



Teeple-Salas, Charlotte, 'Travelling Through Time on my Quest to be a Children's Author'

Leaf Journal, Volume 1, Issue 1, April 2023

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.58091/rf23-8766>

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

Travelling Through Time on My Quest to be a Children's Author

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Abstract

In her quest to become a published children's author, Charlotte Teeple-Salas explores why she is compelled to write time-slip stories, and whether their appeal in the publishing industry is a passing trend, cyclical or enduring. Includes thoughts on writing her current project, a romantic Young Adult (YA) time-slip suspense.

Keywords: *time-slip, time-travel, agents, writing*

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Confession: I don't remember reading time-slip stories as a child. In the school library of my sleepy Southern California beach town, the most exciting books were the well-worn copies of *Nancy Drew*. To me, Merry Old England, with its penchant for time-slip stories in fabulous country houses with famous historical figures, may as well have been another planet. My interest in reading flagged around the age of eight, when *Star Wars* blasted onto the screens and I began ballet lessons. My mind was occupied either counting steps in the ballet studio, or drifting in a galaxy far, far away. But stories, whether expressed through ballet or on the silver screen, were always important to me.

I grew up, earning degrees in art history and museum studies. It was only later that I began my quest to become a children's author, writing a middle grade book about time-travelling knights. For my second story, I chose to write a Young Adult (YA) time-slip romantic suspense for my MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University.

So, I am curious: why am I compelled to write stories in which my protagonists hurl themselves into the past?

In the early days of my first attempt, with the book about time-travelling knights, I hit a figurative wall when a UK-based agent from a large agency told me, 'Time-slip doesn't sell' (2012).

Taking her at her word, I made a rookie error. I neglected to consult others for their opinions, and spent years trying, and failing, to write the book as historical fiction. I spent years trying to find the 'voice' of my twelve-year-old 14th century protagonist. I spent years denying my instincts and doubting myself as a writer.

But I was stubborn, and never gave up. I also couldn't forget the advice of one of my literary heroes, *The Princess Bride* (1973) author, William Goldman, who, when I once had the fortune of meeting him through my work at the Getty Center, told me, 'Just write, Charlotte, write' (2002).

For my YA time-slip, I found myself drawn to writing the story of a girl who travels back to 1925. My instincts (and mentors, writing partners, and tutors) told me to write the story, simply because it's the one I wanted to tell. But in the back of my mind, the agent's proclamation that 'time-slip doesn't sell' worried me. Was she right?

Possibly not. But it was, after all, many years ago, and like most things in life, the answer isn't simply black or white, it's grey. The publishing world's taste is subjective, trends are fickle, and, to again quote William Goldman, from his iconic observations on the film and television industry in *Adventures in the Screen Trade* (1983, p. 39), 'Nobody knows anything.'

Fearing that my next time-slip story might go nowhere, and pondering the grey, I set off to discover if the appeal of time-slip in children's literature is a passing trend, cyclical or enduring.

A Brief History of Time-slip in British Children's Literature

According to Linda Hall, time-slip as a genre in children's literature was born 'almost simultaneously, but independently', with the publication of Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pook Hill* (1906), and Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet* (1906). Both writers 'wove together two hitherto disparate elements: incidents and characters from [Britain's] national past, and time travel popularised ten years earlier by HG Wells' science fiction story *The Time Machine* (1895)' (Hall, 2003, p. 305).

'Time-slip', according to Anne Balay's definition is when time travel happens 'accidentally, without the traveller's consent or control', (Balay, 2010, p. 131). This, she argues, is distinct from 'time-travel', when a device is used for some measure of control. However, for simplicity in this article, I will use 'time-slip' to denote both.

The result of Kipling's and Nesbit's efforts, '[was] a curious new form, utterly removed from scientific rationalism, which for the first time touches English history with the aura of enchantment' (Hall, 2001, p.43). In writing about key moments of British history such as the 'Roman occupation and the Norman Conquest, Kipling reveals the things that persist in the land and the people', thereby defining 'the essential core of Englishness' (Hall, 2001, p.43). Kipling brought his historical characters into the present, (much like intrepid time-travellers Bill and Ted, in *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989)), and the child protagonist passively learned from them. Nesbit, however, 'sen[t] her child characters back in time to enter the past by means of a magic token, like an amulet, so they... take part, in [a] more active way, in the events known to them (and readers) from their history books' (Hall, 2001, p. 44). Strengthened by the popularity of Alison Uttley's *A Traveller in Time* (1939), time-slip stories have since followed this adventurous example (Hall, 2001, p. 44).

After World War Two, time-slip stories such as Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958) moved away from portraying important historical moments in favour of more 'personal' stories, '[undertaking] more intimate and domestic excursions into the past of a particular family or place – often a house and garden' (Hall, 2001, p. 45). Hall suggests this was partly because when its European neighbours 'faithfully' rebuilt their cities, Britain 'swept away remains of the architectural gems and medieval city centres that had fallen foul of bombing' in favour of the new. She says, 'Haunted by a sense of loss, [time-slip] writers attempt[ed] to recapture and preserve' their cultural heritage' (2001, p. 47).

This sense of loss regarding traditional landscape and housing was also reflected in stories such as *Tom's Midnight Garden* when the 'old house... had been subdivided into small flats... while its magical garden [had] disappeared altogether, eaten up by encroaching 'development'' (Hall, 2001, p. 47). In the 1970s, 'traditional structures of family life were also breaking down through greater economic mobility and divorce' (Hall, 2001, p. 45). Landscape and family, the traditional backbones of one's identity, in addition to 'continuity and sense of belonging' (Boston cited in Hall, 2001, p. 48) which

are all essential to a child's development, were eroding. Time-slip books such as Penelope Farmer's *Charlotte Sometimes* (1969) attempted to tackle this erosion by examining issues of identity through the personal psychological lens of the child protagonist, paving the way for the time-slip stories we know and love today.

Why Do Children Love Time-slip Stories?

On a grey day in February, I asked people on Twitter to shout out their favourite time-slip stories (Teeple-Salas, 2022a). The chat was lively, and the suggestions varied, from Sophie Kirtley's recent *The Wild Way Home* (2020) and Ross Welford's *Time Travelling with a Hamster* (2016), to classics such as Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, and Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962). Ever supportive of fellow authors, Sophie Kirtley (2022b), recommended Eve McDonnell's *Elsetime* (2020), and to my astonishment, the legendary Penelope Farmer saw the tweet and jumped into the discussion, citing the influence of Uttley's *A Traveller in Time*, and Nesbit's *The House of Arden* (1908) and *Harding's Luck* (1906), stating, 'As a child I adored them and read them over and over' (2022).

So, why, exactly, do time-slip stories appeal to children?

To help answer this question, I asked some writers, editors, agents and publishers for their thoughts (Teeple-Salas, 2022b). The questions ranged from the personal, such as, 'Are you a fan of time-slip/travel stories?', and 'What do you specifically like about them?', to the professional, such as, 'Would you be open to representing a time-slip/travel novel?' and, 'Would you be open to time-slip/travel submissions?' Their responses were enlightening.

The first reason time-slip stories might appeal to children is rather transparent. By their very nature, time-slip stories are adventures, and like all books, a form of escapism. Bella Pearson, publisher at Guppy Books, states that in one of her childhood favourites, *A Traveller in Time*, there is,

'... that sense of the impossible – and the clash between the modern and the old – it is the perfect set-up for a thrilling story. [Time-slip] often involves both secrecy and courage, and in some cases, the clash of the inevitability of the historical story of course adds an extra layer of tension' (Pearson, 2022).

Literary agent Amber Caravéo states that time-slip stories 'whisk' children 'away' and can give them a 'whole other world to explore – complete with experiences they would never be able to encounter in their normal lives, for example, sailing aboard a pirate ship.' As a younger reader herself, Caravéo also liked the 'magic' of time-slip stories (Caravéo, 2022). For Agent Becky Bagnell, time-slip is, 'the ultimate as yet undiscovered superpower that is easily understood but not possible in this world' (Bagnell, 2022). Editor Kathy Webb says,

‘... there is no end to the adventures you can have when you travel backwards or forwards in time. If there’s a time machine involved, the mechanics of this are fun to read about. And of course, any world that isn’t [a child’s] present one, whether it be a complete fantasy world, a historical place or a future world, is firing readers’ imaginations’ (Webb, 2022).

Clearly, for these professionals in the children’s literature community, the promise of the journey a story delivers to young readers, through adventure, or escapism or new knowledge, is key. But what of the more hidden benefits children experience when reading time-slips?

Like historical fiction, time-slips allow readers to explore the past. However, as Sandra Imdieke and Lynn Anderson-Madaus suggest, unlike historical fiction or non-fiction, time-slips allow ‘contemporary characters’ to act as ‘guide[s]’. Instead of relying upon an historical protagonist to show his/her world to a child reader, in time-slip, the reader can be ‘immersed in the action of the events’ and,

‘... the character [can] comment on the differences and similarities between the character’s original time and the historical time. These historical times and places are brought to life by the characters who visit them rather than by descriptions of isolated facts and events as found in content area textbooks’ (1992, p. 3).

In other words, as author Joanna Nadin succinctly states, children have the chance ‘to experience otherwise ‘dead’ history’, and ‘the possibility of living other lives’ (Nadin, 2022). With time-slip, believes author Sophie Kirtley, the past,

‘almost feel[s] possible... We have an awareness of the past (and a hope for the future) that makes it almost feel reachable. I also think that everyone would quite like to walk in the shoes of someone from another time’ (Kirtley, 2022a).

Aside from the escapism that travelling in another person’s shoes in another time might afford, time-slip is also useful pedagogically since texts can be used to supplement the national curriculum, helping children not only understand, but empathise with the past. Hall states, ‘Writers of time-slip are particularly alert to this sense of place and people through time, which, at the national level used to be part of school history’ (2001, p. 45). If children have had some agency in learning about the period visited and have knowledge of the historical circumstances highlighted in the story, they will likely be more invested in the outcome. As author Kirtley states, ‘readers are already engaged... so they can empathise quickly with your characters’ (Kirtley, 2021, p. 1).

As in historical fiction, time-slips also offer a way to update past prejudices. In her research on children’s literature, Tess Cosslett observes that during their character arc, protagonists in time-slip often must ‘let go of mistaken stories or theories about

the past' (Cosslett cited in Balay, 2010, p. 137). Through the protagonist's eyes, children gain empathy and understanding that might be otherwise difficult to obtain from reading the dry events of history books.

Time-slip stories offer escape, adventure, lessons in history and a chance to develop empathy in children. In this, they are like many children's books. But let's dig deeper.

'Time-slip,' Hall writes, 'engages with more intangible matters than historical fiction,' such as 'emotional and psychological needs'. This includes 'timeless [questions] of human existence' (2001, p. 46). Balay explains that a 'child's desire to know and understand, and thus master, the world is a staple theme in children's literature'. But time-slip 'links that desire to a particular place and time' (Balay, 2010, p. 134-135). This 'rootedness and belonging' helps protagonists develop their 'sense of identity and personal and cultural inheritance' (Hall cited in Balay, 2010, p. 136). Why is this important?

'The process of coming to grips with the unknowable past,' states Balay, 'also fosters growth' (2010, p. 132), particularly for protagonists 'reluctant to grow up' (Nikolajeva cited in Balay, 2010, p. 134). In her Guardian article in 2022, Gillian McAllister explains why time-loop stories 'keep coming back' saying, 'in times of stress, we all look backwards to a place of safety' (p. 4). This is also true of protagonists in time-slips who escape to the past before they must return and face their uncertain present.

This 'resistance to maturity,' says Balay, is often due to 'trauma' which can be the result of 'parental deaths' or 'absence' or 'separation from peers', as in the case of *Tom's Midnight Garden* (2010, p. 142). The trauma causes the time-slip experience. We also see this in Kirtley's *The Wild Way Home*, when Charlie escapes to the stone age until he has the courage to face what awaits his ill brother at home. Although protagonists may be tempted 'to stay forever', 'a temptation... almost all time-travellers in children's fantasy are exposed to', they 'more or less reject' this temptation and return to face their fears (Nikolajeva cited in Balay, 2010, p. 134).

Time-slips have the unique ability to suspend contemporary protagonists in another place and time, giving them space they need to mature, to understand themselves and their place. And if children cannot hide in time and space like their favourite characters, perhaps the protagonists in time-slips act as surrogates. If only briefly, they can seek safety and solace from their lives in the pages of a book, until they are ready to take on the world.

A Passing Trend, Cyclical or Enduring?

If time-slips have such history, speak to us of the timeless human condition (which, to be fair, could be said of all fiction and non-fiction), and inspire such devotion, I suggest that the appeal of time-slip stories is enduring, its impact beyond measurable cycles or trends. I'm not alone. Of the industry professionals I questioned, all of them stated that

they believed time-slips were enduring, too (Teeple-Salas, 2022). What does this mean for an aspiring time-slip author, who might be told, as I was, that time-slips don't sell? Editor, Webb believes that since they are published quite often, time-slips 'come and go in favour with agents and publishers' (2022). However, though they do not speak for the entire industry, in responding to my questionnaire, both agents Caravéo (2022) and Bagnell (2022) indicated they are open to receiving time-slip submissions. Not only has Pearson published two time-slip stories since Guppy Books' founding in 2019, but she is also open to time-slip submissions from agents (2022).

So, writers of time-slip – keep those keyboards clacking.

Having Hope

Readers are not the only ones able to live multiple lives in stories. We writers do, too. And again, I wonder: why am I drawn to writing time-slips? Did my dysfunctional childhood cause my arrested development? Am I, like my protagonists, seeking to avoid responsibility by immersing myself in the nostalgic past? Am I like Peter Pan in not wanting to grow up?

Reflecting, I began to see links with my own time-slip stories, their strengths, and weaknesses. How can I apply what I've gleaned to give them a better chance of being published?

Like all stories, a time-slip must have a strong story at its core, with well-drafted characters. In her response to my questionnaire, Webb states that a story must bring 'something unique to this popular genre'. She would only encourage someone to write a time-slip if they can find a 'new way of approaching the genre, rather than just slipping through a shimmering portal or doorway or coming across an ancient machine' (2022). This is echoed by editor, Nicki Marshall, who cautions would-be time-slip writers against using long-used 'cliches and tropes'. 'They need to know why they want to write [time-slip], who they are writing it for and what it offers that no other novel yet does' (2022). 'Well-told time-slips are a 'rare find', says agent, Caravéo. 'If a story isn't handled well, it can feel 'laboured or contrived'. 'It also needs to offer interesting juxtapositions and reflections on [the] contrasting periods' (2022). And author, Kirtley reminds us that, 'to bring history to life we must make readers feel like they are actually breathing, touching, [and] tasting moments from the past' and that 'using senses makes a story world feel alive... no matter how deep in the past it may be' (2021).

In my unfinished YA time-slip, my protagonist Callie will be tempted to stay in 1925 for love, at the cost of losing her family, but will ultimately reject the past and return to her present, armed with a stronger sense of self. Perhaps one of the ways in which I can strengthen the juxtapositions of the contrasting time periods is not only with the physical differences of the two times but, cleaving to one of my central themes of toxic perfectionism in teenage girls, I can compare the attitudes of men and the freedoms of women in 1925 with the present day. And I hope that my 'device' for the time-slip will be considered unique.

In the end, when I have written the best book I can write, I must remember the grey. When I'm ready for submission, will it be the right time for my time-slip book? Will I submit it to the right people? Will it be the one to fulfil the quest of this aspiring children's author? Much of this is out of my control. 'No matter when a book is set,' says the ever-optimistic Kirtley, 'children demand stories that sparkle with possibility, glimmer with adventure and pulse with hope' (2021).

So, I too, will hope.

And I'm still writing, Mr Goldman. I'm still writing.

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Author Biography

As a child in California, Charlotte caught the story bug from *Star Wars* and ballet, when she yearned to be the first ballerina in space. She has a BA in History of Art from the University of California, Berkeley, an MA in Museum Studies from University College London, and an MA in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa University. A Golden Egg Academy alumna, she is also an active member of SCBWI British Isles and was recently shortlisted for Searchlight Award's Best Novel Opening 2021, and longlisted for the Guppy Books Open YA Submission 2022. Charlotte lives in North London with her French-American-British family and @HarryTheCatFormerlyKnownAsJeff, dreaming up stories of her own.