



Moore, Ruth. 'Time-Play: Slipping the Bounds of a Classic Children's Genre'. *Leaf Journal*, Volume 4, Issue 1, Jul 2026.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58091/7d4s-9p89>

URL: <https://ojs.library.lancs.ac.uk/lj/index>

Time-Play: Slipping the Bounds of a Classic Children's Genre

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Abstract

The time-slip story is a classic of children's literature. It has evolved over time, with more recent iterations using the form to re-read and re-write the past. This article offers a closer examination of time-slip as a genre, considering the nuances of 'slip', the possibilities of 'living history' and the tension between fantasy and realism. It proposes 'time-play' as a new way of claiming our practice when we write into this fertile space.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people, time-slip, fantasy, genre, living history*

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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE HAS always played with time. From immersive historical fiction to time-travel stories; from dual-timeline narratives to ghost stories, young readers can encounter an enormous breadth of temporalities in their fiction. Somewhere amidst these glittering texts – linking them, subverting them, or perhaps even transcending them – lurks a classic genre: *time-slip*.

The time-slip story emerged as a distinct form in British children's literature at the start of the twentieth century. Literary scholar Linda Hall (a prolific chronicler of the early development of the time-slip genre) believes that the first stirrings of this "curious new form" can be found in Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet* and Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, both of which were published in 1906. These novels, Hall claims, "for the first time touch [...] English history with the aura of enchantment" (2003, 306). You may have heard of later time-slip novels such as Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958) or Penelope Lively's *The House on Norham Gardens* (1974). At the dawn of the twenty-first century, David Almond picked up the baton with *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), and, more recently, Joyce Efia Harmer dazzled with *How Far We've Come* (2023).

If you are familiar with any of these novels (or with the many others found under the time-slip umbrella) you will know that novels in this fertile space use time in fluid, playful ways. They are not classic historical fiction, which is set entirely in the past. Nor are they based fully in the present, looking back only by means of reminiscence or research. The common characteristic of these texts is that, by means of a narrative device, they weave more than one era into the active scope of their story. By doing so, they explore and dramatise the complex web of interrelationships between history and the present day. They offer their readers a unique way of thinking about the past.

This is a fascinating space into which some of us may want to venture as writers as well as readers. Literary scholar Tess Cosslett talks about time-slip's offer of "a different type of historical consciousness" (244) compared to that experienced through fully immersive historical fiction. It is a different way of thinking about, analysing, and imagining the past. This is particularly intriguing for those of us curious about the possibilities of the form to illuminate present-day societal issues. Education researcher Peter Lee, building on Rüsen, suggests that historical consciousness helps children "to orientate themselves in time, bringing past, present and future into a relation that enables them to cope with living their lives as temporal beings" (2).

We can see this in powerful action in *How Far We've Come*, where Harmer stirs historical consciousness by linking the experience of nineteenth-century plantation slavery with the present-day experience of systemic racism in Britain. The protagonist, Obah, moves between 1834 Barbados and 2023 Somerset, exploring when and how she can best use her extraordinary energy to fight enslavement. Time-slip novels shimmer with these kinds of possibilities. When young people are empowered to reflect on the past in a dramatised relationship with the present, they can see they are part of far more than the temporal moment in which they live. They can have an impact beyond the immediate. Historical consciousness – as framed by Lee and enacted by

Harmer in her Young Adult (YA) novel – is a vital coping mechanism. It can act as a compass and as fuel.

So, how do we find our way into writing in this genre? What are its boundaries, if any? Humphrey Carpenter, in the 1980s, was one of the first children's-literature scholars to categorise novels where "the past exists as an enrichment of the present" (220). Research on children's time-slip literature ever since has been shaped by a wide range of claims. Is this about adolescence, coming of age, nostalgia, or nationhood? Is this history, fantasy, science-fiction, ghost story – or a complex blend all its own? When researchers discuss these texts, they do so with a particular thematic idea of how they fit into a broader conversation about literature or history. This in turn influences how much they can tell us about the possibilities of time-slip for the contemporary writer.

Let's stop to listen for a moment. *Time-slip*. *Time-slip*? What might happen if we pause to put the term itself under the microscope? It is the descriptor most often used in critical literature, also used in book marketing. But that may not mean it is the best fit for those of us who are curious about writing in this genre. The slippery business of being a creative writer with a foot in academia means to be on alert for scholarly and industry conventions that both help and hinder us in our practice. And so, towards the end of my recent PhD, I found myself wanting to slip the bounds of the term itself.

I did so in full knowledge that we need to be wary of how much time we give to thinking about genre. If publication is on the horizon, genre subtleties become redundant once our novels are handed over to marketing teams. When it comes to literary criticism, there is a real danger, as described by Alison Waller in her analysis of Lucie Armitt's work, of "pigeonholing, prescriptive labelling [...] a closing down rather than an opening up" (11). But I suggest that, as writers, a closer look at the different labels may be worthwhile – if it encourages us to expand our sense of play. What exactly are we talking about here? A sub-genre of historical fiction? A niche of portal fantasy? Something interchangeable with time travel? Or something more – perhaps something wilder?

Time-Slip

Time-slip has traditionally been taken to refer to narratives in which characters from one time period slip into another, moving either backward or forward in time. The plot often features the accidental discovery of a mechanism of slippage, followed by interactions between characters from past and present. There may be a quest of sorts that must be resolved to allow the protagonists to re-root in their own time. The slippage generates historical consciousness – the characters witness the past or future from their own temporal perspective. They develop a deeper awareness of the influence of other times on ways of being in the present. Whether looking back or looking forward, the key thing, historical-fiction researchers Butler and O'Donovan tell us, is that "the time-slip genre allows for a direct examination of the relationship between the past and the present" (8). Reflection is hardwired into the narrative.

Definitions of time-slip in children's-literature scholarship almost always come with an explicit or implicit assumption that it is a sub-genre. Anne Balay, writing about American time-slip literature, describes it as "a genre of fantasy fiction in which time travel happens accidentally" (131). Notice Balay's main assumption: time-slip shelters under the hood of *fantasy* fiction. Butler and O'Donovan add another 'sub' in their discussion of conventions. They opt to describe it as "a sub-species of fantasy and historical novels of realism" (6). A third rendition is offered by Hall, who claims that writers in this form are interested in "timeless matters of human existence" and so "as a result time-slip occupies a philosophical-cum-poetic terrain" (2001, 46). There is, it seems, something slippery about time-slip, such that a variety of scholars can readily sweep it into the flow of their argument, whether that be towards the historical, fantastical, or even philosophical.

It is not surprising, then, that there is no consensus about what might constitute the border between time-slip and time-travel stories. The terms are often interchanged without a given reason. The most helpful distinction I have found is offered by Waller; in time travel, "pseudo-scientific time-machines allow movement backwards and forwards in history" (23). So, the suffix '-travel' is to be used when there is something technological or 'pseudo-scientific' in the way in which movement in time is made possible. Yet even Waller swiftly qualifies this with instances where "time-travel is instigated through magical means, often by the power of a talisman or a magical person" (23). She offers us a border only to erase it. But there is perhaps something useful in her original point. If voyage is instigated by means of a programmable machine (if we are, say, racing towards 88 miles per hour in a DeLorean) we are in time-travel territory. If we are swept back by forces unknown, we are slipping.

As writers, we can gain much by paying further attention to the images conjured by the term itself: *slippage*. Nuances of language are opportunities for us, especially if our stories might venture onto the semi-poetic or philosophical ground suggested by Hall. We are good with images. We know they come with many associations. 'Slip' brings connotations of accident or lack of intention. We slip *on* things; we slip *through* things. We give the slip; we bitterly regret a slip of the tongue. It is useful to recognise that the image of slipping in time carries these associative possibilities with it, and more. Some of these images come together in Balay's quote above: "travel happens accidentally, without the traveler's consent or control" (131). In time-slip, our heroines and heroes do not knowingly press a button which will activate access to the past. The slippery accident of their journeys has an impact on the way in which they experience their historical surroundings. Consent is not obtained.

Time-slip novels, then, may gather around certain things of use to the writer. A distinctive historical consciousness, an ambiguity of parent genre, a lack of initial deliberation on the part of the character who journeys in time. But there are other ways of thinking about stories in this space. What further scholarly ideas might be helpful for writers thinking about how to frame their work?

Living History

'Living history' is a term used by scholar Kim Wilson to "re-vision" a range of novels which include everything from physical journeys in time to "whispering ghosts" and "psychical time connectivity" (2011, 12). It offers a slightly broader mapping of the varieties of narrative choice by which a novelist can create a framework for dramatising historical consciousness or, as Wilson puts it in the title of her book, view "the past through modern eyes".

Wilson's way of thinking allows us to consider the opportunities of narrative connections made through time in a physical sense (whether the characters move in one direction or both) and by means of a psychical link. This folds historically rooted ghost stories into the mix, along with other renderings of characters who experience psychic connections with past lives.

A notable example published since Wilson's book is Sita Brahmachari's *When Secrets Set Sail* (2020). The novel explores interweaving histories of South-Asian migration and colonial oppression through the haunted adventures of two girls in contemporary Britain. It is not easy to define – "not historical fiction in the usual sense, but a contemporary ghost story that invites the reader to consider the way the past shapes our present" (47), as suggested by children's-literature commentators Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor. Living history is a way of reading *Secrets*. History bleeds into contemporary lived experience as characters from the past are conjured in the minds and surroundings of the protagonists, Imtiaz and Usha.

Wilson's living history map also widens the terrain to include parallel narratives. In a time-slip novel, historical consciousness is embodied by the protagonists – they visit or otherwise experience the past. In a novel which offers parallel timelines, the protagonists may never become aware of each other's eras yet the reader is able to notice and reflect on the interplay of past and present. These books "facilitate [...] overt correlations between historical periods, thus creating a psychical connection in readers' minds between past and present" (Wilson, 2011, 14).

The concept of living history is thus another way of thinking about the territory which has traditionally been occupied by time-slip. It offers a useful vantage point from which to broaden our imaginations about narrative devices which might work in this space. Wilson also introduces an idea which invites us to think about the ideological underpinnings of our novels. "The Living History novel is seductive," she warns us. "It lures readers to align uncritically with modern perception. By persuasively inviting readers to assume a particular point of view the authenticity of the modern characters' perception of the past is privileged" (2011, 11).

In short, Wilson believes that novels in this genre are compromised by presentism. This is the idea that we interpret the past negatively through modern values, without being sufficiently critical of our own ideological standpoint. Anna Trusty has written an interesting article in a previous edition of *Leaf Journal* about the challenges of presentism, specifically in Middle Grade (MG) fiction. Could Wilson be

right? Are such novels a siren trap? Or can writers play with this living version of history to offer a critical eye on the present?

Historical Fantasy

The notion of living history assumes that our genre sits in closest relation to historical fiction. Another contender is fantasy. The notion that we can slip, travel or otherwise move towards the past is, after all, inherently fantastical. Let's use Levy and Mendelsohn's useful three-part delineation of the fantasy genre to help us pinpoint what we are talking about when history meets fantasy.

In intrusion fantasy, the fantastical seeps into a recognisable everyday. In immersion fantasy, fantastical worldbuilding underpins the whole story. In portal fantasy, characters cross from their known world into a fantastical other (Levy and Mendelsohn, 83). Historical themes can be woven into each brand of fantasy. A historical intrusion fantasy takes place wholly in a recognisable historical period, into which fantastical elements seep in. Historical immersion fantasy (often abbreviated to historical fantasy) plunges us into a fantastical world which is built on an in-depth rendering of a real historical period. Patrice Lawrence's *Elemental Detectives* series is entirely set in a magical London ruled by warring elemental powers, yet it is richly infused with eighteenth century detail and discrimination. Nazneen Ahmed Pathak's *City of Stolen Magic* (2023) operates as historical fantasy, weaving powers of 'finger magic' and 'writing magic' into the all-too recognisable coercions of nineteenth-century colonialism.

The third category, portal fantasy, is perhaps closest to describing novels that might otherwise be described as time-slip or living history. They "feature doorways into fully built worlds that the protagonists understand only as strangers" (Levy and Mendelsohn, 83). In a historical portal fantasy novel, the protagonists discover a fantastical access point to a "fully built" period of history into which they enter as unfamiliar actors. The fantastical is chiefly manifested in *how* the worlds are linked: the portal. Erlandson and Bainbridge note that "it is the time warp that makes the book a fantasy" – "not the details of the history" (3). The worlds themselves are presented as recognisable historical periods – "it did happen; it is not fabricated," as Balay says (133).

Historical portal fantasy appears to offer much of what we need when we are trying to describe a novel like *How Far We've Come*, which I mentioned earlier as a significant contemporary example in this genre. Our attention is drawn, word by word, to the novel's core features. The past is of great importance to the narrative ('historical'). We anticipate a means of crossing over ('portal') – this takes the form of a silver pomander in Harmer's novel. We are alerted to the fantastical nature of elements of the story ('fantasy').

Yet there is a degree of risk in describing such a novel with reference to fantasy. The historical basis of *How Far We've Come* is real, untold, and important. It portrays attitudes and events likely to have been experienced by real people but unrecorded in historical archives. Therefore, it matters whether the historical elements of the novel

are perceived by readers as real or fantastical. How can we express the weight of history if we describe our stories as fantasy?

Fantasy and Realism

Hunting for language which reflects my research questions and my practice, I was struck by cognitive development research by Corriveau et al., who looked at younger children's ability to differentiate between historical and fantasy characters. They conclude that "to navigate [cultural] heritage, children need to be able to recognize which genre they are dealing with" (225). The experiment related to 4–7-year-olds, and the methodology utilised short-story extracts rather than novels. However, there is a principle of note for writers: the ability to distinguish between a character or event based in fact and one wholly imagined is not a given amongst our readerships. If we overemphasise fantasy, do we risk disempowering readers from recognising the historical elements in our work?

Another way of looking at this risk is offered by literary scholars Beauvais and Nikolajeva: "In order to recognise that a book is making use of counterfactual history readers must already be sufficiently familiar with consensus accounts of the historical past to be sensitive to any departure" (179). They are talking about novels which offer alternate versions of history: what *might* have happened. The point can also be applied to novels which might be described as historical portal fantasy. In a text which blends fantasy and history, children may struggle to notice when and how the narrative shifts if they are not familiar with the historical period. There is a danger that the fantastical nature of the shift between eras might lead readers to assume that what is presented to them in the past is also fantastical. The danger is mitigated in a novel for an older audience, like *How Far We've Come*, where the readers are more likely to have some contextual knowledge of plantation slavery. But it is still not without risk.

Waller's work offers a possible alternative for writers thinking about how to describe the fantastical components of their work. Looking at teen fiction, she describes the wider genre of 'fantastic realism', which time-slip forms part of. "Young adult fantastic realism," she tells us, "combines the characters and events of contemporary or recognisable adolescence found within teenage realism with some aspect of the consensually impossible, supernatural or unreal" (18). The fantastic is thus confined to 'some aspect'. Waller makes a further useful distinction when talking about the specifics of time-slip: "in fantastic realist time-slip [...] the contemporary world always plays a significant part in the narrative and does not merely form a framing device for a series of historical adventures" (23). The realist sections in the contemporary world do much more than frame the narrative or provide a springboard into the past. They play a significant role in shaping the story.

Time-Play

What we have seen is that each of these labels offers something interesting for mapping out the terrain of time-slip stories. All of them also contain nuances or assumptions which risk muddying it. Time-slip often does the job – it is a good convention, a shortcut to describing what has been written and how critics over the past century and more have responded. Yet it is hard to shake the associations of ‘slip’ itself: a sense of an accidental stumbling upon, a falling into time. As writers crafting these kinds of stories, we make active choices. There is nothing accidental about it. To remind myself and others of the creative opportunities that lie before us, I have come to use an adapted term: ‘time-play’.

Time-play is a vivid way to remind ourselves that these are narratives which exhibit an imaginative, explorative approach to the past and the present rather than being wholly based in one or the other. By using ‘time’ rather than ‘history’, I seek to avoid privileging either the historical or the present-day aspects of the narrative. By using ‘play’, I seek to make space for a more expansive range of narrative strategies. It can include time-slip, with its sense of the accidental in journeying through time. It is capacious enough to allow for fantastical portals without drawing attention to their improbable nature, thus risking unhelpful blurring of fact and fiction. It even conjures the idea of playframes as an invitation to writers to reflect with care on how they construct their narrative frames.

Play also carries with it a necessary reminder of risk. When we tell stories which play with time, there is a risk that we will engage with the past in ways that are misleading or unhelpful. As Wilson suggests in her discussion of presentism, there are ethical and ideological dilemmas to reckon with when we use time-playfulness, both those with which characters grapple within the story, and those which the authors knowingly or unknowingly generate by their narrative choices.

Time-play is also a term which celebrates the artistic choices writers make in crafting these novels. Time-play is a creative gathering place. It has allowed me to think more precisely and actively about my practice. It acknowledges all that has gone before, and the new ways in which these stories are being told, especially by writers like Joyce Efia Harmer. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education’s 2024 *Reflecting Reality* report about diverse representation in children’s literature reminds us that these stories come from a “bigger genre palette” where “the hearts of these writers pulsate through every word” (15). There is often a strong sense of purpose animating these contemporary time-play novels – whether that be to call for social change or to amplify empathy. As Harmer says in her foreword to *How Far We’ve Come*, “I want people to read this story and be inspired to challenge themselves to do something extraordinary” (iv). She invites the reader to see this as a companionable act of solidarity: “let’s walk arm in arm and hand in hand” (v). These complex stories are not a slippery accident, from the writer’s point of view. They are blazing with intention.

I found that exploring the bounds of a genre which reaches back as far as Edith Nesbit (a passionate social reformer) was time well spent for my own practice. We

need a risk-aware kind of playfulness in these stormy times in which we live and write. Slipping the bounds of time-slip became an invitation to push further out into the wilds of time-playfulness, to discover what new kinds of stories we can tell – and to ask what we hope could happen when we venture out.

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Ruth Moore writes and teaches fiction and poetry. She was the winner of the Bath Children's Novel Award (2020), second prize-winner in Bridport Flash Fiction (2023) and highly commended for the Historical Writer's Association short story award (2022). After a first career in theatre, creative education, and project management, she has recently completed a funded PhD at the University of Exeter. The creative element was *The Island of Last Hope*, a Middle Grade children's novel. Two young people find an old lifebelt washed up on a Cornish beach and drift back to Falmouth in 1944 to uncover its troubled history. Her research examines how contemporary children's authors are using time-playful fiction, particularly in relation to telling minoritised histories.