



**The Chronotope of the Threshold in
Contemporary Canadian Literature for Young Adults**
— Ingrid Johnston

Maksimowska, Aga. *Giant*. St. John's: Pedlar, 2012.
226 pp. \$20.00 pb. ISBN 978-1897141472. Print.
Snyder, Carrie. *The Juliet Stories*. Toronto: Anansi,
2012. 304 pp. \$22.95 pb. ISBN 978-1770890022.
Print.

Stevenson, Robin. *Inferno*. Victoria: Orca, 2009.
240 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 978-1554690770. Print.
Walton, Jo. *Among Others*. New York: Tor, 2011.
302 pp. \$24.99 hc. ISBN 978-0-7653-2153-4.
Print.

Writers of young adult fiction almost inevitably focus attention on issues of identity and maturation, considering how their protagonists cross bridges from childhood to maturity and the kinds of experiences that accompany these transitions. As Victor Watson has asked, “Can anything ever be resolved in a narrative devoted to adolescence? If it is the nature of maturation that it is always in process and never complete, maturation narratives must accordingly be fluid, uncertain and open-ended. Maturation involves

crossing the bridge—and a toll of some kind must be paid” (39). In all four texts under review here—two published as young adult fiction and two as crossover novels for adult and teen readers—female protagonists encounter points of transition that lead to new forms of identity, and, as Watson has argued, “small eddies of progress and clarity are likely to emerge in the narrative languages authors employ even when they are not self-consciously tracing their characters’ currents of growth and development” (40).

In my discussions of the four novels, I draw upon the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom all literary genres have distinctive representations of time-space that frame their characters' thoughts and actions. He calls this enhanced awareness of temporal and spatial realities a "chronotope," a concept that emphasizes the agency of individuals within the realities of space and time. According to Bakhtin, the key to living in the chronotope is to recognize the inseparability of space and time. We cannot understand the present without knowing the social, cultural, and political history of a particular place. At the same time, everything is dynamic: places, societies, cultures, and individuals all evolve in complex ways. We live in the world, attending to how past forces have made us who and what we are, conscious that we can grow, learn, and change as we continue the journey of life. As Bakhtin explains, "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically viable; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history. This intersection of the axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope" (84). The chronotope, he suggests, focuses on how we live in space and time and the kind of modes of existence we choose: either ones that are passive and closed or ones that are open to change, growth, and learning. In this way, the chronotope functions as "the primary means for materializing time in space" and "emerges as a centre for concretizing representation" (250).

Bakhtin later refers to the "chronotope of the threshold," which is essentially "connected with the breaking point in life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life" (248). Linked with the notion of *limen* in Latin, a threshold is a liminal space that refers to a transitory, in-between state or space, characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, and the potential for subversion and change. In her recent contribution to *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature*, Rachel Falconer considers the relevance of the "chronotope of the threshold" for how we read adolescent fiction:

Readers evince a heightened appetite for fictions that focus on the edges of identity, the points of transition and rupture, and the places where we might, like microcosms of the greater world, break down and potentially assume new and hybrid identities. . . . Bakhtin identifies the "chronotope of the threshold" as being associated with *crisis* and *break* in life; the moment of decision that changes a life, where time is felt as instantaneous . . . as if it had no duration. (89)

Most contemporary young adult fiction represents adolescence as unfinished and open to the formation of new and hybrid identities. As Falconer comments, "Because young adult fiction has sought to articulate questions about rapid transitions, identity crises and

epiphanies, it is proving to be a ready medium in which to capture the felt everyday experience of a world on the cusp of fundamental change" (88).

Of the four novels under discussion here, Robin Stevenson's *Inferno* offers the most linear example of an adolescent on the threshold of becoming an adult, making difficult decisions about the kind of person she will become. At the start of the novel, the protagonist has just turned sixteen and changed her name legally from Emily to Dante, a change that reflects her interest in the poet Dante's vision of hell and also captures her feelings about her new high school as "hell on earth" (15). Smart and independent, Dante feels trapped by the conformity of the suburb where she now lives with her parents and by the rigid academic expectations of her school, in particular those of her English teacher, Mr. Lawson. She comments: "The stupid thing is I should like English. I love reading. I'm crazy for books. But that's half the problem right there. Mr. Lawson can take a book I love and analyze it until it's as dead as the dissected rats in the biology lab. He's a book wrecker. I hate that" (9). Feeling friendless at her new school, she is devastated by the end of her relationship with Beth, her closest friend at her former school, who appears to have moved on in her life and ignores Dante's phone calls and emails. Gradually, readers learn about Dante's sexual orientation and gain more insight into her relationship with Beth as she remembers their first kiss: "In that instant we'd slipped

from being friends into something more. But we never talked about it, never acknowledged it in any way. We never admitted we were anything but best friends" (97). Stevenson's writing and plot are briskly paced and she is able to integrate issues of loneliness, depression, and the alienation of queer youth seamlessly into her novel.

Dante's first point of transition and rupture in the novel occurs when she meets Parker, a school dropout who is distributing leaflets at Dante's school, challenging teens to think about school as a form of prison. Dante is drawn to Parker on a personal level and also attracted to the idea of getting involved in some kind of rebellion against the status quo she has come to hate. Her first opportunity to challenge authority is to join Parker and her two boyfriends in stealing a sign from the Juvenile Detention Centre to hang on her school entrance. For the first time, Dante is caught in an ethical dilemma about the kinds of illegal actions she is prepared to participate in to make changes in the world: "All weekend I can't stop thinking about Parker and her friends and what I've agreed to do. Half of me thinks I'm nuts, that I'll get caught and end up with a criminal record and be grounded for the rest of my life" (65). When the theft of the sign proves to be impossible, Dante suggests making their own sign and risks her life by climbing the school wall to hang the banner on the roof. She is beginning to commit herself to a life in opposition to the secure middle-class existence she has lived so far:



Stevenson's *Inferno* is a good example of realistic young adult fiction in which a protagonist attempts to answer existential questions related to identity and a place in the world.



"I'm not usually a big risk-taker. I wear a seat belt, I don't do drugs, you couldn't pay me to go bungee jumping. Climbing that school was the stupidest, craziest, riskiest thing I've ever done" (90).

As Dante becomes more involved with Jamie and Leo, Parker's two friends, she begins to realize the dysfunctional nature of their lives, seeing first-hand Jamie's abusive relationship with Parker, and learning about Leo's history of violence and addiction and his expulsion from her school. Even knowing these facts, Dante is taken by surprise when Jamie tells her their latest plan:

He grins. "We're going to burn your school down, Dante. That should get their fucking attention."

"You're not serious," I say. I should be shocked but mostly what I feel is disappointment. I've been so caught up in the excitement of trying to make change, so inspired by Parker and the others. And now this. It's not what I thought we were about.

"I'm dead serious."

"It's a stupid idea," I say. "No way am I doing that." (148)

For Dante, this decision is a crucial turning point. She crosses the threshold that will lead her into a different life in the future. Her decision to report the fire at school, her efforts to persuade Parker to leave Jamie and go back to school, and her confession to her parents about her past involvement with Leo and Jamie help Dante to move toward a new maturity. Her acceptance of who she is extends to her decision to join the new group at school being set up by her friend Linnea for queer students: "I search for Linnea. . . . I send her a friend request with a message attached: *Hey Linnea, About that group? Count me in*" (221). The novel ends

with Dante's reflections on how her life and viewpoint have changed over the previous months: "The world looks different to me now, like something has shifted, like the lenses I'm looking through have changed. More things seem possible now" (229).

Stevenson's *Inferno* is a good example of realistic young adult fiction in which a protagonist attempts to answer existential questions related to identity and a place in the world. In Dante's case, her questions extend to her wonderings about her sexual orientation and how it will be accepted within society and within her own family. The fictional world of the novel, focalized through Dante's adolescent eyes, with reality represented through the crises, disruptions, and transitions she encounters in the space-time of her suburban life, offers many links to Bakhtin's "chronotope of the threshold."

Jo Walton's young adult novel *Among Others*, winner of both the Hugo and Nebula awards for best novel, shares a number of characteristics with *Inferno*, namely the strong adolescent voice of its fifteen-year-old protagonist, Mor, who, like Dante, is a prolific and dedicated reader and who also struggles to find her place in the world through a series of crises and disruptions. In many other ways, however, this novel differs substantially from *Inferno*. Walton's novel, set over several months from 1979 to 1980, is a complex fantasy. Fairies and magic underpin Mor's life and are also symbolic ways of exploring her past

and foretelling her future; her struggles to grow up are mediated by her need to escape powerful and dangerous enchantment through her own actions and through her imaginative encounters with a great body of science-fiction literature published at the time.

In her review of *Among Others*, Elizabeth Bear explains why she believes that the novel is neither a *Bildungsroman* nor a coming-of-age story:

Because, as the story starts, our heroine has already come of age. This is a book that concerns itself far more with surviving trauma and finding a place in the world than with finding one's *self*. Morwenna Phelps has already faced her worst monster, emerging scarred for life, with an indeterminate victory that cost the life of her twin sister.

That monster is her mother, a woman who dabbled in black magic and felt perfectly justified in bending anyone she chose to her will. As we join Mor, she has been taken in by her estranged father and his three controlling sisters, and she is about to be packed off to boarding school in England.

As in *Inferno*, this novel deals with alienation, as Mor struggles to find a place for herself at an English boarding school where she faces ridicule for her disability from a shattered leg, for her Welsh accent, and for her intellect. Her physical and emotional pain are conveyed effectively through her appealing

diary entries and are mediated by her devotion to the science-fiction books supplied by the school and town librarians and purchased by money sent by her father. Mor's self-reflective voice about her own positioning at the school and in society is open and honest: "I don't think I am like other people. I mean on some deep fundamental level. It's not just being half a twin and reading a lot and seeing fairies. It's not just being outside when they're all inside. I used to be inside. I think there's a way I stand aside and look backwards at things when they're happening which isn't normal" (169). Mor's crises and transitions during the time-space of the novel revolve around her need to keep her evil mother at bay by setting alight the letters and photos her mother sends to school with Mor's image burned out, and around the decisions she makes at crucial times either to invoke or to resist the power of magic. Mor's major invocation of magic is to make a "karass," a community of like-minded people, a concept she read about it in Kurt Vonnegut's book *Cat's Cradle*. Mor is awed when she is suddenly invited to join a book club at the library to discuss science fiction. Whether it is just coincidence or her invocation of magic, the group offers Mor hope for a more optimistic future with friends who share and respect her interest and insight into books.

Mor's final confrontation with fairies challenges her to make a choice about her future. After she sees the spirit of her dead twin, the fairies try to force her

to join her sister in death. But Mor has moved on with her own life and her response is strong and resolute: "I've gone on. Things have happened. I've changed. You might see me as half a broken pair, and you might see my death as a way of tying up loose ends and getting more power to touch the real world, but that's not how I see it. Not now. I'm in the middle of doing things" (295–96). Her new-found resolve also offers her the strength to resist her mother's efforts to control and injure her in their final confrontation, and she walks away from her knowing she is now safe from her mother's evil magic and that she can move on. Walton's book is a delight to read, with its nuanced characters and the emotionally strong voice of its protagonist. The thresholds Mor has to cross in her efforts to create her own identity are challenging and fantastic, and the book leaves us with Mor "in the middle" of recreating herself, accepting the tragedies of the past, and coming to terms with herself as an individual with plans for the future.

Both *Inferno* and *Among Others* are aimed at adolescent readers, though Walton's book has already garnered a devoted adult readership, particularly among readers who share Mor's passion for science fiction. In contrast to the first two books, Aga Maksimowska's first novel, *Giant*, has been published in Canada as an adult book, with reviews pointing to the author's ability to portray historical and political events in Poland of the late 1980s through a child's

viewpoint and to describe the experiences of a young person's immigration to Canada with emotional resonance and clarity. Clearly, though, this coming-of-age narrative, recounted through the ironic and often heartbreakingly comic voice of its protagonist, also has great appeal to adolescent readers.

The short title of the novel introduces readers immediately to a major challenge in eleven-year-old Gosia's life: she is enormous for her age. A school nurse who examined her when she was nine years old told her that "[y]ou're the largest girl in your class. . . . If you keep growing at this rate, your joints won't hold up" (34–35). Now, two years later, Gosia is much larger and more developed than any of her peers, and she sees herself as a misfit. Her home life in Gdansk, Poland is also not ideal. Gosia's parents are divorced; her father works at sea and comes home only twice a year, and her mother, a former schoolteacher in Poland, has gone to work in Canada, promising to return as soon as she has earned enough money to support her children. Gosia lives in a grim concrete apartment block with her younger sister and her embattled grandparents in the midst of a democratic revolution. She imagines how much better life would be if her mother were back with her:

I've had dreams recently in which I'm still a little kid and I'm swimming across the Atlantic towards Mama. . . . If she doesn't come home, I will go to

her. As I swim I grow heavier and heavier and drop to the bottom of the sea like a cannon ball. But I root my toes in the sand and the rest of me shoots up, breaking the surface of the water with a colossal splash. I am a true giant, a creature of fictional proportions. (37)

Her wish seems to come true when her mother arranges for Gosia and her sister to fly to Canada to join her. But even the flight to Toronto becomes a form of embarrassment for Gosia when she has to wear a placard labelling her as an unaccompanied minor: "[E]very passenger I passed stared at the plastic sign obstructing my overdeveloped chest. 'Unaccompanied *minor*?' each of them seemed to say. . . . I am a parcel sent across the Atlantic to Mama. Airmail. Oversize. So big I should really be sent via cargo ship, take months instead of hours to get there. I'm Gulliver in Lilliput" (90). Maksimowska's descriptions of Gosia's early years as an immigrant in Toronto are intense and illuminating. Gosia's ironic voice chronicles her shock at finding her mother reduced to being a housecleaner in Canada, living with a partner who finds the children a nuisance and who constantly bores Gosia with stories of his Polish ancestry. The unfamiliar Canadian food seems inedible and Gosia feels mortified at her new middle school because of her poor English skills and her feelings of being an outsider: "Finch Valley Middle School might as well be for little kids. Everyone here



Maksimowska succeeds
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with clarity and a
sense of irony.



is a gibberish-speaking midget. I don't understand a word, written, spoken or sung. School sounds like all the English pop songs I've ever heard, played simultaneously on fifty-four different cassette players, full blast" (113).

Gradually, Gosia overcomes all these challenges as she adapts to her new life and her new language, seeing herself as a translated hybrid, living in a border zone between the Poland of her past and the Canada of the present. As Jenni Ramoni has commented, "Just like a text which is translated and therefore reveals the traces of both original source and translated target language and culture, the individual who migrates is translated into a new place and operates through a new language, becoming a translated individual bearing traces of both locations and languages" (115).

Gosia's grandparents remain in Poland as it undergoes drastic transformation and struggles to rebuild and invent a new democratic reality for itself. When her grandmother dies, Gosia, her sister, and her mother return to Gdansk for the funeral, and as Gosia comes to terms with a changed Poland she also reflects on her own transformation:

While my English was becoming nearly accent-free, my Polish words were disappearing as quickly as our family members. I was a foreigner, a floater, but most of all, a fake, from neither here nor there, somewhere in between, somewhere in the middle, nowhere really. . . . I no longer felt one hundred percent anything. I was a pile of sand, millions of grains of indistinct matter. I thought, *Is that what Canadian is?* (200–01)

Gosia's sense of a hybrid identity remains with her as she

describes her teenage years in a somewhat fast-moving ending to the novel. Maksimowska succeeds in creating a dynamic and emotionally strong protagonist who views her changing world with clarity and a sense of irony. The novel, a rich read for both adults and adolescents, creates the dynamic present of this character's life within specific social, cultural, and political contexts of Poland and Canada in the late twentieth century.

While there is no question that *Giant* is a successful crossover novel for adult and adolescent readers, the readership for the final novel under discussion, *The Juliet Stories* by Carrie Snyder, nominated for the 2012 Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, is harder to assess. The book is a series of linked short stories that explore the experiences of the protagonist, Juliet, from age nine to adulthood.

Through third-person narration, the stories recount Juliet's journey through increasingly episodic and fractured prose that reflects the nature of memory and life successfully but also requires readers to fill in gaps of time and space to create a coherent story. The book is an intense and emotional read with appeal to a range of readers from adolescents to adults. Perhaps its positioning on a continuum of books for children and books for adults is best described by Sandra Beckett in her discussion of crossover fiction: "Some works explicitly categorized as adult or children's books inhabit a blurry and shifting intermediary space, a

border zone that separates or joins, according to the point of view, fiction for children and fiction for adults" (9).

Part one of the novel is set in Nicaragua in the 1980s, where nine-year-old Juliet, her older brother Keith, and her baby brother have moved with their parents, who belong to an organization called "The Roots of Justice" and are there to protest the Contra wars. The excitement and danger of political resistance, mingled with the everyday realities of domestic life in an unfamiliar environment, are mediated effectively through Juliet's naive viewpoint: "Nicaragua is a country shaped like a triangle, where it is hot and never snows; also, they are having a war. . . . The Roots of Justice is going to stop the fighting in Nicaragua" (17).

Life in Nicaragua is at times boring and other times exhilarating for Juliet. She and her brothers are allowed much more freedom than in North America, and their exploits are often wild and exciting. But Juliet is also a child who loves to read, and she constantly nags her mother to take her to the library. Her experience there is symbolic of her otherness in the country:

Behind its heavy door, the library is quiet. . . .
Juliet kneels and selects a picture book, opens it.
Disappointment crests and buries her. She can't
read this book. She can't read any of the books in
the library. . . . "Mom?" she whispers.

“Yes?”

“It’s in Spanish!” (47–48)

Observing the often difficult relationship between her parents and the tensions among the Western activists, Juliet sees herself poised on the brink of a threshold of new understandings she is not ready to cross: “It seems that she lives in an unknowable world, on this side of a great divide; on the other side are the grown-ups, who know everything, who hold the answers to the gigantic questions that plague her. . . . But she doesn’t really want to cross that divide” (133).

In part two of the book, appropriately titled “Disruption,” Juliet is forced to cross that threshold as her brother Keith is diagnosed with cancer and she and her family have to leave Nicaragua to live with her grandmother in Ontario, part of “a foreign country to which Juliet has only recently been told she also belongs” (162). In Juliet’s new life she faces the trauma of loss through death, family separation, and geographic relocation. Feeling isolated and marginalized at her Canadian school, she sees herself transformed into a different kind of person, one who is no longer brave or willing to take risks: “She is not courageous. She is not herself at all, the self she left behind in Nicaragua, the self who followed fisher boys into a seaside cave, who ate shark” (174).

The increasing complexity and the episodic nature of the remaining stories in the book reflect Juliet’s

coming-of-age and her efforts to make good decisions about her changing family and personal relationships. At age nineteen, Juliet is back on a beach in Nicaragua at her mother’s second wedding, negotiating her relationship with a new stepbrother and stepsister. Alone on the beach, she has a moment of revelation about her future life:

Here is the beach—no, it is receding: here is the ocean, here are the waves, here she is pulled out, lifted higher. . . . Her arms stretch, but the struggle is brief; she submits. It is almost out of sight, almost gone from her. What is gone? Oh, she knows now what it is; she’s read this story before. It could be named *childhood*; or it could be named *a dream*. She’ll never find that beach again. (256)

The Juliet Stories, at times lyrical, at times comical, and at other times tragic, is a text that conveys the spectrum of emotions of maturation. In this book, the author offers a wide range of geographic, familial, and emotional challenges that Juliet faces over a time span of several decades and that play a part in her growth. In the other three novels, the intensity of border crossings occurs in a tighter timeline. In all four books, the protagonists engage in particular social interactions that are filled with tension and conflict; as they struggle with these tensions, they develop their own ideologies and ways of being in the world. According to Bakhtin,

“The importance of struggling with another’s discourse, its influence in the history of an individual coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous” (348). These struggles, which speak to Bakhtin’s concept of a

chronotope of the threshold, open up spaces for Dante, Mor, Gosia, and Juliet to change, to learn, and to grow into maturity, and for readers, adolescent or adult, to join with them on their journeys.

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Ingrid Johnston is a Professor of English Education in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta. Her research and teaching interests focus on postcolonial literary theories and pedagogies, young adult literature, picture books, Canadian literature, and teacher education for diversity. She has published three books, with a fourth in press, as well as numerous articles in international journals.

