls’ stories written by men, and then examines the gendered discourses that emerge from these books.

In *Old School Ties: the Public Schools in English Literature* (1964), John Reed surveys the portrayal of boarding schools mainly in adult literature, though he does also consider books written for children. Reed not only engages with portrayals of schools in novels, but also draws upon authors’ memoirs of their time spent in boarding school and the effects upon the rest of their lives. He points to the system’s “deeply ingrained hypocrisy,” its passion for “abstract values and practical performance,” and the tendency for the public schools to produce “young men of uncertain accomplishments” (75) who were expected to become bureaucrats, colonial administrators, generals, and other peons of the Empire. Boys with creative tendencies (as most writers were as children, presumably) felt that the system was designed to “crush imagination and intellect” (77).

Jeffrey Richards, in his 1988 book *Happiest Days: The Public Schools in English Fiction*, bases his analyses in Cultural Studies, and illustrates how the typical “classic” boarding
school story is a significant barometer of cultural and social values. As he states in his introduction, “popular culture holds up a mirror to the mindset of the nation” (1), and thus a boys’ school story documents its era’s “boy mind and experience of boyhood” (6). Isabel Quigly adds to this in *The Heirs of Tom Brown* (1982), positing that “the inadequacies of adult life” during the 1930s are “reflected in the schools, and in the books inspired by them.” Specifically, Quigly believes that public school teachers were virtually prisoners of the system, poor and celibate (264), and they were often portrayed as such in school stories. Pico Iyer, quoted by Andelys Wood in an article entitled “Quidditch Rules: Sport in the Postmodern School Story,” admits that magical elements notwithstanding, many of J.K. Rowling’s finely observed nuances of boarding schools, teachers and students are accurate (158).

Despite some authors’ efforts to accurately portray students, teachers and schools, most critics agree that the genre presents a distorted and idealized view of school life. In an article called “Two Little Worlds of School: An Outline of a Dual Tradition in Schoolboy Fiction,” Terence Wright observes that in typical boarding school stories “to have more than an amateur interest in scholarship is vaguely unhealthy. Preparation and lessons would seem to be only an interlude between patches of ‘real living’ for the hero” (60). Instead, this type of story's focus upon episodic adventures that take place outside of lessons and learning constitutes a problematized verisimilitude, simply because such a large portion of a school boy's life is effectively tossed aside in favour of frivolous adventures and didactic opportunities.
2.2.2 Ideology

Beyond simply reflecting common features of British society and real-life boarding schools, most critics agree that this genre played a part in disseminating dominant ideology to its readership. For Wright, this ideology is very clear: “we have, then, a little world which metaphorizes its larger counterpart - a world where battle is waged between the upright and strong who are the supporters of society's structure and the cowardly and weak who, by design or not, threaten the ordered and happy state” (61). For example, typical plot features such as student rebellions underscore the fact that “well-understood moral didacticism was central to the genre and the courage to stand up for oneself was a vital part of it” (Musgrave 244). In this way, students demonstrate agency, but when such acts of resistance are subdued, the moral superiority of the adult domain is cemented. In Richards' words, these books “transmit dominant ideology and … create for it a consensus of support” (3). The genre does this because it

selects aspects of school life and creates an attractive image of them. It excludes unacceptable or dissident elements. It confers automatic status on the public schools. It instructs the wider community in the educational values and virtues embodied in the image. It tends towards conformity. (Richards 4)

Richards also implies that both the institution of the public school, and the boarding school genre, work together very closely in this way. Viewing the genre as a cultural, as well as literary, artifact allows us to see the ways in which its portrayal of school life promote a
certain world view – like the real schools that school stories were based upon, emphasis was placed on spiritual fortitude, industriousness and patriotism, among other qualities. Even the most escapist school story tends to have a didactic element to it.

Both Richards and Musgrave classify school stories into their own schema. Musgrave classifies stories according to the degree of criticism they level against the public school system, and posits that school stories written for adults rather than children could be stronger “instruments of criticism,” because of their intended audience (211). This raises interesting questions for further exploration about the Molesworth books because of their indeterminate audience. Richards goes further by theorizing that there are three types of boarding school stories. First of all, there are conformist novels – ones that endorse the dominant ideology that Reed points to in *Old School Ties*. Secondly, there are alternative novels which propose change. Finally, there are oppositional novels, ones that reject or seek to abolish dominant ideologies – but Richards points out that popular culture has, for the most part, been sympathetic to boarding schools, so examples of this final classification is rare indeed (8). Clark adds to such definitions by further classifying school stories as being either elite or non-elite (11). These ideas may provide a useful schema with which to assess the Molesworth books.

And to whom are these school stories transmitting their ideologies? Richards believes that their largest audience was

- boys who had not been and would never go to public school. For them the image was a glamorous substitute for
- the grim reality of their own schools, a wish-fulfillment of a particularly potent and beguiling kind. (18)
Thus, just as boarding school stories reflect the real schools and society they were based upon, so too did they have a hand in promoting the Empire’s values.

In addition to ideologies of self-sufficiency, morality and patriotism, Clark believes that boarding school stories also promote particular views of the adult/child hierarchy. “School is,” she claims, “a border case, a site for working out contrary impulses” such as the performance of child- and adulthood (8). Moreover, the school story is “contaminated by associations with childhood,” and the belief that children are naturally inferior to adults (10). Thomas Hughes, Clark believes, helped to challenge the supremacy of adults with Tom Brown’s Schooldays – a tradition that Nigel Molesworth proudly carries on a century later.

2.2.3 Decline of the Genre

Critics of the genre agree that boarding school literature had a short but glorious lifespan from the mid 19th Century through the 1930s. Furthermore, most writers on the topic also generally agree that such books are hardly paragons of high-quality children’s literature, yet some are more sanguine than others. For instance, Isabel Quigly believes that those authors who kept writing boarding school books beyond the 1930s “were not particularly good” (273), whereas Beverly Lyon Clark sees the genre as a fascinating document of its time – but by no means timeless. This raises an interesting question: if this minor genre is characterized by “not particularly good” writers and the prolific repetition of predictable formulas, then why has it inspired the publication of a handful of very comprehensive, well-researched and interdisciplinary book-length studies? Why does the boarding school story still have a hold on readers and critics alike? It is worthwhile looking into a selection of critics’ stances on the death of this genre in order to understand the genesis of Nigel Molesworth and St. Custard’s.
Among the genre’s more disparaging antagonists is Frank Eyre. In his 1971 survey book *British Children’s Books in the 20th Century*, he includes a few pages on school stories in a chapter on “Other Genres,” and roundly dismisses them as “an artificial type,” declaring that their “decline towards the middle of the [20th] century was neither unexpected nor deplored” (82). The reason that the genre had essentially vanished by 1950, Eyre continues, is that the majority of such books … suffer from the defects of any deliberately contrived type. They are written for the immediate moment, will serve their purpose for a time and then some other writer of the same kind of thing, but with an outlook ten years younger will take their place. (84)

To Eyre, this type of book is marred and ultimately destroyed by its own popularity and temporality, not to mention its artificial characteristics – the improbable yet predictable story lines and the stereotyped characters, for example. His assertion, however, does not necessarily hold water when mapped against the exhaustive work of Clark, Musgrave, Richards and Quigly, who give the genre much more credibility.

It is apparent where Eyre’s sympathies lie – he is a strong proponent of more literary children’s books, a completely justifiable position to take. However, his universal dismissal of all but a very few school stories (among them William Mayne’s *A Swarm in May*) is at odds with subsequent critics mentioned above. These scholars might not necessarily argue against Eyre’s declaration that “the boys’ school story was always an artificial category and children’s books will be better without it” (84), but they do treat the genre with greater respect than children’s literature purists such as Eyre are wont to do.

Rather than simply being the victim of its own inherent weaknesses, P.W. Musgrave believes that “the coffin of this minor genre was nailed with nails of a diverse nature” (258).
Musgrave’s work, *From Brown to Bunter: The Life and Death of the School Story*, published in 1985, traces the rise and fall of boarding school books, and links their trajectory with changing attitudes towards the public school system in England. Musgrave believes that the formulaic nature of boarding school series is a result of “narrow conventions set by the expectations held for the genre” (220), started by Thomas Hughes but perfected by Talbot Baines Reed in the 1880s. Reed, not Hughes, was the far more influential boys’ school story writer, according to Musgrave (224).

Isabel Quigly notes that by the 1930s, many school stories began to display “bitterness, cynicism, psychological tension… and smug self confidence” (271). Quigly thus allies the decline of the school story in the 1930s with not only the parallel decline of the public schools’ eminence, but also with the fall of the British Empire: “whatever it was, the system that had begun with idealistic fervour ended in rhetoric and emptiness” (273). It is this emptiness and rhetoric that Willans and Searle play off of with Molesworth.

Musgrave also believes that the death of the genre can be traced to changing mores within the reading and publishing communities:

> Any genre does have a temporary and socially negotiated reality, which forms a social factor that influences and is influenced by the behaviours of writers, middlemen and readers…. [This genre] could not cope with the demands put upon it. (256)

Perhaps, then, it was also a victim of its own success. This theory, however, is not entirely plausible, simply because the purported “death” of the genre was not a complete one: boarding school stories continued to be written and published long after their apex, including, of course, the Molesworth series. Quigly does point out that after the death of the
classic school stories, the “pop” school series became increasingly popular, with Frank Richards' famous Billy Bunter stories, serialized in boys' magazines such as The Magnet, between about 1910 and 1940, being the epitome of the genre. These more popular stories, Quigly contends, were aimed mainly at a lower and middle class child audience, and promoted the view of public schools as "a cloud-cuckoo land, an all-purpose repository of dreams for those who had never been there" and a "symbol of romance" (250). Quigly also believes that this type of lowest-common-denominator, formulaic and unsophisticated school story, still occupies the public's imagination as the apotheosis of the entire school story genre. It is probably no coincidence, then, that like Billy Bunter, Nigel Molesworth first appeared as a serial in a magazine (Punch), around the time of Billy Bunter's decline - the 1940s. As a school teacher, Geoffrey Willans no doubt was familiar with the popularity of Richards' series amongst his pupils, and consequently it is highly likely that he created Molesworth at least in part as a response and engagement with the iconic Billy Bunter.

2.3 Bakhtinian Analysis

To inform the second part of my research question, I turn to some salient examples of children’s literature scholarship (and a number of studies on adult literature) founded in the principles of Mikhail M. Bakhtin. I will not be drawing upon Bakhtin first-hand in this literature review because I will be doing so in my analysis chapters. As Catherine Elick states, Bakhtin’s theories are becomingly increasingly important in the study of children’s literature (454). Bakhtin helps critics to make sense of literary works that might otherwise go unnoticed. Children’s literature has historically been considered low-brow material and has only relatively recently begun to gain credibility within literary circles. Because he celebrates
popular culture and “roots for the underdog,” as it were, Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories are one way of accessing material that may at first seem unsophisticated.

However, some critics present a caveat about overenthusiasm regarding Bakhtin’s theories. Chris Humphrey believes that analyzing more recent cultural or literary specimens by using a framework based upon medieval phenomena brings critique too far away from Bakhtin’s original notions; by doing so we go too far back in time and miss over 500 years of Western history which results in reducing a “complex range of cultural forms to a neat chronological aphorism” (167-169). Peter Barta et al are even more severe upon the upsurge of interest in Bakhtin:

Carnival, dialogism, heteroglossia and the rest continue to roll off the tongues, and out from under the keyboard-caressing fingers of scholars and graduate students who find in them a useful analytical framework which does not in itself need to be interrogated. Such uses of Bakhtin are not, of course, by definition abuses, but at their worst they are banal and de trop, while even at their best they can sometimes make accusations of theoretical modishness difficult to deflect. (10)

Barta et al conclude their invective rather ominously by warning that “‘using’ or ‘applying’ Bakhtin has become difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish from ‘exploiting Bakhtin’” (10). I concur that it is important to interrogate Bakhtin’s (or indeed anyone’s) theories in addition to applying them. And this thesis, naturally, will attempt to avoid “theoretical modishness” at all costs. However, as will become apparent, Willans’ and Scarle’s works are
surprisingly powerful Bakhtinian texts, and this study will, I hope, illustrate that in a way that is neither banal nor de trop.

To mirror the thrust of my literary analysis, I have organized this part of my literature review into research on Carnival, Chronotope and Heteroglossia in other examples of children’s and adult literature.

2.3.1 Carnival Overview

Carnival is a term that encompasses numerous elements. Gardiner explains it thus:

Carnival is Bakhtin’s term for a bewildering constellation of rituals, games, symbols and various carnal excesses which together constitute an alternative ‘social space’ of freedom, abundance and equality. (45)

Significantly for Willans and Searle, many elements can come together to form carnivalesque discourse “which supplants the drabness and routinization of everyday life” (Gardiner 47) in a boarding school. Maria Nikolajeva believes that elements of the carnivalesque “can be present in all genres,” both high-brow and popular alike (8). Carnival is the over-arching principle that heteroglossia and chronotope fall under, so it is no surprise that many of the elements of these three concepts intermingle in the literature I have reviewed. Language, especially, comes to the fore. I have highlighted some of the major themes that emerge.

2.3.2 Theatricality

Carnival is a mode rooted in performance, so it is no surprise that theatricality is one manifestation of carnivalesque discourse. According to Brottman, Bakhtin believed language is “a live event” (25) and hence many carnivalesque texts have a performative element. In his
analysis of L. Frank Baum’s Oz books, Joel Chaston describes the ways in which the theatrical structure of many of Baum’s latter books forms a carnivalesque discourse. Like many boarding school stories – including the Molesworth books – the Oz books are part of a popular series, generally written to meet demand from the reading audience. Consequently, Chaston believes that many of the sequels that follow *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* become increasingly loosely plotted, more of a mix of genres, and hence more canivalized (137).

Much of Chaston’s commentary on the Oz books can be applied almost word-for-word to Willans and Searle. For example, Chaston draws parallels between the Oz series and 19th Century American musical extravaganzas by declaring that Baum’s books are “polyphonic, episodic stories – patchwork quilts of a variety of genres and many characters” which display a “disregard for formal structure: … Baum’s books subvert the usual authorities, bring down the pompous, celebrate individualism, and make room for the grotesque” (131). Specifically, their base humor and loose forms mimic the structure of contemporary musicals which were typically over-the-top.

### 2.3.3 Grotesque

Another important component of Bakhtin’s carnival theory is the presence of grotesque and scatological figures and events. Mary Harker, in her study of carnival in Brian Doyle’s novels, points to incidents in such novels as *Angel Square* and *Up to Low* which undermine adult authority through a variety of “disgusting” bodily vignettes such as drinking, urinating and vomiting (42). Such events represent for Harker a “hilarious celebration of revolt” (41). Interestingly, Harker believes that acts of degradation – for example, when an adult is put in his or her place – can actually be creative in their ability to establish new hierarchies (43).
John Stephens, whose 1992 book, *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction*, has proven to be incredibly valuable to my research, discusses the importance of the grotesque to children’s picture books, namely Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*. The emphasis that many carnivalesque texts place upon the bodily – represented in Sendak by the size and shape of Max’s monsters – affirms the importance of the material, which in turn grounds the text in the real. Searle’s illustrations of people are similarly exaggerated in size and shape.

### 2.3.4 Subversion of Hierarchies

Carnival plays an important part in the characterizations, plots and action of many children’s books, particularly in the ways that traditional hierarchies are subverted. In her study of animal characters in both C.S. Lewis’s Narnia series and P.L. Travers’s *Mary Poppins*, Catherine Elick draws attention to a handful of carnivalesque elements that play a part in subversion.

Elick makes the point that in a true carnivalesque text, the action is not orchestrated by a central figure, but rather by a character of a lower status – however, in Narnia and *Mary Poppins*, Aslan and Mary do in fact control what happens in much of the text (454). Nevertheless, a number of animal-related events in these two books mirror Bakhtin’s classic pattern of crowning and decrowning the carnival king, linked to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Elick points to humorous incidents involving human characters trading places with animals as examples of this sort of carnivalesque discourse.

### 2.3.5 Materiality/Textuality

An interesting aspect of many children’s books is the ways in which they draw attention to their own materiality – this has been brought up briefly by some critics of children’s literature as another carnivalesque aspect, and it is a particularly potent aspect of
the Molesworth books. In fact, critic John Stephens argues that many carnival texts do in fact draw attention to their own textuality – he points to the ways in which Enid Nesbit inserts little phrases into her books which reminds the reader that they are in fact reading a story (127). In her 2007 book *Radical Children's Literature*, Kimberley Reynolds also describes the peritextual elements in Tove Jansson’s *Book about Moomin, Mymble and Little My* such as a drawing of a scissored hole designed so that it looks like the book itself is being damaged. Reynolds maintains that such features of the book emphasize how the story is told is more important than what actually happens. Similarly, Stephens also describes Jan Needle’s *Wagstaffe the Wind-Up Boy* as a book that “flaunts its textuality… to break fictive illusion” (152). Thus we can see that the traditional meaning of carnival – subversion of political, economic or religious authority – can be extended to children’s books that subvert – either in words or pictures – the authority of printed text.

**2.3.6 Language**

Books are made out of language, and carnival discourse allows us to see the ways in which language functions as a tool to establish or invert power structures within texts. This is particularly interesting to my study of Molesworth, set as it is in a school, and especially given Willans’ striking use and mis-use of language.

To Stephens, in his study of *Wagstaffe the Wind-Up Boy*, language is not only a playful element but also an important marker of power relationships: “control over language [is] used in adult-child conversations to inculcate and maintain … a particular structure of dominance” (153). Moreover, Stephens links this power order to the subject position of the reader. A carnivalized discourse allows the child reader to recognize and situate his or her
own position in society, which is one reason why textual elements are particularly powerful in children's books.

Power also emerges as an important part of Harker’s study on Brian Doyle’s novels. According to Harker, “Doyle’s carnival does not celebrate the mock masses of the medieval fete, but it does engender an emancipation from... authority, linguistic or otherwise” (46). Doyle’s use of heavily context-dependent meaning – as in his child characters’ reappropriation of vocabulary – also subverts the dominance of fixed meanings.

2.4 Chronotope Overview

For Bakhtin, chronotope refers to the role of space and time in a novel, and how these two concepts interact with each other. Chronotope “is what determines the unity of every motif and idea in a text, as well as determining the logic by which these images unfold” (Brottman 13). Of the three Bakhtinian concepts I am investigating, chronotope receives the least amount of scholarly attention, or at least the term is not used as such, although the idea is referred to. For instance, in her discussion of the peritextual elements components of Jansson’s Book about Moomin, Mymble and Little My, particularly the cut-outs, Kimberley Reynolds argues that such features of the book “break down temporal and spatial linearity” (36).

2.4.1 Space

Margaret Mackey uses chronotope in her analysis of Beverly Cleary’s creation of time and space in her Ramona books. Although Mackey uses the word “chronotope” in the title of her article, she does not engage in a rigorous Bakhtinian analysis. In fact, despite making some interesting points about Cleary, Mackey could be accused of “exploiting” Bakhtin, since his name is dropped in the introduction of her article but is then effectively cast aside.
For Ramona, according to Mackey, space is established socially, not geographically (104). That is, Ramona orients herself spatially within the social environments of school, family and friends, rather than the physical surrounds of her world.

In an essay on how the Harry Potter series engages with traditional boarding school stories, Pat Pinsent makes the point that J.K. Rowling’s school, Hogwarts, is a more “solid” spatial creation than many other fictional boarding schools. Miss Cackle’s Academy in Jill Murphy’s *The Worst Witch* textually “disappears” when the students are absent, for example (Pinsent 34). Murphy’s school thus would appear to be more bound up with the time scheme and plot of the novel, whereas Rowling’s school almost has a life of its own, separate from the plot and time scheme of her books.

2.4.2 Time

In her discussion of Beverley Cleary’s work, Mackey also discusses how Cleary creates a sense of time. Specifically, Cleary’s nuanced repetition of events and references throughout her books creates a sense of “thickened” time (102). This could be interpreted as an example of Nikolajeva’s mythic “kairos” time scheme.

Maria Nikolajeva’s 2000 work *From Mythic to Linear* provides a comprehensive discussion of Bakhtin’s ideas about time and their specific application to children’s literature; she also discusses how these notions about time act within carnival texts. Nikolajeva distinguishes between two types of time: the term “kairos” refers to mythic, cyclical time; “chronos” refers to linear time (5). According to Nikolajeva, in carnivalesque texts, “the time pattern… goes from kairos to chronos and back to kairos” as the “protagonist is brought back into the cyclical state and no further progress is allowed” (8). This suggests that the social/power subversions mentioned earlier occur when the time pattern is switched from an
eternity to a finite time span, whereas in a circular pattern, traditional adult/child hierarchies are re-established and confirmed. Nikolajeva similarly distinguishes between events in story that are either iterative – that is, something that happens again and again – or singulative (9).

Moreover, this move from one time pattern to another results in “polyphony, intersubjectivity, unreliable narrators [and] multiple plots and endings” which ultimately “creates (as well as reflects) a chaotic view of the world, as opposed to the ordered (structured) universe of the archaic mind” (8). This structure is found consistently in the Molesworth books, which play with linear time by jumping from school’s predictable schedules and events to different historical eras, and back again.

Nikolajeva also distinguishes how the narrative structure of certain children’s novels changes in accordance with the “displacement of myth” (8). This raises an interesting avenue of investigation for the Molesworth books. Do boarding school stories constitute a mythic scheme of their own? To what extent can it be said that the boarding school genre has established its own mythic time pattern, and how do Willans and Searle change this pattern?

2.5 Heteroglossia Overview

For Bakhtin, heteroglossia (also called polyglossia) refers to the multiple voices within a text that make up novelistic discourse. These different voices have their own force. In her 2005 book *High Theory, Low Culture*, Mikita Brottman describes the concept by explaining that, for Bakhtin, language is not a “static, communicable representation of the speaker’s intention, but… a system bearing the weight of centuries of intention, motivation, and implication” (5) – language takes on a life of its own, separate from the author’s or narrator’s control. Moreover, heteroglossia can be found beyond dialogue, as it is also
present in peritextual elements that many books – including the Molesworth series - include.

In his 1992 book *The Dialogics of Critique*, Michael Gardiner explains:

> heteroglossia can enter the novel either through the speech of specific characters, each bringing their own ideological orientation to the text, or, more significantly, as a wider ‘dialogizing background’ which interacts with the form and content of the work as a whole. (41)

Although the term “heteroglossia” *per se* is seldom used by critics of children’s literature reviewed here, the concept is still a central one. For example, Elick argues that the very principle of “heteroglottic mingling” underpins the founding of the land of Narnia, a “libertarian” society made up of diverse creatures (456).

### 2.5.1 Dialogism

Dialogism – heteroglossia’s effect in a text – is the “unmasking of social languages” which reveal different “motives, leanings, [and] intentions” (Brottman 9). For example, Jacqueline Rose discusses the politics behind the editing of J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* to allow it to be used as a curriculum text in British schools. Although she does not use the term heteroglossia explicitly, she does refer to it in discussion of the mingling of different registers in one scene involving dialect from Richard Adams’ *Watership Down*. According to Rose, Adams’s inclusion of a child’s dialect in the story “allows to be spoken the whole question of the child’s relationship to knowledge, culture, language and the schools” (105), thus emphasizing that different strata of language use do have a part to play in making meaning in the world.
An interesting form particularly common in much children’s literature is nonsense language, which arguably represents a sort of mingling of different speech types. Kimberley Reynolds discusses the prevalence of nonsense in children’s books, which, perhaps counter-intuitively, does not represent a lower-stratum form of language but rather “derives from highly specialized discourses in high culture” which are based upon “knowing languages, arguments, rhetorical styles and professional information available only to an educated elite” (46). Thus including elements of nonsensical prose or poetry in a text represents – for the most part – the dialogism of the upper classes. This is a particularly intriguing idea, especially as it relates to Molesworth, because his structure, style and spelling are so irreverent and oftentimes nonsensical. However, Reynolds’s interpretation suggests that a structural appeal to the low is ironically accessible only by the elite.

In specific reference to the classic boys’ school story, Richards explains that “boy conversation, difficult to produce because… it is concerned with small concrete facts and incidents” indicates a “Rabelaisian plainness of speech on certain subjects” (15). This is an interesting observation in light of my work on the Molesworth books, where boy conversation (or monologues, in many cases) peppers the work, thereby exposing the different voices within the text.

Mary Hopkins provides a very comprehensive discussion of the use of heteroglossia in Flannery O’Connor’s novels. Even though O’Connor’s books are not children’s literature, Hopkins’s analysis of the importance of heteroglossia proves to be a solid model which I can build on. According to Hopkins, Bakhtin classifies language as two types of forces: centrifugal, which encourage change; and centripetal, which favour consistency (200). For Hopkins, heteroglossia means co-existing dialects – centrifugal and centripetal – within a text, and from this mélange meaning is derived: “this juxtaposition, this interaction of strata
in dialogue with one another, not any single utterance, is the source of meaning” (200). This results in what Hopkins calls “character zones” whereby the narrator of a text “echoes, imitates or parodies the speech of a character,” resulting in an indirect discourse with subtle blends and mixtures (202). The difference between the narrator’s and the characters’ language consequently raises the status of the narrator, thereby heightening the distance between reader and character (206). As a result, Hopkins argues that readers must be able to distinguish the two registers of speech to understand the text (203). Hopkins’ commentary on O’Connor can be mapped almost perfectly onto Willans’ prose as indeed each of the four Molesworth books is an exercise in the clash of language and speech types, from which readers must make meaning.

2.5.2 Ideology

Heteroglossia is an important factor in a text’s ability to promote an ideology – as Hopkins points out: “heteroglossia … bears a greater burden for promulgating ideology than even Bakhtin himself claimed” (199) because “when various dialects … come together … each dialect is forced to expose its embedded values” (208). In his analysis of South African writer Alex LaGuma’s apartheid-era novels – also adult fiction – Mzenga Wanyama also emphasizes this important point:

to Bakhtin, the stylistics of the novel is not just a matter of what aspects of formal linguistic norms a particular writer chooses to foreground, but rather it is an ideological position that the writer adopts vis-à-vis the myriad ‘heteroglot’ languages that the novel teems with…. Cognizant of the dialogic dynamism of heteroglossia, the novelist deliberately creates an
environment in which antagonistic or dialogic stances enjoy
free reign and thrive at the expense of linguistic unitarism. (116)

Wanyama’s point that writers deliberately choose languages, dialects and registers in order to
create an ideological position poses an interesting question for those writers – such as
Willans – who are considered to be “light,” or those who choose jocular parody as their
mode, as opposed to more politically charged writers and genres (as, naturally, an apartheid-
era South African writer would be). For Hopkins, however, such positioning might be less
obvious than Wanyama seems to suggest: “truly shared value systems are implied in
language, taken for granted, not explicated or defended” (209).

The three aspects of Bakhtinian analysis that I intend to address in the ensuing
chapters have received some important scholarly attention as illustrated above, and earlier
critics have provided useful insights and models for my own work. Each chapter will draw
upon Bakhtin directly by first of all examining his theories and then interpreting salient
examples from Molesworth where chronotope, heteroglossia and carnival are expressed.

2.6 Criticism on Willans & Searle

Criticism on the work of Willans and Searle is sparse, at best. While Ronald Searle
has produced a vast body of work and is regarded as a very important figure in cartooning,
he has not received the sort of academic attention one would expect for an illustrator of
such importance. In addition to the Molesworth books, Geoffrey Willans also authored
some other books, among them One Eye on the Clock, a memoir of his time in the navy in
World War II. Willans’ work has received even less critical attention than Searle’s - none, in
fact, as far as I could find.
Despite the scant research available on his work, Searle does emerge as a cartoonist of immense stature. In his history of the cartoon, John Geipel calls Searle “one of the most distinctive and influential of Britain’s post-war graphic humorists” (97). Detlef Gohrbrandt, a postcolonial theorist, adds to this by calling Searle the “chronicler of a period rather than a biographer of individuals” and declares that “Searle set out to analyze the true state of a nation that had survived [World War II] but not changed” (132). Searle’s “ability to set down a character is striking from the word go” (Lezard para. 12), and his use of “spindly, spiky limbs and rhythmically elegant embellishments” (Geipel 98) are noted as hallmarks of his work. Of Willans’ and Searle’s collaboration, Lezard declares that “I can think of no work, except perhaps Alice in Wonderland, where illustration and content are on such good terms with each other…. The combination of Willans and Searle… is like two children on different sides of the street, calling out to each other but heading for the same destination” (para. 12).

While they have an unchallenged cult status, and are revered by numerous fans, the only commentary to be found upon Molesworth comes from online newspaper articles, the introduction of the Penguin Classics edition, released in 1999 and reprinted in 2000, and a handful of fan websites. Molesworth does make a very fleeting appearance in Quigly’s Heirs of Tom Brown – but only to be dismissed as “pure farce” (276). The thrust of any “criticism” tends to be whether Molesworth is actually funny or not.

In his introduction to the 2000 Penguin Classics edition, Philip Hensher points to the series’ crossover appeal, as both children’s literature and books about childhood (xiii) and – as one would expect from the introduction to a book – is glowing in his devotion to the series. For example, Hensher declares the series “one of those sublime works of genius which no reader will ever forget” (x), and then proceeds to chronicle the numerous occasions where he has found it useful to quote Molesworthisms. Interestingly, Hensher
believes that the books are very far removed from “the clean-cut school fantasies which entertained England before the advent of the atomic bomb” (x) but does not delve into their relationship to the boarding school genre any further, nor indeed the fascinatingly dark undertones of the books, coming as they do at a significant era in British history – poised between World War II and the Cold War.

In response to this unabashed adoration, Thomas Jones is much more critical in his review of the Penguin edition in the London Review of Books in 2000. Perplexingly, his dismissal of the books seems to be directed more at Hensher’s enthusiasm, rather than any fault he can find with either Willans or Searle. He claims that the books’ status as 20th Century classics is “transiently applicable,” and that they deserve to be considered classics only because they are nostalgic (para 11). He continues: “They purport to view the world with a cynical eye, but the effect is far from unsettling; quite the opposite, in fact – they’re terribly cosy” (para. 7). Jones also declares that Nigel fails as a “hero of a satire” and that the books’ “great disingenuousness” lies in the fact that they “appear to exaggerate the institutional horror when their actual effect is to condone the institution [of the boarding school]” (para 11). Jones does not support his statements with any examples from the books, which is disappointing given that the latter statement is a contentious one, especially in light of the work of writers such as Reed, Musgrave and Quigly, who also believe that boarding school stories in general are supportive of the institution. Whether Molesworth supports boarding schools or not is difficult to ascertain. The overall tone of the books is so irreverent that Molesworth’s attitude towards his alma mater can only be described as ambivalent at best.

Five years after Jones’s review, Nicholas Lezard wrote a retrospective on Molesworth in the Independent. Lezard is more circumspect than Jones, and significantly,
considers Molesworth in its cultural context; in fact he believes that “there is richness and incident in Molesworth’s world” (para. 12). Without saying so, Lezard also describes certain carnivalesque elements in the books when he calls Molesworth “part of the cultural continuum of the times, an element of the great flowering of irreverence, linguistic and formal, which began to flourish in 1950s Britain” and even goes on to compare Willans’ prose with that of Samuel Beckett, also working at the same time. Whereas Jones considers the Molesworth books to be frivolous and forgettable, Lezard believes that they offer something more: “Molesworth articulates a consistent philosophical position: that of seeing things as they really are. And as they are is not good enough” (para. 7).

2.7 Literature Review Summary

My study of Willans’ and Searle’s Molesworth books will be informed by this literature review of important areas of study. Criticism on the boarding school genre provides insight into its evolution and impact, which allows me to determine the ways in which the Molesworth books adhere to many of the conventions and ideologies, yet still manage to parody the genre. Reviewing other critics’ applications of Bakhtin to both children’s and adult literature – specifically the manifestation of carnival, chronotope and heteroglossia – provides a deeper understanding of these concepts in their application to different texts, and hence are models for my own Bakhtinian analysis. Finally, reviewing the scarce material available about Willans and Searle and the Molesworth series helps to frame its reception among readers and critics.
3. THE CHRONOTOPE OF MOLESWORTH

3.1 Overview

The most basic definition of chronotope is simply that it is the interconnectedness of space and time within a text. In his introduction to “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin explains that

in the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movement of time, plot and history. This intersection and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84)

This is an intuitive observation: as the plot timeline progresses in a novel, so the settings change accordingly. In fact, “chronotope seems to have something like the status of ‘motifs’ or ‘functions’ in Structuralist analyses, a kind of recurring formal feature that distinguishes a particular text type” (Holquist 110). Such a seemingly intuitive concept has some surprising ramifications. By first exploring some of Bakhtin’s beliefs about chronotope and then using a very conventional contemporary school story as a counterpoint to Molesworth, this chapter will examine the different ways in which Willans and Searle play with the notion of chronotope, and moreover, how a more expansive definition of chronotope can account for the series’ engagement with the times in which it was produced.

Anthony Buckeridge’s Jennings series is a contemporary of Molesworth; the first installment, Jennings Goes to School, was first published in 1950, only three years before Down
With Skool! Like Molesworth, Jennings has also been – either purposefully or through neglect – excluded from the old boys’ club of the classic boys’ school story. Lighthearted, whimsical and fast-paced, Buckeridge’s books are near-perfect manifestations of the classic template, minus any heavy moral overtones, and thus provide a useful counterpoint to Molesworth with which to explore chronotope.

In his monograph, Bakhtin sets out to categorize a variety of ancient and medieval “novels” according to the type of chronotope they employ: romances; adventures; biographies; Rabelaisian novels, and so on. In doing so, Bakhtin delineates a number of features of these ancient popular literary forms which prove to share a number of features with boarding school stories and with the Molesworth books. Boarding school stories are a form of popular literature, and intriguingly many of their features ally with the forms of Greek romances and adventures that Bakhtin describes – also popular literary forms of their time. Their formulaic plot structures and predictable character archetypes, for example, are resonant of many types of ancient Greek texts that Bakhtin describes in his monograph. While summarizing each ancient chronotope would prove to be far too exhaustive, highlighting some of the chronotopic features of ancient texts that resonate most with Willans and Searle will demonstrate the ways in which the Molesworth books adhere to, and diverge from, generic expectations.
3.2 Time

The time-space of Greek romances and adventures centers around two poles of plot movement: first, the initial meeting of a man and a woman; and finally, their marriage. All other events and settings are created in accordance with these poles. In this way, Bakhtin theorizes that biographical time and biographical life are conjoined (Bakhtin “Forms of Time” 89). By this, Bakhtin proposes that the time-space of the story closely mirrors the time-space of actual life. However, Bakhtin does point out that in a romance story with this sort of organizing structure, very little changes regarding the two poles: the two people fall in love, and remain in love, and everything that happens in the rest of the story represents a simple “hiatus” between the two events (“Forms of Time” 90, 110).

Looking at a typical school story, it becomes clear that the genre also revolves around two chronotopic poles: the protagonist’s entry into the school, and his or her subsequent graduation a number of years later. In boarding school series, this time scheme is extended over several sequels but the larger chronotope remains essentially the same. Even though Bakhtin does not believe adventure time to be cyclical (“Forms of Time” 127), in a longer series, perhaps time may seem cyclical because each installment chronicles adventures that do not necessarily lead anywhere. An important difference in many school stories – especially the classics such as Tom Brown’s School Days – is that during this “hiatus” between the protagonist’s entry into the school and his graduation, an important change does in fact take place. As I noted in the Literature Review, the protagonist evolves from an undisciplined boy to a moral, “muscular Christian” (Richards 23). In the less heavily didactic examples of the genre, however, the hero’s changes are likely to be less significant: he may grow older and taller, and perhaps wiser, but the metamorphosis is less profound and
therefore less instructive. Wright acknowledges that boarding school stories are traditionally episodic and seldom have a well-defined story arc (62)

In a major departure from other boarding school series, the Molesworth books reject a purely chronological time pattern, instead opting for one that is heavily based upon themes, vignettes, observations, and daydreams. Even the way the chapters are organized alerts us to this shift. Unlike, for example, Jennings Goes to School, where each chapter presents events chronologically, the chapters in Down With Skool! describe thematic points such as “Boo to Sir” and “Lessons and How to Avoid Them.” While there is an effort at following a normal arc – Back in the Jug Agane begins at the start of term, for example – the order of “events” is less important in conveying the story.

This structure is highly reminiscent of Bakhtin’s description of everyday adventure novels. Such stories are episodic, highlighting specific pastiches which diverge dramatically from the protagonist’s normal existence; these events underscore the hero’s development. Bakhtin believes that this type of novel is set apart by a mixture of adventure-time and everyday time, so that, unlike the bipolar model of the Greek adventure – where the main events are only a “hiatus” between the initial and final plot points – the protagonist undergoes a more significant metamorphosis (emphasis in original):

... a novel of this type does not, strictly speaking, unfold in biographical time. It depicts only the exceptional, utterly unusual moments of a man’s life. But these moments shape the definitive image of the man, his essence, as well as the nature of his entire subsequent life. (Bakhtin “Forms of Time” 116)

This model also maps very neatly onto the boarding school genre, especially those novels with a more moralistic bent, where the development of a young man’s character is indelibly
shaped at school. Any school story is technically about something very mundane and universal – school – hence the plot almost invariably centers around unexpected events that take the reader and characters outside of this institution. The implication is, perhaps, that the out-of-class adventures have a more profound effect on a character’s development than pedagogy. Moreover, these events do function in many instances as vignettes, in that they may be disjointed, and do not necessarily build upon each other to progress the plot; but as each adventure concludes, the reader is brought back into the unity of chronological school-time. Hence lighter, less instructive books like *Jennings Goes to School* embrace a little bit of both the Greek adventure/romance as well as everyday adventure time templates.

In Molesworth the “plots” (the word here is used rather cautiously) are radically different because they center instead around the very details of the mundane experience of schooling which most school story plots actively reject. Willans and Searle establish an inconsistent chronological framework by opening the entire series in *Down With Skool!* by first of all directly introducing the school itself and its primary boy characters both textually and pictorially; then the first chapters launch straight into Nigel Molesworth’s impressions of St. Custard’s faculty. There is no sense of time. As Molesworth’s commentary continues throughout the opening chapters of *Down With Skool!* with little indication of time passing, the present tense and rather universal attitude (Molesworth generalizes quite heavily about lessons and masters) create an impression of timelessness. The only reference to time passing is the inclusion of Headmaster Grimes’ daily schedule (Willans and Searle 18 – 19). Towards the end of *Down With Skool!* something does in fact happen – a school play:

Imagine the scene. I am in 2B just flying a few darts or guided missiles when Molesworth sa Hav you heard the latest you are in the skool pla and must wear silk tights chiz
Whether this event turns out to be a formative part of Nigel’s metamorphosis, tights notwithstanding, is uncertain; but it does stand out as one of the few instances in _Down With Skool!_ where readers get the sense of a plot element actually occurring and being recounted by the narrator. Even so, it is unclear when the play happens – what month, what time of day, what other events it precedes or follows, et cetera. In _Back in the Jug Agane_, the final book in the series, the narrative opens in September with the arrival of students at St. Custard’s, but it quickly strays away from a standard school chronotope. Michael Holquist believes that “a particular chronotope will be defined by the specific way in which the sequentiality of events is ‘deformed’… in any given account of those events” (114). We can see this happening on virtually every page of Molesworth – it is a narrative in which time is deprived of its unity and wholeness – it is chopped up into separate segments, each encompassing a single episode from everyday life … Everyday time is not parallel to this basic axis and not interwoven with it, but separate segments of this time … are perpendicular …

(Bakhtin “Forms of Time” 128)

In Willans’ and Searle’s books, there seem to be two time schemes: the implicit chronological, scheduled and formal school time, marked most prominently by being in class or being out of class; there is also a perpendicular “Molesworth time,” an imaginative, spontaneous and resistant chronotope which flits in and out of this other scheme.
Molesworth’s time can be seen as a manifestation of Holquist’s interpretation of Bakhtin’s original notion of chronotope. Holquist believes that “art and life are recognized by Bakhtin to be different places contained by a larger unit of which they are constituents,” and that that unit is the “heteroglossia of words, values, and actions whose interaction makes dialogue the fundamental category of dialogism…. Chronotope provides a means to explore the complex, mediated relation between art and life” (“Forms of Time” 111). In other words, Molesworth’s narrative is a representation of the relationship between art and life, when mapped against the well-known chronotope of the school story. His observations and daydreams are an interpretation of a very universal real, or literary, experience: school; but their parodic bent also interacts with the social and cultural changes taking place in Britain at the time of the books’ publication.

One resulting function of the everyday adventure chronotope is the development of different types of characters. Almost by definition, boarding school characters are very contextual constructs: readers may catch a glimpse of a character at home during breaks, or learn in dribs and drabs of their life before starting school, but the schoolboy character only exists because he is in school; in a way he comes into being by entering school. School stories invariably have their archetypal cast – the best friend, the bully, the sissy – all of which Willans and Searle include, too. Far from being the average happy-go-lucky Jennings-esque schoolboy, though, Nigel Molesworth emerges as an archetypal Bakhtinian hero. Reading the descriptions of the heroes of the ancient novels of everyday life in “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” it is eerie how well Bakhtin’s analysis describes Molesworth, too. He is “a rogue, a man [or boy] who changes his everyday personalities as he pleases and who occupies no fixed place in everyday life, who plays with life and does not take it seriously,” (Bakhtin “Forms of Time” 121 – 122) someone who does not participate
fully in life but rather stands back and watches others. Not only that, he is also a typical carnival “fool,” someone who stands on the borderline between art and life, and mediates the interplay between reality and its representation.

3.3 Space

Even though the time scheme of a school story echoes most closely Bakhtin’s description of an everyday adventure novel, the spaces of a school story are more reminiscent of those found in Greek adventure or romance – texts based upon two poles of plot movement where the interceding adventures constitute a “hiatus” between the beginning and end of the story. Greek adventure time requires an abstract expanse of space, according to Bakhtin; he describes the link between time and space in this sort of genre as technical, rather than organic, because the need for space and different settings hinges upon the movements of the characters and the needs of the plot (“Forms of Time” 99). Moreover, adventure stories and romances typically make use of the contrast between proximity and distance – such as when a character is abducted and when his or her friends come to the rescue; consequently, the “size and diversity” of the settings are “utterly abstract” and non-specific: because the setting or space of the story does not have any causal relationship with plot elements, the setting is fairly non-descript (“Forms of Time” 100) despite its immense size.

While typical school story settings naturally have no use for the limitless geographical expanse in the Greek texts that Bakhtin describes, they do require certain spatial markers. Like much children’s literature, there is a distinction between home and away; there is also the distinction between inside and outside at the school, which is most discernible in the contrast between the dullness of lessons and the exhilaration of sporting events. However,
like the Greek adventures that Bakhtin describes, the space of the school generally has very little bearing on the activities of any characters or the movement of the plot; rather, the needs of plot progression – not to mention any moral didacticism the author wishes to include – determine the spaces that will be used. A well-known literal example of this is J.K. Rowling’s “Room of Requirement” in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, which conveniently appears and morphs according to the needs of the story. Like the Greek romance, the chronotope of the school story is generally static and abstract, at least until the story’s needs change (“Forms of Time” 110).

Buckeridge’s introduction to *Jennings Goes to School* reveals a surprising awareness of chronotope, for in it he states that “it would be a waste of time to describe Linbury Court Preparatory School in detail, because, if you are going to follow Jennings throughout his school career, you will be certain to alter the shape of the building so that it becomes, in imagination, your own school” (Buckeridge 9). This is an admission that time and space are closely linked, but that – to use Bakhtin’s vocabulary – school space is relatively immaterial when compared to both the biographical life of the protagonist (and presumably the reader) and the biographical time of the novel. Indeed, it becomes clear that throughout *Jennings Goes to School*, space invariably submits to time.

Like the Greek adventures and romances Bakhtin describes, *Jennings Goes to School* clings closely to archetypal “poles of movement.” Specifically, the book – and, by extension, the entire series of over twenty Jennings books published between 1950 and 1994 – begins with the eponymous hero entering Linbury Court at the start of term: a characteristic boarding school story chronotope begins to emerge. The most significant aspect of this chronotope is the clear delineation between school-time and events that occur outside of school-time. Lessons do not loom large in Jennings. This establishes an inequality between
the two types of time, which consequently affects the space needed in the story. For example, in the first adventure of the novel, Jennings and his friend Darbishire fear the reprisal of the school bullies and escape from the school on a public bus, only to be followed by a teacher (Buckeridge 37-54). Like a typical Bakhtinian narrative, the space required for this adventure expands infinitely – the town spreads further and further as the bus journey progresses – until the two boys are caught and brought back to the confinement of the school. Similar adventures ensue throughout the book regularly. By contrast, their actual lessons and time within a classroom occupy a significantly immaterial portion of the book. Buckeridge’s plots come into being only when the school time and space are trespassed upon.

From the opening pages of Down With Skool it becomes apparent that Willans and Searle take a more conscious approach to the spaces of their work. Molesworth’s messy, scribbled-upon endpapers of the book establish the “space” of St. Custard’s: “This book belong to N. Molesworth, St. Custard’s, England, Europe, The World, The Universe, Space.” (endpapers, How to be Topp) This is undoubtedly an homage to not only countless schoolchildren’s inscriptions but, intriguingly, to the introduction to Jennings Goes to School, whereby Buckeridge locates Linbury Court:

If this book should dare to roam,

Box its ears and send it home,

To J.C.T. Jennings,

Linbury Court School,

Dunhambury,

Sussex,

England,
As mentioned earlier, however, Linbury Court is a fairly abstract space, like the settings of Bakhtin’s Greek adventures and romances, and this act of explicitly situating it is a rare occurrence indeed.

Molesworth’s school has a much more tangible physicality than Linbury Court. Even though Buckeridge gives occasional descriptions of Jennings’s school, the reader does not gain an appreciation for the space itself, secondary as it is to the action of the story. However, Willans and Searle are quite descriptive about St. Custard’s in the opening pages of *Down With Skool*, and although they do not focus upon the buildings and grounds so heavily anywhere else in the series, these opening descriptions establish the spaces firmly:

this is st custard’s our skool taken with my brownie [camera] but i made a bit of a bish and didn’t get it all in.

Anyway what i have got in is probably quite enuff. That is the front door but you can’t get in since the boys nailed it up you hav to go in somewhere behind which fortunately you can’t see as it is most unsavoury. On the right is the fire escape which props up the skool i think or the skool
props it up i am not sure. It is good is good to get out by at

night but if there is a fire it is quicker to use the drane pipe.

(Willans and Searle 6)

Beyond satirizing the normally awe-struck descriptions of storied institutions, as Rugby is
introduced in *Tom Brown’s School Days*, Willans and Searle here establish a space that is almost
a character of its own. The troubled relationship between the place and its inhabitants is also
apparent.

Hence, because St. Custard’s has a more solid presence than some other fictional
schools, physical space has more of a role in guiding the Molesworth chronotope. Instead of
time dictating the expanse of space, the physical presence of St. Custard’s itself – along with
the teachers and Molesworth, of course – plays a part in guiding the time-span of the
narrative. In a significant departure from other boarding school stories, classroom learning
(or, perhaps more accurately, the lack thereof) plays a very large part in the Molesworth
series. The narrative, which makes expansive use of pedagogy as a jumping-off point for
Molesworth's flights of fancy, is symbolically contained within the brick and mortar space
created by the fictional school. For example, in a section of one chapter about the different
teachers at the school, the “setting” of Willans’ narrative ranges from the present time, to
ancient Greece, and finally the breakfast table of Pythagoras and his wife (Willans and Searle
42 – 46). These flights of fancy take Molesworth and his reader back and forth within time
and space, but ultimately remain grounded in the classroom. Space does expand rather
indefinitely in this section of *Down With Skool* but, like a rubber band, it snaps back to the
grim reality of St. Custard’s with no narrative travel time, and seldom any textual cues to the
change. Episodes of confinement and escape therefore have a less predictable pattern. Most
adventures take place within Nigel’s mind, which in turn is encased by walls of the school.
Even the St. Custard’s sports fields offer little escape from the confinement of academic learning. Traditionally, school sports comprise a major plot element of a boarding school story. The open expanses of the games fields represent freedom from the confines of school, and sporting events are typically described in exhilarating and exhaustive detail (Clark 4). Even in *Jennings Goes to School*, an entire chapter is devoted to a football (soccer) game – although the peripheral events surrounding it, namely Jennings being banned from playing for bad behaviour, are the real focus of the chapter. In *Down With Skool!* the sports field is viewed with equal dread as the classroom.

Interspersed with Molesworth’s half-hearted attempts at kicking the ball are hilarious moments of philosophical delight, as when Fotherington-Thomas and Molesworth discuss T.S. Eliot and the young one hit wonder English philosopher Colin Wilson, whom Molesworth declares: “advanced, forthright, significiant” (323). Even this tongue-in-cheek passage demonstrates how the space of the classroom – and with it certain connotations of elitism – influences the fields of glory. Molesworth’s spaces are more cerebral than physical.

In the Literature Review, I noted that a number of Bakhtin scholars caution against mapping his theories to more modern texts, in part because to do so makes huge leaps across cultures and eras. However, after reviewing “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel” it is very difficult to ignore the striking parallels between the ancient Greek texts that Bakhtin analyses, and the more recent phenomenon of boarding school stories, despite the millennia that separate them. As we have seen, boarding school stories share chronotopic features with both Greek romances and adventures, and also with everyday life adventure stories. Willans and Searle’s play on these notions constitutes a significant departure from the conventions of the genre.
3.4 Summary: Art and Life

Michael Holquist believes that there are two ways critics can use chronotope as a theory: in its restrictive, close-up view and with a more expansive attitude: “at one extreme, chronotope has a relatively restricted set of applications that apply to literary texts conceived as single units. But [it] may also be used as a means for studying the relation between any text and its times” (113); thus the concept should be treated “bi-focally” (110). This chapter has been primarily concerned with the former, but it also bears exploring this more expansive interpretation. As Beverly Lyon Clark declares, school stories reflect the “values and crises of their age” (9), and I would argue that Molesworth engages with the era in which he was created more dynamically and perceptively than his fellow boarding school story protagonists. Nicholas Lezard agrees: “Molesworth ... is part of the cultural continuum of the times, an element of the great flowering of irreverence, linguistic and formal, which began to flourish in 1950s Britain” (para. 11). In particular, Lezard believes that the parallels between the Goon Show and Molesworth are striking indeed, not only in their humour but also in their structure: “The Goon Show ... was going strong on the radio, doing for that medium what Willans and Searle were doing for the printed page” (para. 11). The numerous references in the books to various cultural ideosyncracies of the times that I point to throughout this thesis, are convincing arguments for Molesworth being completely in tune with the zeitgeist of middle class 1950s England.

Willans’ and Searle’s very close engagement with this era, however, probably accounts for the books' modern reception as cozy farces. However, by adopting Holquist’s attitude and treating the notion of chronotope more expansively, it becomes clear that the books are also a fascinating document of their times: the advent of television; the rise of publicly-funded comprehensive schools; a child’s perception of the Cold War, and so on.
Molesworth himself sums it up best: “Wot a lot of problems we dere little chaps hav to face – there are H-bombs, missiles, spacemen, russians, yanks, electronik branes ...” (Willans and Searle 337). By their own admission, these are books closely connected to their time and their place, perhaps more so than most of their boarding school brethren.
4 MOLESWORTH'S HETEROGLOSSIA

4.1 Overview

Heteroglossia is a phenomenon in novels in which different social strata are realized through dialogism. Because Willans’ use and deliberate misuse of language is so very striking, heteroglossia is a particularly rich aspect of the Molesworth series. In fact, it virtually epitomizes Bakhtin’s own definition of a novel: “a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice” (“Discourse” 261). Brottman explains further that “each stratification of discourse inevitably incorporates various motives, leanings, intentions … unconscious, pre-reflective ideologies that are often defined as political” (9). In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin lists a number of features of heteroglossia (see below), all of which can be found in the Molesworth series.

Bakhtin believes that in a novel, “form and content are one” and that understanding a text’s “verbal art” allows the critic to overcome “the divorce between an abstract ‘formal’ approach and an equally abstract ‘ideological’ approach” to literature. This is founded on the notion that “verbal discourse is a social phenomenon – social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract thought” (“Discourse” 259). Michael Holquist elaborates on this by claiming that heteroglottic “discourse does not reflect a situation, it is a situation. Each time we talk, we literally enact values in our speech through the process of scripting our place and that of our listener in a culturally specific social scenario” (63). By examining some of the most prevalent examples of heteroglottic discourse in the middle two Molesworth volumes, How to be Topp and Whizz for Atomms, we can see clearly how dialogism in Molesworth functions not only as a satiric counterpoint to what Beverly Lyon Clark calls the “gosh-wow,
overexplanatory, overexclamatory dialogue characteristics of the pulp [school] stories” (231) but also as a surprisingly rich and powerful social discourse of its own.

4.2 Dialogism

Holquist believes that dialogism is founded upon, and gains its meaning from, difference (40), and of course a school setting naturally implies a social hierarchy. In a typical boarding school novel, attempts at subverting (if only temporarily) this accepted order are common (Musgrave 244), but except in the most radical examples such as the film *If*, they ultimately fail – which in turn reinforces the importance of hierarchy. Like any boarding school hero, Molesworth and his friends also have their moments of subversion as when they booby-trap a door jamb with spiked planks as a group of teachers cross the threshold (Willans and Searle 72). However, boyish mischief alone is not the main source of subversion in the Molesworth series; it is the rich cacophony of discourses that reveals the struggle of social orders. If dialogism is the “unmasking of social voices” (Brottman 9) then several examples from Molesworth illustrate these perfectly. Bakhtin outlines a number of different types of common novelistic discourse, or “compositional-stylistic unities”:

1. Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants);

2. Stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration (*skaz*);

3. Stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc);

4. Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech
(moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth);

5. The stylistically individualized speech of characters.

(“Discourse” 262)

Whether consciously or not, Willans, and to a lesser extent Searle (through his illustrations), make use of all of Bakhtin’s features above, as each volume in the series is rife with examples of these different stylistic unities intermingling.

These books do not have an easily identifiable narrative technique. Even though the point of view is first person – yet another feature which makes them stand out from the boarding school genre – there are multiple discourses on every page. Willans demonstrates a skillful capacity to channel social voices in the text, through the medium of Nigel Molesworth, confirming Bakhtin’s belief that authors and narrators speak “through language” (“Discourse” 299). Molesworth clearly struggles with providing a structurally sound narrative form, another hallmark of the boarding school story tradition. His narration is frequently interrupted by daydreams, the speech of other characters, pictures and screenplays. It is also interrupted by insertions of oral language such as the omnipresent “chiz” or “hem-hem.” Of course, one of the most noticeable facets of Molesworth’s multiple discourses is his atrocious spelling. Nigel wears “trousis,” hates “gurls,” and plays “foopball,” for instance. While a point of humour – especially when he misspells a simple word such as “girl” but is able to correctly spell something trickier such as “inexorable” (285) – this also reveals a discourse on its own: a rejection of formalized language that trickles down into every other facet of the Molesworth phenomenon.

Bad spelling aside, one of the most striking examples of stylistic intermingling in the books is Nigel Molesworth’s narration. It deftly combines “direct authorial” narration; skaz
and the “stylistically individualized speech of characters,” often in quick succession within even a very short excerpt. We can see this happening readily in both *How to be Topp* and *Whizz for Atomms*. For example, in *How to be Topp*, Molesworth discusses French lessons, and that because “fr. is a living language,” it is best to grin and bear it, and ply “monsieur” with flattery:

> The Francais realy understand the art of LIFE don’t you agree monsieur? … Monsieur may not be fuled by this but it may lead to something. In fact it may lead to him teling you about his last holiday in Dieppe tho i would have thought the less said about what he did *there* the beter. This may tempt a tiny eleve to get caried away and GO TOO FAR e.g. were there any mademoiselles hem-hem there, monsieur? (Willans and Searle 173)

This passage reveals competing discourses. Nigel’s “direct authorial” narration is sporadic, interrupted on the page by spurts of the stylized speech of characters without any punctuation of contextual clues to the change of speaker. The cheeky voices of pupils are woven into Molesworth’s narration, evidence of both authorial narration and everyday language, as per Bakhtin’s schema above. Of interest also is the comment “i would have thought the less said about what he did *there* the beter” because it represents another discourse – that of knowing adult skepticism – a verbal wink on the narrator’s part and a lighthearted example of Bakhtin’s “extra-artistic authorial speech.” Moreover, the use of choice French words and expressions interspersed amongst the English is also notable, implying a formal politeness which is undercut numerous times throughout the passage. And, as per Holquist’s belief that any utterance is an event in and of itself, this passage also
illustrates how discourse and dialogue can be significant “events” in the narrative, even though technically very little happens.

Molesworth’s ease at switching roles in these texts means that very often he assumes the voices of many characters without using traditional pointers; he is so involved with his story that he nimbly takes on the voices of other characters. Quotation mark use is inconsistent, for example, as is the expected pattern of normal novelistic dialogue. It can be difficult to keep track of who is speaking, but this in itself is also an important marker of Willans’ unique prose style. When Molesworth describes the process of readying himself for the visit of some GURLS he channels a typical mother-son conversation:

Mater then give pi-jaw e.g. Now you will behave nicely won’t you nigel and you won’t do wot you did to cicely last time.

Oh no mater rather not.

You promise?

Oh yes and I will sa nothing about her dolly either.

And you will not shout Cave Cave here they come when they ring the bell? You will not repeat wot Daddy sa at breakfast about mabel entwhistle? Nor sa rice pud ugh at lunch.

No No dearest mama perish the thort.

(Willans and Searle 190)

Here we can see the competing discourses of civilized adulthood clashing with Molesworth’s emerging independence; in addition, Molesworth’s use of Latin (“mater” and “Cave” –
which means “beware”) also points to the clash between an expensive education and his boyish behaviour. Hence Willans’ prose style opens itself up to numerous conflicted discourses which each reveal their own intentions and value systems (Holquist 61). The dialogue itself, not to mention Molesworth’s facility with channeling speech reveals much about parent-child relations than any action of Mrs. Molesworth’s could.

The conflict between the ideals of education, and the less lofty reality, is also nicely illustrated in How to be Topp when Molesworth is called upon to recite a poem in his English class:

```
SIR THE BURIAL SIR OF SIR JOHN MOORE SIR AT
CORUNNA SIR
...
Notadrumwashardnotafuneralnote
shut up peason larffing
As his corse
As his corse
what is a corse sir? gosh is it
to the rampart we carried

(whisper you did not kno your voice was so lovely)
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot.

PING!
Shut up peason i know sir he’s blowing peas at me
Oer the grave where our hero we buried.

(Willans and Searle 153)
```
The “dramatic irony” of Wolfe’s sombre war poem recited by a distracted and irreverent Nigel Molesworth needs little commentary. What is more significant for our discussion here is how Willans crams the everyday banter of schoolboys against the majesty of Wolfe’s poem, revealing more conflict and opening up the struggle of different voices and discourses – literally the high discourse of poetry with the low discourse of boyhood. Willans’ use of typography and layouts has a very deliberate effect on the heteroglossia, moreover: the passage is laid out in verse form, with Wolfe’s poem constantly being interrupted by Nigel’s own commentary and his classmates’ behaviour. Capital letters, misspellings, italics and parentheses all have a purpose in channeling the energy of this discursive event. The jamming together of the first nine words of the poem also implies the speed at which Molesworth is speaking. Taken together, these numerous strategies capture the orality of everyday speech, acting almost as a typographic sound recording of an English lesson.

Even between children, Willans’ deft ability to capture voices is apparent. For example, in a chapter called “A Few Moments in the Underworld” in How to be Topp, Molesworth describes the various schoolboy archetypes (the sissy, the cad, the bully, the oik). When it comes to “Snekes,” Willans’ narrative nimbly channels the voice of the tattle tale:

i am just cutting up my bungy [eraser] under cover of the blotch in preparation for all out barrage when sneke sa

LOOK AT WOT MOLESWORTH IS DOING BEHIND HIS BLOTCH, SIR…. HE IS CUTTING UP HIS INDIARUBER SIR IN CONTRAVENTION OF SKOOL RULE 66(c) para.3…. 

61
This is the signal for the whole klass to sizzle like a steam engine saing ‘Sneke sneke sneke.’ Sneke looks highly delighted with himself and put out his tongue. He will be the hon sec of a tenis club when he grow up and serve him right no fate is too bad. (150)

The use of capital letters, the formal language to address the teacher and the schoolboy “legalese” all convey the different social levels at play in this scene.

4.3 Written Narration

Willans and Searle provide numerous examples of “stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration” (Bakhtin “Discourse” 262) such as handwritten letters and report cards. The products of school life become physically part of the narrative itself, usually without much in the way of introduction or context; form and content truly are one. For example, the reader often enters the world of Armand, a character from the school’s French textbooks; and later on in the series Armand actually visits the Molesworth family in person. Likewise we come across samples of test questions complete with Molesworth’s irreverent answers, or St. Custard’s report cards which Nigel has filled in himself. The inclusion of such peritextual elements presents another level of dialogism within the narrative, as readers are forced to engage with these documents directly. This type of element embedded within the narrative un masks social voices readily. Letters are common features of the narrative. In How to be Topp Molesworth covers the evolution of letters home from “new bugs,” from their first “emotional chiz” letters:
Darling mama, darling papa

i mis you very much. i am lonely. plees kiss my golly-wog.
never did I appreciate so much the joys and comforts of
home life. To think that i was rud to granddad that i
scremed when i was told to hav a bath. And how many
times hav i refused to come in and go to bed. O woe. Kiss
my gollywog agane.

Yours fathefuly

binkie.

(119)

Molesworth goes on to explain that the ardour cools somewhat as time goes on, and letters
home become less emotional, though their maternal responses become even more earnest:

Dear Mummy and Daddy,

We played aganst howler house on Saturday. We lost 9-0.
The film was mickey mouse. Thank you for the bakterial
gun. Will you send me a jet-propeled airship (17/6).

Love from

nigel

…

My ever-darlingest superset most smashing and admired
son Nigel,
Your letter was a wonderful surprise and so full of news. Your handwriting has improved beyond measure. *You did not mention about the lozenges darling will you be sure and let me know next time.* Do not worry about your lessons i kno you are doing your best. The crocus are out now but yore father is still in a filthy temper so i hav ordered the jet-propeled airship myself. Don’t forget about the lozenges and Gollywog send his love.

Your most tremendously affectionate divinely superbly adoring mater

Mommy (121)

The inclusion of a “self-adjusting thank you letter” is also noteworthy - especially as the reader is invited to manipulate the text.

An intriguing aspect of Willans’ narrative is his use of scripts within the text. Almost all of *Back in the Jug Agane* is written in script form, in fact, but the other volumes also have numerous examples of plays within the books. These plays are most often daydream scenarios wherein Molesworth acts out solutions to problems. For example, fed up with his pointless Latin lessons, Molesworth imagines himself as Queen’s Counsel cross-examining his Latin teacher (133). These miniature plays are all examples of literal dialogism on the page.
4.4 Heteroglossia and Subject Position

The heteroglossia at play in *How to be Topp* and *Whizz for Atomms* leads to interesting questions about the subject position of the reader. Traditional boarding school stories seldom have an easily-identifiable target audience. While most of the mass-market titles are very clearly aimed at child or teen readers, Richards believes that, in many cases, these books are more specifically aimed at readers who will never be a part of the private school system (18), but who will read that type of book as a sort of wish-fulfillment; and there are many examples of adult novels set, partially or wholly, in boarding schools. The Molesworth books, especially, have always had a problematic audience – are they children’s books, are they books about childhood, or are they adult-oriented satires? Willans’ and Searle’s heteroglottic narrative offers a few possible answers.

In many places, the reader is understood to be another child – for example, in the preface to *How to be Topp*, Nigel addresses a child reader fairly explicitly: “there is just time to give my felow suferers the fruits of my xperience. You could becom topp if you want to but most pupils do not. If they use this book they could come half way up or even botom hem-hem” (109). In other places, the humour is so tightly wound up with cultural references that it is unlikely that a child reader would be able to understand the satire; and similarly, many jokes hinge upon at least a rudimentary understanding of the vestiges of a classical education. As an example of the latter, Searle’s two-page spread entitled “The Private Life of the Gerund,” wherein the obscure verb tense is depicted as a strange anteater-like creature that “attacks peaceful pronouns,” and “cuts a gerundive” (136-137) is likely only understandable to readers who have a grounding in Latin grammar. Nonetheless, the very fact that so many
discourses – and in particular the clash of adult and child worlds – intermingle freely within Molesworth’s narrative space is evidence of the books’ crossover appeal and indeterminate audience. The use of letters, report cards and other documents situated in the narrative invite the reader to engage directly with the discourse. The reader can be a child, or an adult “in the know,” and the meanings and affect will differ accordingly.

4.6 Summary

In many ways, the Molesworth series is a bit of a cacophonous mess, with its madcap mingling of misspelled text and pictures; it is oftentimes confusing for those readers who prefer linear narratives; and there is no question that a lot of its cultural references are out of date in the 21st century. However, after revisiting Bakhtin’s assertion that in a novel “form and content are one” it becomes apparent just how true this is for Molesworth’s narrative techniques. Instances of competing discourses found throughout the Molesworth series – namely the clash of adult and child discourse – point to the competition between centripetal and centrifugal language forces. In her analysis of heteroglossia in the novels of Flannery O’Connor, Mary Hopkins explains that the latter language register promotes change, while the former supports maintaining the status quo (200). In Molesworth we can see how Nigel’s channeling of adult and child speech plays out the contrast between these two types of discourse. By extension, Willans’ style itself is a larger manifestation of the move away from the centripetal force of the boarding school genre and its traditions, to a centrifugal, playful and parodic re-imagining.
5 CARNIVAL EXPRESSIONS IN MOLESWORTH

5.1 Overview

The Molesworth books demonstrate an almost uncanny realization of Bakhtin’s theories of Carnival. In this chapter we will be taking a detour from *The Dialogic Imagination* and focus instead upon *Rabelais and his World*, where Bakhtin describes at length the features of Medieval carnival. Despite the fact that Bakhtin’s carnival theory was initially developed in relation to a very specific historic era, countless literary critics have taken up his mantle and explored carnival expressions in literature from all ages. To Bakhtin, carnival in Medieval folk culture represented a reprieve from the harsh realities of peasant life, a time when rigid social orders were temporarily turned on their heads. He outlines three aspects of Medieval folk culture which are significant markers of carnival. In addition to “comic verbal compositions” and “curses, oaths, [and] popular blazons” (5) there is the phenomenon of ritual spectacles, which, it is important to note, were not simply *seen* by audience members, but actively participated in (7). These shows are distinguished from “serious, official, ecclesiastical, feudal and political” rituals (5). Such ritual spectacles featured clowns and fools who, exactly like Nigel Molesworth, “stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar midzone” (8). Grotesque images and characterizations are also key to carnival discourse. As we shall see, the Molesworth books constantly demonstrate this spirit of reversal and surprise.

Carnival, it emerges, is also enormously useful for critics of children’s literature. One particularly insightful critic is John Stephens, whose book *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction* identifies “interrogative” children’s books – those that are more challenging and less
purely escapist – as being particularly demonstrative of carnival discourse (122). Stephens draws on Bakhtin, but also elaborates on the precepts of carnival discourse to create his own framework for carnivalesque children's literature. For Stephens, there are three main types of such texts: those that employ a time-out device; those that demonstrate “gentle mockery” and those that are “endemically subversive” of social constructs, and widely-held ideas. Interrogative children’s books employ a time-out pattern that allows characters to leave the everyday world and experience adventures outside of the norm – much the way the carnival marked the temporary cessation of formal social interactions during the Middle Ages. Gentle mockery and linguistic playfulness are also important components of carnival discourse in children’s books. Stephens’ classifications also prove to be helpful when examining carnival expressions in the Molesworth books. My analysis in this chapter will combine Bakhtin's original work from *Rabelais and his World* with some of Stephens' more contemporary interpretations. This chapter will pinpoint specific carnivalesque elements in all four Molesworth books. First of all, the books’ emphasis on their own production, textuality, and physical natures will be explored, followed by Willans’ and Searle’s use of the grotesque. Finally, the role of laughter and comedy in the books will be examined.

### 5.2 Textuality

Bakhtin does not identify textuality *per se* as a specific attribute of carnival texts. However, books that are aware of their own physicality engage with the world in a carnivalesque manner by inviting reader participation and rejecting print’s conventional restraints. Throughout the Molesworth books, the reader is implicated as an active participant, not merely a passive audience. This is most clearly demonstrated by the books’ numerous peritextual elements, features with which they explore their own physical medium.
For example, ink blobs are almost as common an interjection as Molesworth’s ubiquitous chizzes and hem-hems, giving the books a more vital, living character.

The endpapers of *How to be Topp* are also a fascinating example of carnival textuality, for they mimic a schoolboy’s graffiti in his textbooks. This questions the very nature of the books – are they a schoolboy’s personal journals? Are they novels? Are they textbooks? They interact with the world they describe, more so than a run-of-the-mill boarding school story. Consciousness of the physical medium of the book means that they have become a “live event, played out at the point of a dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses, united to the world it describes. [They do] not mirror the world mimetically, but [are] rather part of it, interact with it to transform discourse, speaker and audience” (Brottman 25). This is further reinforced by various elements in the books such as the “Molesworth Self Educator,” a dial which purports to answer any test question with stock answers (185); and the “Self-Adjusting Thank You Letter,” designed to save children time and effort after Christmas. Whether or not readers actually make use of these whimsical inventions is immaterial; their invitation to participate in the text and manipulate it is evident. Hence Willans and Searle have created books that are aware of their book-ness; their medium is as much a part of the story as the narrative itself. This in turn implicates the reader in the making meaning – like Bakhtin’s interpretation of medieval spectacles, readers are full participants in the Molesworth discourse.

Both John Stephens and Kimberley Reynolds identify textuality as a hallmark of radical children’s literature. Reynolds believes that peritextual features – exemplified by one of Finnish children’s author Tove Jansson’s Moomin picture books – break down the barrier between reader, text, and illustration (35-36), and hence invite readers into the story. In fact, *The Book about Moomin, Mymble and Little My* is very similar to the Molesworth books, and as it
was published only a year before *Down with Skool* they share an “unapologetic … playful and celebratory … response to modernism” (35). Jansson’s book integrates cut-outs on each spread, which undermine the reliability of the printed page, just like Searle’s ink blobs, scribblings and other playful peritextual features.

This awareness of text as a physical as well as intellectual entity is also present in some of Searle’s more intriguing and whimsical illustrations, the Lines Machine and Latin Translator. Here students are seen to be producing language through mechanical processes, either feeding Latin sentences into a production-line, or producing detention lines with a bicycle-powered writing machine. These two machines undercut the notion of language as an abstract form of expression, instead suggesting that language, like sheet metal or wood pulp, has a physicality that can be manipulated; confirming cultural critic Peter Schwenger’s belief that “concrete language is capable of becoming itself a thing” (139). In both illustrations, Searle reduces language to a product – a commodity that can be manipulated with machinery, thereby eliminating its abstractness, and undermining the esteem the spoken or printed word is granted. The punitive value of writing lines, and the intellectual superiority of Latin are questioned.

### 5.3 The Grotesque

Both Stephens’ and Bakhtin’s schemas are fully realized in the Molesworth books. Bakhtin spends much time in his introduction to *Rabelais and his World* discussing the grotesque, typified by a focus on the body which “debase[s], destroy[s], regenerate[s] and renew[s] simultaneously” (*Rabelais* 151). Stephens expands on this by describing it as a motif that “brings down all that is high and idealized” (136). Perhaps counter-intuitively, Bakhtin
himself views the bodily element as “deeply positive,” representing a “cosmic and all-
people’s character” (19) that represents “fertility, growth and a brimming-over abundance” (47). In the act of degradation, a body becomes closer to the earth, and this links to fertility – Bakhtin describes such degrading grotesque elements as part of the chronotope of a story (25) because of the cyclical nature of life and growth.

Ronald Searle’s illustrations are perhaps the strongest examples of grotesque to be found in the books. His drawings, which have been described as “black, Gothic and seething with half-hidden obsessions” by Philip Hensher in his introduction to the Penguin Classics compendium (xiv), depict parents, teachers, and students alike as exaggerated caricatures. The boys of St. Custard’s are almost all short and rotund, while the teachers typically have elongated bodies and legs; the height difference is played upon, as is the distinction between the pointed, harsh lines of the male teachers’ noses and chins and slanted eyes, and the more rounded features of the boys. The fertility aspect of the grotesque, so central to Bakhtin’s argument in *Rabelais and his World*, does not have much application to Molesworth, however. With a few exceptions, Searle’s St. Custard’s characters are entirely asexual – a complete departure from his earlier St. Trinian’s work, in which many of the school girls are highly sexualized. Nonetheless, we can see that despite their grim existence at St. Custard’s, Searle’s boys’ physical proximity to the ground mirrors the earthiness of Bakhtin’s tenets – and indeed, these “noble, brave, fearless etc.” boys (Willans and Searle 5) might exemplify a new beginning, a break from the old system epitomized by St. Custard’s and Britain’s evolving public school system.

There are numerous examples of Searle’s unique vision of the grotesque throughout the books. For example, Nigel Molesworth takes on a number of bizarre forms that question his humanity, as he is depicted as a “ghastly THING,” a pig and a gorilla (figs 6 -8,
respectively). Unusually for a typical boarding school story hero – a good-natured yet imperfect “muscular Christian” boy – Nigel is pictorially degraded. However, in line with Bakhtin’s belief, this may indeed be a confirmation of Nigel’s creative and discursive potential, rather than an insult. It affirms his position as a protagonist with a great deal of agency, someone capable of change – and, moreover, fully establishes his role as the carnival fool, because he can so easily inhabit the more realistic world, and an imaginative one.

One of the more memorable grotesque episodes in the series is the “Revolt of the Prunes” in *Down with Skool!* Inspired by the dismal school food, Molesworth creates a story which traces the history of the cafeteria prunes, captured and carried off from their native “prune country” by the school’s headmaster. Eventually, tired of being cooked and served to ungrateful boys, the “savvage” prunes stage a revolt (96), and their first victim is Jasper, the headmaster:

‘JASPER the headmaster must be slain first,’ sa the chief prune. ‘Then we mop up the rest of them. No prisoners will be taken not a boy must be spared’

So ten thousand prunes waited for action.

‘Cuh I sa gosh i say its prunes agane,’ came the cry from sixty throats.

‘Prunes are good for you,’ repli the masters in chorus but without conviction.

At that moment the hour struck.
With fierce yells the prunes leapt from plates from dishes from the boxing cup and other hiding places yelling fiercely.

JASPER the headmaster was the first victim. When he saw the prunes he gave a yell of fright his false teeth shot across the room and lodged in the opposite wall. The boys noticed no difference. they thought he was shouting at molesworth I as usual. (98-100)

The story is accompanied by illustrations depicting the prunes – reminiscent of dark, wrinkled, disembodied masters’ heads – in military garb and wielding swords. The story-within-a-story demonstrates not only Stephens’ notion of “linguistic playfulness” in the pun on the word “revolt” (all the boys find prunes revolting) but also a zany storyline that realizes the true nature of carnival: the lowest of the low – a small, sticky dried fruit – temporarily overthrowing an established hierarchy. Moreover, in an even more carnivalesque overture, authority is killed by a notorious laxative, the symbolism of which, perhaps, does not bear thinking about. Molesworth and his friends do eventually subdue the prunes and restore order to the school, but not until after they have wrought great upheaval at St. Custard’s. This is a spectacle which requires everybody’s participation – students, teachers, and prunes – in order to play out. The grotesque aspects of this episode only hint at scatological connotations, and circumvent sexuality entirely. Nonetheless, it is absurd in the extreme, of course, and it occurs without much by way of introduction or foreshadowing. The very inclusion of such an episode which undermines any semblance of linear narrative flow, and which has no logical or symbolic place in the text, indicates an engagement with carnivalesque celebration of the sillier aspects of childhood fantasy.
5. 4 Laughter/Satire

While it is irrefutable that many aspects of Molesworth are intentionally satirical, it is inaccurate to view the entire series as a satire. According to Bakhtin, satire creates inequality because one party is laughing at another, and because satire almost always requires a “certain degree of learning” (Rabelais 12) in order to be understood. Carnival humour, by contrast, is ambivalent and equal. Like a classically carnivalesque text, much of Molesworth involves an all-encompassing comedy, where all participants laugh and are laughed at. Bakhtin explains that this type of comedy is

first of all a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated “comic” event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. (11-12)

Thus while Molesworth “chizzes” at his peers, teachers and parents rather ruthlessly, and inarguably aims to lampoon British society, he is not immune to being laughed at himself, and in fact he readily sets himself up for mockery. For example, he describes the annual torture of parents’ day, when “boys… all dress up in weedy costumes with all sorts of bells everywhere” in order to perform (under great duress, one imagines) a country dance:

(dancers enter)

ALL: Dilly dilly dilly dilly O
With a rilly dilly strawberry, o.

(pointing toes)

Rilly-me Dilly me.

(jangling a bell on the end of the nose)

EBENEZER: Rilly-dilly jingle. Rilly-dilly jingle.

EPHRAIM: With a raspberry o.

ALL: Rilly-dilly raspberry rilly-dilly raspberry o.

…. All boys dance like mad bells jangle dogs yap babes
cry… molesworth 2 get strangled in the maypole. (85)

There is certainly a satirical element in this episode, a send-up of Morris dancing and school performances. Yet to land definitively on such an interpretation is perhaps too heavy: this is a perfect example of carnival comedy. The humour is at the expense of everyone: the boys in their “weedy costumes” and bells, pointing their toes and chanting nonsense; the parents for watching this display; the teachers for choreographing it. The whole situation is completely ridiculous and silly – and that is the point. Nothing and nobody emerges unscathed. That Molesworth includes such an embarrassing episode in his own life story indicates that his aim is not purely to satirize others. He is under his own lens as much as any other character.

Molesworth’s willingness to make fun of himself can also be seen during gym class when he is put in his place very effectively by Fotherington-Tomas, the “utterly wet” school sissy, who mostly skips about saying “hullo clouds hullo sky” (125). When Fotherington-Tomas comes across Molesworth hanging from the gymnastics rings, the following conversation ensues:
Another exercise with the rings is to swing on them by yore feet upside down. This is super. At least it would be if fotherington-tomas do not come along.

‘Look at me fotherington-tomas,’ you sa as you zoom by. ‘Look at me no hands.’

‘i am looking,’ he sa. ‘Wot are you doing?’

‘Boddy swinging ARMS XTENDED, feet in the rings backwards and forwards bending with deep rhymical breathing.’

‘So that is the noise i hear?’

‘In and O-U-T. In and O-U-T.’

(fotherington-tomas scratch his head)

‘But molesworth wot is the point of it?’ he sa. ‘Wot hav you ganed when it is all over? Do it make you better than other boys? Wot does it prove in the long run? ect. ect.’

These are very difficult questions to answer when swinging by the feet upside down. As you ponder, you strike head sharply on the ground.

‘You see?’ sa fotherington-tomas and stroll away. He is a gurly. (172)

In typical carnival fashion, the sissy – lowest of the low in the boarding school hierarchy – sends up the protagonist and literally brings crashing him to the ground. This theme occurs throughout Molesworth. For instance, in one of Molesworth's daydreams, he envisions a teacher supplicating himself at Sir Molesworth's feet.
Another example of inversions of commonly-accepted hierarchies is one of Searle’s illustrations in *Back in the Jug Agane* that gives an unexpected twist to the classic prank of booby-trapping a door jamb so that a bucket of water is tipped onto an unsuspecting victim’s head. In *Down With Skool* there is an illustration of Molesworth and his cronies playing this trick, but instead of a bucket of water, Nigel is setting a spiked board and a pile of furniture just above the door (72). Later on, in *Back In The Jug Agane*, a parallel illustration appears. Instead of the students setting up the trap for the teachers, as perhaps one would expect, it is the masters who hide behind the door, precariously booby-trapped with jars of ink, jam and golden syrup; the adults snicker as a mass of students, led by Molesworth, cross the threshold (371) on the opening day of term. Here again, in this reversal-of-a-reversal, the relativity of St. Custard’s is celebrated and laughed at. Searle's deft illustrations, too numerous to list in detail, contribute to the overall carnivalesque, irreverent tone.

For instance, in *Down With Skool!* the reader finds a series of full-page illustrations – interspersed throughout the book – of a Roman and Gaul soldier marching in opposite directions, never to meet. Likewise, Searle provides “Fragrant Leaves from my Botany Book” (53 – 54) which details a number of imaginary birds with fanciful names. These illustrations have no actual significance to the text itself; they are simply there to be funny, and to destabilize textual linearity.

Bakhtin believed that after the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the nature of comedy and the grotesque changed dramatically. Humour in the Romantic era, for example, ceased to be joyful and instead became “angry satire” (“Rabelais” 36). In this context, grotesque elements became hostile rather than life-affirming. By contrast, Medieval comedy is “fearless,” and laughter is used to dispel fear and defeat “comic monsters” (38-39). This
relationship between fear and laughter leads to an ambiguous tone in carnival texts, where the serious and the comic are blurred.

This is very true for the Molesworth books, where amid all the madcap humour there are some dark and unsettling undertones. In *Down with Skool!* readers come across a two-page spread entitled “Grips and Tortures for Masters” (48 – 49), which illustrates a number of different corporeal punishment techniques. Even though the examples are hilariously macabre – such as the “Cumberland creep from behind with silver pencil,” wherein an ominous point encroaches upon the unsuspecting ear of a boy; or the rather self-explanatory “headshave with ruler” – the subtext of abuse is impossible to ignore. Likewise, “Kanes I Have Known by N. Molesworth” appears as a field guide to teachers’ whips (13). In addition to the classic “Old Faithful” there are more technologically advanced specimens such as the “‘Nonpliant’ or ‘Rigid’ with silencer attachment to drown victims cries” which has a small bottle of ether attached to the shaft; there is also the “‘Creaker’ or split-seam,” which is “for use by ‘hurt-me-more-than-it-hurts-you’ kaners.” Just like the “grips and tortures,” the comedy of detailing violence used against children is a deeply unsettling one; yet it would be too simple to take offense at these illustrations.

Corporeal punishment was a fact of life in British schools – indeed, it only became officially illegal in the late 1980s (Benthall 382). Consequently, Molesworth’s catalogue of punishments has a basis in truth: in an article about the ritualistic nature of corporeal punishment at Eton in the 1950s, Jonathan Benthall notes how there were several categories of instruments used in beatings – ranging from innocuous segments of rubber hosing used for “siphoning” (379) to a custom-made bundle of birch twigs used by the headmaster for the “birching” or “flogging” of serious offenders. This latter punishment was traditionally carried out in public, outdoors, at the “flogging block,” with the headmaster dressed in “a
black cassock and black gown, with two white clerical bands hanging down from it, indicating his high rank, which gave him a quasi-ecclesiastical status” (380). Molesworth’s discursive resistance to such a tradition, then, is very much in line with Bakhtin’s carnival, a true bringing-down of the high and mighty. While school boys may be physically powerless against the punitive acts of adults, they do wield a discursive power, and the fear inspired by these tools and rituals can be dispelled. Bakhtin’s “comic monster” (*Rabelais* 47) must be named, exaggerated, and laughed at in order to be defeated – in order to “claim a small victory over fear” (Harker 46).

Thus, in most cases, Molesworth and his peers’ resistance to institutionalized violence, and the power disparity between children and adults is realized through discourse. Bakhtin’s “comic monsters” appear frequently throughout all four Molesworth books – and the only means of defeating them is laughter. For example, the chapter entitled “A Few Moments in the Underworld” in *How to be Topp*, discussed in my previous chapter, includes descriptions of bullies. While acknowledging the bully’s power and cruelty, Molesworth also manages to defeat him:

> Every skool hav a resident buly who is fat and roll about the place clouting everybode. This is necessary so we can all hav a sermon from time to time chiz e.g. *if you are strong remember the little fellow ....* There are 2 kinds of buly. There are fat bulies who can run fast and fat bulies who can’t run for tooffe [toffee].... Bulies who can’t run are beter. You can watch them swanking up the coridor then zoom past chanting Look at the clot-faced wet.  (148 – 149)
In a similar manner, when the headmaster intends to mete out punishment for a transgression of school rules, Molesworth takes discursive control over a situation which would otherwise see the boys as powerless. The headmaster gathers the whole school about him in order to harangue them about a misdemeanor – presented by Molesworth as a form in which non-applicable offenses are crossed off:

‘Some boy’ he [headmaster] sa. (This is it. Always is when a headmaster sa ‘Some boy’) ‘Last night – or in the early hours of this morning – some boy broke out of his dormitory and

*strike out CRIME which do not apply:*

- discharged pellets at skool pig.
- hung by his heels from the weather cock.
- bunged up the drane with a pair of socks.
- Scared the matron stiff.
- Painted the gymnasium purple.
- Raided the larder….

‘Some boy,’ he sa agane, ‘is guilty. Let him own up now before the whole skool. Let him admit his guilt. Let him step before the judges.’ *Silence.* ‘Come on!’ he roar. ‘Oo dunnit, eh?’ (232-233)

The headmaster’s fearsome rhetoric is deftly captured – he obviously has the power to instill terror in his students; yet Molesworth is able to dispel this fear by declaring: “There you hav the weakness of his case. The clot hav not got an earthly – i mean, well, lets face it he simply doesn’t kno. One should really feel sorry for him” (233). Moreover, the presentation of his
tirade as a form which requires filling in is another nod towards textuality – as if the reader can also take control of the situation by manipulating the text on the page. This choice on Willans’ part de-emphasizes the “realistic” aspect of this event, and turns it from something potentially serious, to a simple matter of red tape.

Molesworth does not stop here, however; instead, he creates what Stephens would identify as a “time-out” from the plot when he instantaneously places himself in a crime-story script as “Det. Inspectr the Hon Nigel Molesworth,” who orders his lackeys to rough up a younger student in order to confess to the crime, with the justification that “Headmasters do not care who is innocent, they only want someone to confess” (236). If this seems a particularly cynical and harsh reaction to the headmaster’s strategy, Molesworth lessens it considerably by digressing during his speech by starting, apropos of nothing, a conversation about Ming vases. In a traditional boarding school story, the boys would learn an important moral lesson from such a disciplinary event; yet in Molesworth, all players in the story are shown to be amoral and clueless, and subsequently the whole notion of discipline – physical or not – is neatly undermined.

5.5 Summary

The scant commentary available upon the Molesworth books tends to dismiss them as dated satire; indeed, many of the jokes and situations would be unintelligible to a reader who did not attend a boarding school, or was even alive in the 1950s, and consequently much of the humour is likely lost on modern audiences. However, a Bakhtinian analysis of the books’ carnivalesque elements confirms that they do engage with their world in ways that are more complex than perhaps first imagined – from their radical textuality, the numerous grotesque episodes, and the ambivalent nature of the comedy. The books are highly
carnivalized texts in almost every possible way. Bakhtin himself believed that carnival could not – and should not – be broken down into smaller constituent parts. Instead, it had to be viewed as an “organic system of images and style” (Rabelais 153). While it was necessary to break down different aspects of carnival theory in order to form a cogent argument in this chapter, it is important to view the books organically, so that their overall playful, snarky, irreverent nature is not overlooked. The fast-paced and jarring juxtapositions of Willans' numerous generic styles and voice with Searle's illustrations confirm that carnivalesque discourse cannot easily be pulled apart for examination – and yet such an examination yields rich insight into the carnivalesque world of Nigel Molesworth.
6 CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of Findings

But I do not think I will ever be the BRANE of BRITAIN as every other boy will be. Perhaps by that time there will be room in the world for a huge lout with 0 branes. In which case I mite still get a knighthood. (Willans and Searle 405)

These are Nigel Molesworth’s final words in *Back in the Jug Agane*. Geoffrey Willans died before the book was published, so it is unclear whether a further volume in the series was planned or not, and whether these final words were indeed intended as such. Regardless, these final “thorts” neatly encapsulate the spirit of Molesworth, and perhaps unintentionally predict his legacy.

I have argued that while these books have been either neglected in studies of boarding school stories, or roundly dismissed as meaningless farce, they may perhaps have more “brane” than first assumed. Applying three theories of Mikhail Bakhtin has allowed us to regard the series in a new light, and to see the books for the radical texts they are.

As my literature review highlighted, the boarding school genre as a whole tends to endorse the institution of school, and uphold an ideology that supports the status quo. Formally, they usually follow a set pattern in terms of chronological time passing; the characters are lively but largely stereotypical; and the message largely imparts an adult’s sensibilities about the importance of school onto the child reader. However, the Bakhtinian features of Molesworth discussed in this thesis represent a radical diversion from the genre as a whole, even while satirically demonstrating many of the features of this popular and significant genre of children’s literature.
Willans and Searle’s books are clearly parodic responses to the boarding school genre, as well as to 1950s England. One of the ways they succeed in parodying these is by manipulating the time-space, or chronotope, of the boarding school genre. Bakhtin’s descriptions of various classic chronotopes map readily onto the boarding school genre, particularly in the way that time behaves, and in the use of space. Instead of following a strictly linear or circular time scheme, as many boarding school books tend to do, Willans and Searle instead adopt a chronotope that is unstable and powerful; it allows the characters and themes to emerge in innovative ways. Not only is there an unreliable sense of time passing, but space also has an increased presence in the texts.

Willans’ ingenious prose is another Bakhtinian manifestation in the books – that of heteroglossia. Bakhtin’s assertion that language in a novel is an event consisting of the interaction of different social consciousnesses is fully realized in the Molesworth series. Throughout the books, Willans demonstrates an uncanny ability to literally intermingle different voices through passages that integrate normal prose, dialogue, scripts and written artifacts. Through this dialogism, different orders of conflicts – largely comprised of power relationships – are realized.

Finally, the Molesworth series is a highly carnivalized one. Bakhtin’s original notion of carnival is founded in the medieval phenomenon, where the normally rigid ecclesiastical social order was temporarily inverted, resulting in grotesque imagery, hierarchical inversions, and festive laughter. Some of the most powerful carnivalesque elements are the Molesworth books’ awareness of their own textuality, Searle’s grotesque illustrations, and Molesworth’s play with the subverting of normal hierarchies through his imaginative role-plays and daydreams. Such Bakhtinian features allow the books to engage with the zeitgeist of 1950s Britain and to explore dynamics of power within school systems.
6.2 Contribution to Existing Scholarship

This thesis is the first in-depth academic study of Willans’ and Searle’s work, and as such it constitutes an important inclusion in the field of both children’s literature more broadly, and of school stories more specifically. This thesis is also another study that will add to the work of theorists such as Kimberley Reynolds and John Stephens – researchers who have successfully reconsidered select children’s books by applying the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin. By examining books that are so far removed from the scholarly limelight and using Bakhtin’s theories to pinpoint their more significant features, I have shown that these forgotten texts are indeed powerfully radical. While I acknowledge Peter Barta’s concern that “‘using’ or ‘applying’ Bakhtin has become difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish from ‘exploiting Bakhtin’” (10), I do believe very strongly that the sort of analysis I have used here is insightful and helps to make sense of the Molesworth series. Without a specific theoretical lens, it would be difficult to discuss or defend Molesworth as anything more than cozy, nostalgic, misspelled farce; that Willans and Searle demonstrate so many Bakhtinian concepts throughout this series is serendipitous.

6.3 Areas for Further Research

My study has been far from exhaustive – indeed, the more I read, researched and wrote, the more ideas I came up with which go far beyond the parameters of these pages. I believe one of the most intriguing issues surrounding Molesworth is its uneasy classification and crossover appeal. No one seems to be in agreement whether these books are indeed intended for a child or adult audience, and certainly the satirical and cultural references are likely beyond the comprehension of all except for the most astute children (or adults, for that matter). However, as Perry Nodelman notes in his recent book The Hidden Adult,
children’s literature cannot necessarily be identified simply by its intended audience. Nodelman identifies a number of universal features that help define the genre of children’s literature – such as a child protagonist, and adult power and influence over children (77 – 78) – which are clearly demonstrated by Willans and Searle throughout the series. On the other hand, whether a child reader could fully identify with Nigel Molesworth is questionable, and the adult sensibilities inherent in the books are hard to ignore. Therefore, I believe these books would make an excellent subject for the study of crossover children/adult literature. In a similar vein, they are ideal examples of the use of satire and parody in children’s books, because their satirical bent is one of the main stumbling blocks in classifying them definitively.

Another fascinating part of Molesworth which is sadly beyond the purview of my study here is performance of gender in the books. For example, Fotherington-Tomas consistently subverts his stereotypical role as the sissy by appearing alternately as incredibly “gurly” and also very masculine – as when he leads a space mission in one of Molesworth’s daydreams (Willans and Searle 125). Moreover, Molesworth himself, while always distancing himself from the sissy ways of Fotherington-Tomas, imagines his future as a very feminine couture designer (299). Numerous examples like these throughout the series prove to be an intriguing aspect of the books, and are worth studying further.

6.4 Concluding Thoughts

According to Ronald Searle’s biographer Russell Davies, Searle received a threatening letter in about 1970 from the 11th Viscount Molesworth, who having just read *How to be Topp*, was incensed by the use of his illustrious name without permission. Searle’s response was brilliant:
… Your splendid name is shared by many humble thousands, and it would be difficult to say which of these lower ranks, called Nigel, inspired Mr. Willans to create the character of ‘Nigel Molesworth’ for *Punch*, sometime towards the end of the last war.

Alas, we shall never know, as Mr. Willans died at an early age some years ago. Happily his books go on after all these years, to the delight of several generations – and a legion of Molesworths.

They also help support in a small way his widow and children who were left behind in rather reduced circumstances.

‘Nigel Molesworth’ has entered the ranks of English folklore, and after a quarter of a century of activity I am rather mystified that he has not previously brought himself to your attention. However, I am sure that Mr. Willans, were he still alive, would be the first to say that he is happy you have been spared the previous 24 years of anguish due to the invention of his fictitious character.

(Davies 157)

Such a letter is only one small fragment of the ephemera of Molesworth that survives to this day. Through online communities such as an interactive online St. Custard’s and the Facebook group called the “Molesworth Appreciation Society,” legions of fans are keeping
the spirit of Willans’ and Searle’s creation alive, even though the books have been out of
print for almost a decade at the time of writing.

Far from being simple vestiges of a bygone era, the Molesworth series envisions the
world differently than a typical boarding school story, and offers a new take on reality. In
Rabelais and his World, Bakhtin declares that “the carnival spirit offers the chance to have a
new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a
completely new order of things” (34), and this is demonstrated consistently by Willans and
Searle through Molesworth’s futuristic imaginings, his play with time, space and language, his
celebration of the grotesque and the absurd. The classical understanding of the canon,
Bakhtin suggests, does not allow for such playfulness and relativity. Likewise, the boys’
boarding school “canon” typified by Tom Brown, Billy Bunter et al, while admittedly diverse
in outlook, tone, and message, represents a unified whole. Even among the heavier tomes
where morality reigns supreme, such lighthearted pulp fare as the Jennings books by
Anthony Buckeridge share a similar spirit of playful escape or “time out” in Stephens’ words.
Nigel Molesworth, on the other hand, adheres to certain elements of the genre but pulls
them apart at the same time – fashioning for himself something entirely, and delightfully,
different. Perhaps Molesworth and Fotherington-Tomas sum it up best themselves during
their discussion of 20th Century philosophy while minding the goalposts (Willans and Searle
323): despite appearances, these little books truly are “advanced, forthright, signifficant.”
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