The Carnivalesque Body

The last lines [of the play] with their subtlety of phrasing and calculated repetitions irritated the audience.... When Alexander [the actor playing the protagonist] delivered himself of what, in other circumstances, might have been a touching and deeply felt speech, 'I'm the last, my lord, of the Domvilles!', there floated out of the darkness a strident voice from somewhere in the gallery: 'It's a bloody good thing y'are.'

— Leon Edel, A Bibliography of Henry James

Mikhail Bakhtin’s conceptualisation and articulation of the carnivalesque is a celebration of a tradition whose full realisation he finds in the works of François Rabelais. Rabelais, Bakhtin claims, “inherited and brought to fulfillment [sic] thousands of years of folk humor. His work is the unique key for the understanding of this culture in its most powerful, deep, and original manifestations.”¹ The work of François Rabelais (1495-1553) has become synonymous with excess, hyperbole and a humour embedded within grotesque conceptualisations of the body. Rabelais was a learned monk with a doctorate in medicine whose literature caricatured the anachronistic state of medieval society and earned the respect of scholars and the masses alike.² In his book Rabelais and His World Bakhtin argues that manifestations of folk culture can be divided into three distinct forms:

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ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions and various genres of billingsgate speech.³ Bakhtin then goes on to detail the nature of grotesque realism, a genre which inflected Rabelais’s works, and its relationship to laughter, degradation, and the material body. According to Michael Bernstein, “[i]t is largely from the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin that we have learned to apply terms like ‘carnivalization’ to the collapse of hierarchic distinctions ... and it is a major part of Bakhtin’s legacy to have taught us better how to value the liberating energy of the carnivalesque.”⁴

In this chapter Bakhtin’s theoretical explication of the carnivalesque will provide a framework for the analysis of two Australian children’s novels that seemingly adopt the carnival form as both a narrative device and a means of subverting certain ideological positions. John Stephens, in Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction, writes that “[c]arnival in children’s literature is grounded in a playfulness which situates itself in positions of nonconformity. It expresses opposition to authoritarianism and seriousness, and is often manifested as parody of prevailing literary forms and genres, or as literature in non-canonical forms.”⁵ Australian children’s literature is not renowned for its carnivalised discourse and indeed the vast majority of texts in this genre favour conservative forms and outcomes above anti-authoritarian or subversive representations, especially with regard to the body. However, two novels, Victor Kelleher’s The Red King and John Marsden’s The Journey, seemingly embrace the grotesque form and represent

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³ Bakhtin 5. Billingsgate speech is the term given to speech patterns which reflect a sense of anti-authoritarianism and originate in the marketplace. For more information see Bakhtin 15-17.
entertainers and spectacles as central elements in their plots, thereby suggesting the potential for a carnivalesque reading.

Victor Kelleher's *The Red King* is a fantasy novel for children which is set in the woodlands and fortress of the Red King. The story follows Timkin, a young acrobat who has survived the fever that is controlled by the Red King and with which he threatens and controls his subjects. Immune to future infection, Timkin is enslaved by a travelling band of entertainers, an assemblage that includes Petie the magician, Crystal the monkey and Bruno the bear. Together they travel to the fortress of the Red King where they win favour with their carnival tricks and gain entrance. After performing for the King they escape into the bowels of the fortress where they ostensibly search for the King's riches which Petie wishes to steal. However, there are numerous covert agendas milling among this group including Timkin's desire for revenge against the King who killed her Old Master and Petie's preparedness to risk the lives of his fellow travellers for the sake of greed. The climax to the book involves a confrontation between the Red King, Timkin and Petie where loyalties are tested and the action of each ultimately reflects their personal beliefs and desires.

*The Red King* can be interpreted as embracing the carnivalesque for a number of reasons. First, the novel primarily focuses upon characters who lack authority and are closely affiliated with carnival entertainment. Secondly, in this book, as in Bakhtin's theory, the entertainer is the ideal representation of the people and it is Timkin who ultimately overthrows the dictatorial authority figure, the Red King. Finally, the novel's representation of grotesque characters and its ambiguous conclusion attest to its potential
for a carnivalesque reading. However, a close analysis of *The Red King* will reveal that it lacks some of the central elements, such as laughter and parody, which are fundamental to the carnivalesque and that much of the folk culture within the book is hierarchically sanctioned and therefore opposes the "nonofficial nature" of carnival.

The second of the two texts which will be reconsidered using Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque is John Marsden’s novel *The Journey*. This story clearly conforms to the tradition of *Bildungsroman* which is so popular in the genre of children’s literature. Like many such novels it is concerned with a journey, in this case both metaphorical and physical, of the primary protagonist Argus through the trials that lead from adolescence to adulthood. Argus’s journey takes him from home through various adventures until, predictably, it eventually brings him home again in a cyclical process toward self-knowledge. *The Journey* also employs the spectacle of the carnival or fair, yet the representation differs from that offered in *The Red King*, for in *The Journey* the fair is a site in which, as Bakhtin states, the “material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed.” The fair in *The Journey* is carnivalesque for it embodies all of the central elements of this theory including manifestations of folk culture and humour, representations of the grotesque, and the subversion of hierarchical structures. Unlike the ambiguity which characterises the conclusion to *The Red King*, this text culminates in Argus’s return home where he accepts the values, structures, hierarchies and paradigms of his society, thereby marking a return to tradition, convention

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7 Bakhtin 3.
and the status quo. Yet, just as the ambiguity of *The Red King* can be understood as carnivalesque this conclusion also enables such a reading for an important aspect of carnival is its temporality, in which a brief gesture of inversion is predicated on a reinstatement of the established order.

To attempt an analysis of these two texts using Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque one must first have a clear understanding of the theory itself. According to Michael Gardiner, Bakhtin “was always a marginal individual within the Soviet intellectual establishment, mainly because his rather unorthodox views contradicted the official Party line on aesthetic and literary matters.”¹⁰ Despite this, Bakhtin wrote on a wide range of subjects from socio-linguistics and the theory of the novel to numerous epistemological and interpretive issues in the human sciences.¹¹ The books which have been, to various and still disputed degrees, attributed to Bakhtin include: Volosinov’s *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973), *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1985) and Medvedev’s *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1985).¹² In 1940 Bakhtin completed and, unsuccessfully, submitted a doctoral dissertation entitled *Rabelais and His World* which was published for the first time in 1965. This text has become a ‘popular’¹³ theoretical point from which to

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¹⁰ Bakhtin 19.
¹¹ Gardiner 1.
¹² The novel *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* is attributed to V.N. Volosinov and yet many believe it to be written, either in whole or in part, by Bakhtin. *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* is credited to both M. M. Bakhtin and P. M. Medvedev yet scholars continue to debate the authorship of these deuterocanonical texts. See Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) 7 and 15; Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and Gardiner 6.
¹³ In using this term I am invoking more than a sense of an increased awareness and popularity of the text but am also attempting to suggest a popularity which Bakhtin highlights in *Rabelais and His World*,
reconsider literary, cultural and sociological texts. Among other things, it has been the basis of various readings in Latin American culture, the poetry of Shelley, the plays of Samuel Beckett and Shakespeare, and the writing of Wilson Harris.\textsuperscript{14} Eagleton states that \textit{Rabelais and His World} pits against that "official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism whose unspoken name is Stalinism the explosive politics of the body, the erotic, the licentious and semiotic."\textsuperscript{15}

It is difficult to discuss \textit{Rabelais and His World} without first situating it in the context from which this theoretical approach to laughter, transgression, carnival and subversion originated. According to Gardiner:

Bakhtin's thought matured during the political and cultural tumult of the inter-war years, which produced a libertarian-humanist vision of socialism that was inimically opposed to the authoritarian tendencies of Leninism and Stalin's 'barrack communism' as well as the vacuity of official social democracy.\textsuperscript{16}

His later writings are thought to have become overtly political and to closely reflect the aims and methods of a Marxian \textit{Ideologiekritik} because of the changing historical context in which they were produced, which saw the consolidation of the Stalinist regime.\textsuperscript{17} In this fraught political state Bakhtin published a theory centred on the destabilisation of hierarchies through carnival and laughter.

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\textsuperscript{15} Terry Eagleton, \textit{Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism} (London: Verson, 1981) 144.

\textsuperscript{16} Gardiner 5.
By encouraging rather than suppressing social difference and by tracing out how this diversity was sustained in the utterances and cultural practices of everyday life, Bakhtin believed that the authoritarian structures of modern bureaucratic societies could be challenged and subverted. However naive this might seem today, Bakhtin unarguably maintained a pronounced faith in the liberating potential of popular cultural forms, even during the darkest moments of Stalinist repression.\textsuperscript{18}

In formulating his theory of the carnivalesque, and most specifically his analysis of the grotesque, Bakhtin warns modern theorists about applying his conceptualisation, which he claims was specific to the Middle Ages and briefly formed part of the Renaissance, to modern textual or cultural productions. He contends:

... we have ceased long ago to understand the grotesque canon, or else we grasp it only in its distorted form. The role of historians and theorists of literature and art is to reconstruct this canon in its true sense. It should not be interpreted according to the norms of modern times; nor should it be seen as deviation from present-day concepts. The grotesque canon must be appraised according to its own measurements.\textsuperscript{19}

Despite this warning many critics continue to apply Bakhtinian theory to modern texts. In doing so his theory of the carnivalesque and grotesque is often reconfigured, becoming a modernistic conceptualisation which incorporates such things as mocking and ironic laughter, elements that Bakhtin maintained were absent from performances of the carnivalesque which were popular during the Middle Ages. Sue Vice is one such theorist: “I have done what many Bakhtinian critics do, which is to extend the implication of his arguments to fields or purposes he did not have in mind. Hence the appearance of his ideas in film, post-structuralist, post-colonial and queer theory, following the route

\textsuperscript{17} Gardiner 6.
\textsuperscript{18} Gardiner 3.
mapped out by feminist extensions of his work. In this chapter I too will apply the carnivalesque to modern texts and am very aware of the way in which I am carnivalising Bakhtin's own theory. I am entering a rhetoric that challenges his rigid time-frame for the discussion and application of his theory and am setting up a counter-conceptualisation in which Bakhtinian theory can be applied to, and transformed, as part of the modern text.

According to Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, "carnival is a mode not of 'abstract thinking' but of 'artistic thinking'. It is not a set of propositions about the world but a way of viewing the world; it is not so much a set of views as a ground for vision." Morson and Emerson have encapsulated numerous important issues related to Bakhtinian theory of the carnivalesque in this brief statement. They have identified Bakhtin's deep concern with the social, political, hierarchical and cultural implications of carnival and folk humour and have recognised that the explication of these manifestations of culture through the author, Rabelais, should not result in the over-simplification of this text as an attempt at "mere literary criticism". Furthermore, this brief assertion highlights the way in which artist and audience necessarily remain undifferentiated in Bakhtin's theory of the carnival, for carnival laughter "is the laughter of all the people.... [I]t is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone...." Finally, Morson and Emerson encapsulate the confusion and inconsistencies that are often commented upon in Bakhtin's work. The blurring and repetition of the terms "view", "viewing" and "vision" are a parody of

19 Bakhtin 29-30.
20 Vice 1.
22 According to Vice, Bakhtin's "disciple and executor Sergey Bocharov ... mentions the 'grimace' with which Bakhtin used the phrase 'mere literary criticism' to describe the first chapter of Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics." (2).
23 Bakhtin 11.
Bakhtin’s terminology which is “often deliberately repetitious, and encumbered with multiple and ambiguous levels of meaning.”

Through the writings of Rabelais, Bakhtin framed a theory of the carnivalesque that was a populist, utopian vision of the world seen from below and a festive critique through the inversion of hierarchy and ‘high’ culture. The term ‘carnival’ covers many interconnected ideas in *Rabelais and His World*, from the manifestations of folk culture that included rituals, games, symbols and various forms of corporeal excess to the importance of laughter and degradation as a means of inverting hierarchical structures. Finally, carnival is intimately linked with Bakhtin’s conceptualisation of grotesque realism in which the ambivalence of images and actions, such as the process of degradation which “is to bury, to sow and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better,” suggests the potential for constant renewal and thus a social space of utopian freedom, abundance and equality. Morson and Emerson write: “[t]here is an element of ‘utopian’ radicalism [in *Rabelais and His World*], for unlike the fate of real-life bodies, potential in the grotesque body is always realized: the old always dies and the new always flourishes and grows bigger.”

During the Middle Ages the fears of the people, which often originated from a belief in a variety of cosmological, divine and social threats, were often exploited by the upper classes and the theocracy “in order to subdue the populace and dampen a critical consciousness, to legitimate the existing social hierarchy and the system of taboos and prohibitions that reinforced it. Yet ... the forces of officialdom could not entirely destroy

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24 Gardiner 1.
25 Stallybass and White 7.
26 Bakhtin 21.
the centrifugal impulses of folk culture." According to Bakhtin, there were many manifestations of folk culture and humour in this period. Most obvious were the ritual spectacles that included carnivals, pageants, comic shows, popular feasts, crownings and the numerous performances which surrounded the market place. Such open-air amusement often included the participation of giants, dwarves, monsters, trained animals and a carnival atmosphere dominated at such times.

All these forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition existed in all the countries of medieval Europe; they were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonies. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year.

Therefore, the creation and repeated appearance of a festive folk culture in the Middle Ages was evidence of the formulation of a specific discourse and practice that evolved as a means of combating the fears, restrictions and prohibitions under which the populace lived. "Through folk laughter and symbolic degradation and renewal, the abstract terror of the unknown was ‘made flesh’, transformed into a ‘grotesque monster’ that was to be laughed at and overcome."

Folk culture and humour were also evident in the comic verbal compositions, such as the often informal oral and written parodies of the times, which were both ambiguous and regenerative. Medieval parodies did not undermine authority in principle but only

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27 Morson and Emerson 444.
28 Gardiner 51.
29 Bakhtin 5.
30 Bakhtin 5-6.
"authority with pretension to be timeless and absolute." Parody, like most other forms of grotesque realism, was concerned with degradation, with bringing the discourse down to earth, with the turning of subject into flesh. Morson and Emerson claim that the importance of parody lies in its ability to "enable us to distance ourselves from words, to be outside any given utterance and to assume our own unique attitude toward it." Whilst parody was unable to change 'reality' (for like most forms of carnival, parody was premised upon and thus necessitated the presence of that 'reality') it was important for its ability to increase "freedom of interpretive choice by providing new perspectives."

In conjunction with the proliferation of parody during the medieval carnival Bakhtin identified the establishment and increasing use of billingsgate speech.

This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. A special carnivalesque, marketplace style of expression was formed which we find abundantly represented in Rabelais's novel.

Billingsgate speech, like almost all other forms of carnival, was commonly constructed to inspire laughter, and therefore, to degrade all that is high, formal, official and ceremonial. As a speech pattern it was clearly differentiated from the speech genres of the church and the ruling classes through the use of curses, oaths and popular blazons. During carnival

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31 Gardiner 51.  
32 Morson and Emerson 435.  
33 Bakhtin 20.  
34 Morson and Emerson 435.  
35 Morson and Emerson 435.  
36 Bakhtin 10.
the popularity of billingsgate speech infected "every sector of feudal society"\textsuperscript{37} and, according to Gardiner, "[s]uch colloquial oaths and profanities were for Bakhtin a codified form of verbal protest, a repudiation of officialdom through the violation of sanctioned verbal forms of expression."\textsuperscript{38}

In the introductory chapter to \textit{Rabelais and His World} Bakhtin states that "[n]o dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook."\textsuperscript{39} In the text Bakhtin suggests that it was the ideological weapon of laughter that enabled Rabelais to participate in the rescue of human consciousness from the repressive conceptual framework in which it had been imprisoned since the Dark Ages.\textsuperscript{40} Despite what Morson and Emerson describe as the "targetless and indiscriminate, utopian and Bakuninesque" elements to Rabelaisian laughter, the invocation of laughter functioned in a "fundamentally positive and value-generating way" in Rabelais's works.\textsuperscript{41} "[L]aughter in the Middle Ages remained outside all official spheres of ideology and outside all official strict forms of social relations. Laughter was eliminated from religious cult, from feudal and state ceremonies, etiquette, and from all the genres of high speculation."\textsuperscript{42} Laughter challenged notions of hierarchy and centrality by being both pervasive and ambiguous. It was not the reaction of the people to any one particular event, but rather a collective reaction that stood in opposition to concepts of subjectivity or individualism.

\textsuperscript{37} Gardiner 50.
\textsuperscript{38} Gardiner 50.
\textsuperscript{39} Bakhtin 3.
\textsuperscript{40} Gardiner 57.
\textsuperscript{41} Morson and Emerson 452.
Medieval laughter is directed at the same object as medieval seriousness.... it is
directed not at one part only, but at the whole. One might say that it builds its own
world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own
state versus the official state.43

Laughter was also connected with the symbolism and manifestations of grotesque
realism, most particularly those forms concerned with ambivalence and the forces of
death and reproduction: “gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It
asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.”44 Laughter
stood in opposition to all that incited fear, terror and guilt and instead subverted these
repressive elements by “becoming strength”.45

... festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural
awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly
kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts.46

Another essential element to Bakhtin’s articulation of carnival theory is the
presence of the grotesque which is ambiguous, transgressive, disruptive and which
challenged the asceticism and spirituality of medieval high culture. Bakhtin writes that
the “essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that
is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth
and body in their indissoluble unity.”47 The examples Bakhtin draws upon primarily
originate from Rabelais’s work *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. In this text there is a repeated

42 Bakhtin 73.
43 Bakhtin 88.
44 Bakhtin 11-12.
45 Bakhtin 95.
46 Bakhtin 92.
47 Bakhtin 19-20.
fascination with what Bakhtin calls the material bodily principle, in which the body adopts a utopian and festive aspect and appropriates no pretences or egoistic renunciations of its earthy or base nature but rather embraces these elements as deeply positive and humanistic forms of expression. Furthermore, grotesque representations are often ambivalent and reflect the hyperboles that are a renowned attribute of the Rabelaisian system of grotesque imagery. An example of grotesque imagery from Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* involves Panurge’s proposal to build the city walls from the genitals of women. This passage signifies many of the basic elements of the grotesque: the material bodily principle; the ambivalence of the grotesque image; the use of hyperbolic concepts; the inversion of official and authoritative practices and discourses; and the recurring trope of the lower bodily strata as a site of both birth and death, renewal and degeneration in carnivallistic discourse.

'I have observed that the pleasure-twats of women in this part of the world are much cheaper than stones. Therefore, the walls should be built of twats, symmetrically and according to the rules of architecture, the largest to go in front.... They should all be made to dovetail and interlace, diamond-shape, like the great tower of Bourges, with as many horny joy-dinguses, which now reside in claustral codpieces.... What devil could possibly overthrow these walls; what metal on earth could stand up as well against punishment?'

In Bakhtin’s schema the grotesque degrades and mocks the social and hierarchical as well as the material and bodily. It encourages laughter as a means of reconfiguring system, order and normalcy. However, the degradation of the grotesque was not envisaged as a negative phenomenon, but rather as a positive and utopian means of representing growth and renewal among the people. “In grotesque realism … the bodily

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48 Bakhtin 18-20.
element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world. Furthermore, the grotesque body, according to Bakhtin, cannot be separated from the social body. In this configuration it is not an autonomous, self-sufficient object, but rather an element of an “indivisible unity, a collective or ‘cosmic’ representation of the people that is ‘grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable’."

Perhaps the most important element to Bakhtin’s articulation of both the grotesque and carnivalesque is the necessary relationship each maintains with the concepts of ambivalence and regeneration. For whilst carnival is a period of freedom and anarchy that challenges all notions of authority or regulation it is necessarily short-lived and is, therefore, predicated upon a time in which strict control and subordination of the people is maintained. This ambivalence is partly alleviated by the knowledge that the carnival will always return, and thus, the power of regeneration is ever present. Similarly, the grotesque image is synonymous with both ambivalence and regeneration, for such images are often situated between the binary notions of male and female; young and old; birth and death; animal and human; high and low; king and commoner. Bakhtin writes: “[t]he grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The other indispensable trait

49 Rabelais as cited by Bakhtin 313.
50 Bakhtin 19.
51 Gardiner 49.
52 I say “necessarily” because, as has been pointed out by many theorists, the carnivalesque challenges the notion of official time “which presents a linear and hierarchical teleology of events, carnivalesque time is aware of ‘timeliness’ and crisis in the version of history which it presents.” Clair Willis, ‘Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria and Women’s Texts’, Bakhtin and Cultural Theory, ed. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) 130-131.
is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis."

In the final chapters of *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin traces the transformation of the concepts of grotesque realism and the carnivalesque since the end of the Renaissance. Gradually carnival was severed from its populist, folk basis to become a part of official performances and ceremonies. "[I]ts communal performance in the carnival square, and its characteristic symbols, gestures and speech-genres became merely decorative or narrowly farcical." Bakhtin notes that around this time there was a distinct narrowing of forms that altered the audience’s perception of grotesque realism, which was subjected to a monologic reading and came to be envisaged as “a negation, an exaggeration pursuing narrowly satirical aims.” The ambivalent and regenerative elements of the grotesque were lost or misunderstood as the alienation of individuals or the ridicule of officialdom. Under this reconfiguration of Rabelaisian images, laughter, with its universal and utopian aspect, became ironic and mocking. Thus, Bakhtin’s utopianistic interpretation of Rabelais’s work, with its elimination of any distance between the individual and the social, and the reconfiguration of the body as a site of earthy materialism, was misunderstood as a “caricature that reached fantastic dimensions.”

Since its publication Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque has been applied to many texts and genres, providing insights into the use of laughter, corporeality and the grotesque in those works. Children’s literature has long suffered from a lack of such

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53 Bakhtin 24.
54 Gardiner 58.
55 Bakhtin 304.
analysis. As a genre, it often promotes conservative ideological positions that support many of the patriarchal and hierarchical structures in Western society. "Children's writers often take upon themselves the task of trying to mould audience attitudes into 'desirable' forms, which can mean either an attempt to perpetuate certain values or to resist socially dominant values which particular writers oppose." In the promotion and repetition of certain, often conservative, ideological positions within this genre a gap has been created for the analysis of texts in the light of various theoretical approaches that can then be used to recognise the subversive potential of children's novels. One such approach involves an analysis of children's novels that appear to incorporate various elements of the carnivalesque in their structure, plot and characterisation. John Stephens claims that:

Since 1960 there has appeared a variety of books for children which broadly share an impulse to create roles for child characters which interrogate the normal subject positions created for children within socially dominant ideological frames. [These books can therefore be referred to as] 'carnivalesque' texts, since they function to interrogate official culture in ways comparable to the traits of carnival identified in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin....

Stephens then goes on to examine numerous picture books and analyse how they function to carnivalise official culture through: the "flouting of adult prohibitions"; "gentle mockery"; "the subversion of social authority, received paradigms of behaviour and morality"; and the "dismantling of socially received ideas...." His analysis of picture books, including Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and Anthony Browne's *Willy The Wimp*, provides the foundation for my extended analysis of the carnivalesque in

56 Bakhtin 306.
Victor Kelleher’s *The Red King* and John Marsden’s *The Journey*. On the surface both of these texts contain the imagery that one associates with the carnivalesque, including fairs, fools, jugglers, travelling entertainers and grotesque bodies. Yet each conforms to and conflicts with Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque in different ways.

In analysing *The Red King* and *The Journey* this chapter will follow the model Bakhtin established by: considering the manifestations of folk culture; discussing the nature and significance of laughter and the grotesque; and examining the role of ambivalence and regeneration in these texts. In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin states:

> As a special phenomenon, carnival has survived up to our time. Other manifestations of popular-festive life, related to it in style and character (as well as origin) have died out long ago or have degenerated so far as to become indistinguishable. Carnival is a well-known festivity that has been often described throughout many centuries. Even during its later development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it still preserved certain fundamental traits in a quite clear, though reduced, form. Carnival discloses these traits as the best preserved fragments of an immense, infinitely rich world. This permits us to use precisely the epithet ‘carnivalesque’ in that broad sense of the word.⁶⁰

Whilst Bakhtin clearly situated his utopian and idealistic conceptualisation of the carnivalesque within the Middle Ages and acknowledged that it briefly formed part of the Renaissance, there is enormous scope for carnivalised readings of modern texts. This is especially true of those texts, like *The Red King* and *The Journey*, which border on the genres of fantasy and realism. Bakhtin acknowledges that by employing many of the devices common to the carnivalesque, authors are often forced to challenge the “usual static presentation of reality”.⁶¹ Both *The Red King* and *The Journey* employ fantastic environments, grotesque figures, and structures that strongly conform to the quest motif,
in their attempts to embody ideological concepts such as emancipation, individuality, wisdom and corruption. None of these concepts precludes a realistic structure or narrative, yet, in employing the use of fantasy in these novels, both authors have created a sense of timelessness which facilitates their reading as texts that employ the carnivalesque to challenge dominant ideological and social paradigms.

Victor Kelleher’s novel, *The Red King*, was first published in 1989. Like many of Kelleher’s novels it is a quest in which the protagonist, Timkin, must face her fears and in doing so achieve a level of emancipation. According to Leonie Tyle, Kelleher often uses “the construct of the quest ... to intellectualise those issues which interest him: violence, political structures and the ways in which humans and animals face up to each other.”62

The novel’s introductory chapters incorporate many of the key issues that underpin the text including issues of slavery, subjugation, trust, and inimical, uncompromising authority. In these chapters the audience witnesses many manifestations of folk culture, particularly those related to spectacles such as carnivals, pageants, and forms of entertainment like juggling and magic tricks. Timkin, the primary protagonist, is a member of a travelling group of entertainers who move from town to town enchanting crowds with their skills in storytelling, clowning, juggling and acrobatics:

... it was amidst a buzz of excitement that the old man, resplendent in a bright purple cloak, stepped into the smoky ring of flares to announce the start of the show. The first to appear were the clowns, Timkin amongst them. With their floppy clothes and straggly wigs, their faces brightly painted, they tumbled and fell over each other, bringing peals of laughter from the children. Next came the

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60 Bakhtin 217-218.
61 Bakhtin 32.
acrobats, and after that the jugglers.... Last came the most spectacular act of all: the trapeze. 63

These bands of entertainers, we are told, travelled from one hamlet to another in wagons and their arrival in each town was accompanied by "cheers". 64 "Children were running alongside the horses, calling out in shrill voices; while the growing crowd of adults followed them through the narrow streets to the central square." 65 At the beginning of The Red King the central square seems a place of revelry and fun, where the serious is discarded, if only momentarily, in the laughter provoked by the troupe of entertainers; and in the manifestations of laughter and revelry that accompany the entertainers exists the potential for the carnivalesque. This anti-authoritarian atmosphere is encouraged by news that the town has rebelliously refused to pay the tribute imposed upon them by the Red King and the troupe is seemingly willing to join the town in challenging the oppressive regime by illegally entertaining the people, thereby endangering their own lives.

The imposition of tributes and their enforced payment, on threat of death, announces an obvious hierarchical structure in this text with the Red King clearly residing at the peak. His rules are enforced by his soldiers, guards and selectors, with the "woodsfolk" 66 situated at the bottom of this structure. In performing in a town they believe to be doomed to death the travelling band of entertainers may be challenging this structure and its obvious inequities. Yet the reader is quickly disabused of this notion as they discover that the reason the Old Master is willing to endanger the lives of his troupe is for profit. "[B]riefly it crossed [Timkin's] mind that in a village such as this, which

63 Kelleher 5.
64 Kelleher 4.
65 Kelleher 4.
paid no tribute to the Red King, their payment would be high. She was glad of that, for her Master’s sake.” So, far from presenting the audience with a carnivalised reading of a rebellious socialist ideology in which class inequities are righted through the people challenging and usurping the power of the oppressor, the Old Master and his troupe of entertainers instead become symbols of another form of oppression in which their passivity, and even their capitalist tendencies, sustain the Red King’s power.

Furthermore, unlike Bakhtin’s conceptualisation of the carnivalesque in which the “[c]arnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” the entertainment provided by the travelling troupe establishes a clear demarcation between performers and audience. The “smoky ring of flares” is used by the troupe to separate and isolate the two groups from one another, in contradiction to Bakhtin’s “play without footlights”. Timkin’s carnival is not a celebration of all people, but a paid performance that shuns Bakhtinian notions of inclusiveness.

Ultimately, the Old Master’s travelling troupe of entertainers suffers for its greed as it is trapped in the town square, a classic place of freedom and privilege in Bakhtin’s theory of carnival, where they are forcibly exposed to the deadly red fever. The Red King’s soldiers are tellingly outfitted in scarlet armour, reminiscent of their leader, and in masks: “dusky crimson face-pieces which hid their features. All the masks were identical – fashioned in the likeness of leering human faces, but with blunt pig-like snouts.”

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66 Kelleher 52.
67 Kelleher 4.
68 Bakhtin 7.
69 Bakhtin 235.
70 Kelleher 10.
Unlike the carnival mask which, according to Bakhtin "is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity"\textsuperscript{71}, these masks are all alike, and are reminiscent of the Romantic form in which the mask "loses almost entirely its regenerating and renewing element and acquires a sombre hue. A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it."\textsuperscript{72} The inclusion of the pig-like element of the masks is a symbolic reference to the repulsive, animalistic nature of these soldiers and their leader. The masks, of course, serve a practical function also for they screen the soldiers from the red fever enabling them to kill the small community without themselves becoming infected. Thus, the mask in this novel opposes classic carnival intentions as it "hides something, keeps a secret, deceives."\textsuperscript{73}

The result of the Red King’s attack is the massacre of the townspeople and the Old Master’s troupe of travelling entertainers with the exception of Timkin, who, whilst infected, is able to escape and is eventually found and healed by Petie the magician. In return for her life Timkin promises to help Petie enter the Red King’s fortress and steal his wealth on the proviso that Petie will release her from the shackle that encircles her neck, signalling her status as slave. Together this new troupe of entertainers which includes Petie the magician, Bruno the bear, Crystal the monkey, and Timkin travels through the woods towards the Red King’s fortress and the Gathering.

Within \textit{The Red King} spectacles and performances cannot be considered carnivalesque. Reliant on all that is high, formal, official and ceremonial, they lack a sense of the universal and inclusive. This is epitomised by the annual Gathering which is

\textsuperscript{71} Bakhtin 40.  
\textsuperscript{72} Bakhtin 40.  
\textsuperscript{73} Bakhtin 40.
preserved, not as a site of subversive, anti-authoritarian, anti-hierarchical entertainment, but rather, it is sanctioned by the hierarchy to reassert the nature and omnipotence of the Red King's authority. The Gathering is:

The biggest fair in the whole of the Forest Lands, held at the end of each summer outside the walls of the Red King's fortress – the same fortress that guarded the Caverns, buried deep within the fiery mountain. Of all the fairs which took place throughout [sic] the year, the Gathering was of special importance to entertainers: because it was there, and there alone, that the best acts were chosen to perform before the Red King himself.74

In performing at the Gathering the troupes of entertainers and the gathered woodsfolk are not contesting the status quo, but instead, are acquiescing to the social order and their own subjugation in their attempts to gain the privilege of performing before the figure who stands at the pinnacle of oppressive power, the Red King.75 According to Michael Holquist:

Carnival must not be confused with mere holiday or, least of all, with self-serving festivals fostered by governments, secular or theocratic. The sanction for carnival derives ultimately not from a calendar prescribed by church or state, but from a force that preexists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing carnival.76

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74 Kelleher 67.
75 It is possible to read this, and other elements of *The Red King*, as conducting a kind of dialogue with Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque in which Kelleher exposes the ease with which the carnivalesque can be made over for profit or power and harmlessly defused in the interests of the hierarchy. Other authors, such as Angela Carter, have, after all, been similarly preoccupied with the tricky frontier between 'real' and 'false' carnival. See Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984) and *Wise Children* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991). However, I would argue that the official sanctioning of carnival forms in *The Red King*, and the constraints which the King imposes upon the travelling troupes, is one of many devices used within the text to reveal the extent of the Red King's autocratic power and authority and which, ultimately, justify his dethronement.
The Gathering and the many performances staged in towns and hamlets throughout the Forest Lands are therefore not carnival activities but rather sanctioned forms of entertainment that exclude the general populace and ultimately uphold the separation of high and low; the subjugation of the people as chattels of the Red King.

Just as the spectacles in this novel do not conform to Bakhtinian notions of carnivalesque folk culture, there is also no evidence of parody or billingsgate speech with which the people might verbally debase the formal and official elements of their society. According to Bakhtin, "abuses were ambivalent: while humiliating and mortifying they at the same time revived and renewed. It was precisely this ambivalent abuse which determined the genre of speech in carnival intercourse."\(^{77}\) Whilst the contemporary literary audience, regardless of genre or intended readership, would not expect to encounter the same sort of verbal idioms popular in Rabelais's work, the lack of billingsgate speech in any form, modern or otherwise, is arguably most evident in those texts and discourses designed for the young. There is an apparent, and at times seemingly unbridgeable, gap that looms between the carnivalesque as it appears in Rabelais's works and the potential for carnivalesque readings of modern children's literature. This gap materialises most tellingly in the lack of billingsgate speech for, whilst the common folk idiom employed by Rabelais was believed by Bakhtin to have fostered "an atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity"\(^{78}\), to many modern critics, authors, writers and readers of children's literature such speech is prohibitive. One could suggest many reasons for the lack of billingsgate speech in children's literature, but the most obvious would be the censorial gaze to which so many texts in this field are commonly subjected.
In a genre where the speech of both adults and children is often analysed for its potential to corrupt and mislead the young, it is economically understandable that most texts do not employ these devices to interrogate and challenge the status quo. For children's literature continues to be viewed as a tool for the protection and preservation of youthful innocence, in the tradition of the *tabula rasa* or the corruptible youth, as we are constantly warned of the capacity of youth for adopting that which is inscribed upon its mind. This approach to the social role of children's literature perhaps partly explains the lack of billingsgate speech in this text and indeed in the genre as a whole. The nature of such prohibitions, however, points to the need for an increased awareness of the limitations and restrictions to which the children's novel is subjected and the importance of the subversive text in contesting the imposition of didactic, moralistic and socially dominant ideological frameworks.\(^79\)

Bakhtin claims that:

> Profanities and oaths were not initially related to laughter, but they were excluded from the sphere of official speech because they broke its norms; they were therefore transferred to the familiar sphere of the marketplace. Here in the carnival atmosphere they acquired the nature of laughter and became ambivalent.\(^80\)

To Bakhtin the most important function of laughter is its capacity to degrade and materialise.\(^81\) It is a means for the people to overcome their fears and equalise the imbalances evident in everyday life. Laughter helps dissolve the social and hierarchical structures, if only for a brief time, and as a social phenomenon it functions to remind

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77 Bakhtin 16.  
78 Bakhtin 195.  
80 Bakhtin 17.
everyone of their equality in the face of the laughing crowd. Laughter is also a means of challenging “external censorship” for it liberates from a “fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power.” Yet, laughter is rarely mentioned in *The Red King* and is certainly not recognised as a subversive tool of the populace. Action and violence, rather than laughter, are the best means of overcoming one’s fears according to this novel.

Whereas laughter, for Bakhtin, is a reminder of the power of collective action and the importance of a social conscience, its absence from *The Red King* would perhaps reflect a similar absence of these traits if it weren’t for Timkin. Like all the other characters in the novel Timkin is ultimately driven to the climactic moment in the text by various individualistic goals, including her desire for revenge and her hopes for freedom, yet her actions speak of a social conscience and an awareness of her role within the collective. Thus Timkin, unlike the awe-struck, selfish and ineffective Petie, finally confronts the Red King as the purveyor of social justice. Without laughter, yet with a level of empowerment similar to that which carnivalesque laughter inspires, Timkin is thus able to overcome the Red King.

The grotesque, like laughter and folk culture, is an intrinsic element in the carnivalesque text, for the grotesque “cannot be separated from the culture of folk humor and the carnival spirit....” In *The Red King* Petie’s travelling band of entertainers encounter various grotesque figures both on their approach to the fortress of the Red King and inside the labyrinthine tunnels that traverse the King’s mountain. These figures conform to many of the traits that Bakhtin identifies as grotesque, for they are:

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81 Bakhtin 20.
82 Bakhtin 94.
83 Bakhtin 47.
... ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of ‘classic’ aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed.... They are contrary to the classic images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development.  

In employing figures like these the author, according to Bakhtin, is not attempting to terrorise his audience, but rather to invoke in a single character binary concepts such as birth and death, beauty and ugliness, man and nature, the monstrous and the minuscule. The grotesque becomes symbolic not of particular, individualistic elements of the person or the life-cycle but of “the great body of all the people” and the conception of “life as a whole – its indispensable component, the condition of its constant renewal and rejuvenation. Death is here always related to birth; the grave is related to the earth’s life-giving womb.” Therefore, the grotesque in the carnivalesque tradition is a means of invoking, universalising, interweaving all the elements of life and death, body and nature, individual and social. In the carnival tradition there are no dualisms, no barriers preventing the consolidation of these concepts in the one grotesque body.

The first of the grotesque figures that Timkin, Petie, Bruno and Crystal encounter on their journey is the figure who guards the Red King’s tree. This tree bears fruit that has the potential to cure anyone of the red fever, a pod from this tree is what once saved Timkin’s life and she is determined to gather more pods and save others. Barring her from doing so is the Red King’s guard who is itself reliant on the pods for survival:

It was, she supposed, a man. Or had been once. In broad outline it still retained the shape of a human being. But that was all. In everything else, it was monstrous, and as massive in its way as the tree it guarded. Its arms and legs like misshapen roots;

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84 Bakhtin 25.
85 Bakhtin 49-50.
its body a gnarled trunk; its face, if indeed it were a face, a twisted and knotted thing from which a single greenish eye stared broodingly. Only its clothes belied its horrifying appearance: made of rich, finely woven material, they hung from the grotesque limbs in soft scarlet folds.  

The clear relationship the novel draws between the grotesque and nature, this blurring of the boundaries between human and animal or human and plant, has a long tradition in carnivalesque discourse. As Bakhtin states, in the grotesque the "borderlines that divided the kingdoms of nature in the usual picture of the world were boldly infringed." Many of the terms Bakhtin invokes in his explanation of the grotesque reflect not only nature as a constant site of death, renewal and regeneration but more specifically the human body becomes a metaphorical tree where "[s]pecial attention is given to the shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside." In linking the physical or material body of the human to animals and plants The Red King, in the tradition of the carnivalesque, degrades and materialises these bodies so they can be seen as part of nature. Tirakin’s inability to truly differentiate the genus of this creature, whether human or tree, also exposes the ambivalence of the grotesque image and its unfinished nature as it is constantly in the “act of becoming”.

Almost all of the Red King’s guards or servants are in some way depicted as grotesque figures in this novel. Many, like the figure who guards the tree, combine typically human characteristics with those of another species. For example, in the labyrinthine tunnels that comprise the Red King’s fortress the band of entertainers encounter a creature who resembles both human and fish:

86 Kelleher 47-48.
87 Bakhtin 32.
88 Bakhtin 316-317.
In the light of the flare its face was equally fish-like, with wildly staring goggle-eyes and a great curved mouth rimmed with dagger-teeth. Its arms and legs reminded her of gigantic flippers to which hands and feet had been attached; and when it moved, it dragged behind it a murderous looking tail, armed with gleaming scales. As with all of the Red King’s special servants, it bore signs of disease. More than anywhere else, the disfigurement showed on its face, its scaly skin badly pock-marked and scarred.90

The travesty of human corporeal boundaries enacted through the creation and repetition of such images has a long tradition in the grotesque canon, for Bakhtin notes that Rabelais and many of his contemporaries corrupted the human form by combining the elements of various animals with the human form in a carnivalistic performance. During the Middle Ages such performances were enacted as part of the carnival season. For example, the Feast of the Ass involved a mass which was accompanied by comic braying.91 Such acts encouraged the people to laugh in the face of official solemnity.

However, the convergence of Bakhtinian grotesque and The Red King’s hybridised characters divides here. For Bakhtin the grotesque, as with all carnival images and performances, was a means of inciting laughter and of defeating fear. It disclosed the potential for “a friendly world, of the golden age, of carnival truth. Man returns unto himself. The world is destroyed so that it may be regenerated and renewed.”92 Kelleher, alternatively, has created characters who demonise and terrorise as a means of serving and upholding the hierarchical system. They are essential to the maintenance of authority and order in the Red King’s world and are embroiled in the constant subjugation of the people. Rather than representing the potential for life and renewal, these hybridised
characters symbolise death and decay. Their physical deformities are a reflection of their cruelty and baseness and are symptomatic of their alliance with the corrupting influence of the Red King. The novel's grotesque characters are more evocative of the 'post-Romantic' forms of the grotesque than the carnivalesque or Bakhtinian explication. According to Kayser the post-Romantic grotesque, like the monstrous figures in The Red King, is "hostile, alien and inhuman", standing in contradiction to the friendly world envisaged by Bakhtin, it is reminiscent of all that was once familiar, friendly, and whole suddenly become "hostile."  

Most of The Red King's grotesque characters occupy only one end of the dualistic spectrum that Bakhtin identifies as essential to carnivalesque configurations of the grotesque. The old woman who guards the Red King's fever potion, for example, clearly represents death for she is "unbelievably old, and so thin that she was more like a skeleton than a living being: her wrinkled skin hanging from her bones; her face a grinning skull; with gleaming red eyes that peered out from beneath a jutting brow, and with a tangle of dirty white hair that fell almost to her waist."  

There is no sense of birth or regeneration in the depiction of this character; instead she is the bearer of death and disease, a far cry from Bakhtin's metaphorical old woman who both dies and gives birth representing the spectrum of life, age and death in the one poly-symbolic image. The vast majority of grotesque characters in The Red King do not reflect this carnival notion of the

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92 Bakhtin 48.

93 In using the term 'post-Romantic' I am following the example of Heather Johnson in 'Textualising the Double-Gendered Body: Forms of the Grotesque in The Passion of New Eve', The Review of Contemporary Fiction, 14.3 (Fall 1994): 49. Johnson writes: "the term post-Romantic is taken from Bakhtin who has chosen it to distinguish between a modern understanding of the term grotesque and the much earlier meaning grounded in the social reality of the Middle Ages. I realise that distinction is by no means an absolute one and exceptions do exist in the post-Romantic period."

94 Kayser as cited by Bakhtin 48.
inclusion of opposing or binary features in the one individual. However, there are two
notable exceptions to this in the forms of Petie and the Red King.

Petie, Timkin’s travelling companion and apparent enslaver, is teeming with
ambivalence. He is driven to confront the Red King out of a selfish and greedy desire for
wealth. Yet his avarice ultimately results in the emancipation of the people. His
appearance is itself a contradiction as he is described as having a “long thin face that was
neither young nor old, neither happy nor sad, and surrounded by a bush of curly hair
which was an odd mixture of brown and grey.” Petie is a trickster, clown and autocrat.
He saves Timkin from the red fever and frees her from the bonds of slavery by hiding the
key to her neck shackle in her wounded arm, only to enslave her in turn through lies and
decception. His role in the troupe is that of leader and conjurer for he draws the crowds to
their performances with the use of a “slender wooden flute” and then proceeds to
entertain them with magical tricks. The bells that adorn his hat are a symbolic
representation of his sometimes clownish and comic temper. Petie “was grinning
impishly at her and nodding his head, making the small golden bells, sewn into his hat,
jingle playfully.” Yet, rather than simply being clown or magician, Petie is chameleonic,
a “thing of sunlight and shadow”, and this is most evident in his ambivalence toward
the Red King whose cruelty he despises and yet whose wealth and power he envies.

Petie’s moods, a reflection of his personality and his dualistic nature, can “change
in the space of a single breath: from noisy laughter to sadness; from friendliness to sullen

95 Kelleher 108.
96 Kelleher 19.
97 Kelleher 42.
98 Kelleher 19.
99 Kelleher 40.
His avarice drives Timkin, Bruno and Crystal through the Red King’s labyrinth until they finally find the King and his hoarded treasure. Petie’s willingness to endanger the lives of his troupe, his friends, speaks of his overwhelming greed.

‘At last!’ he breathed out. ‘What I’ve always dreamed of. To stand in the treasure house of the Forest Lands.’ His fever-ridden eyes alight with desire, he stumbled through the chaos – dipping his hands greedily into heaps of gold coins; running his fingertips lovingly over velvet coverings or the cool silky sheen of jewels.

Greed is the one sustaining trait that motivates Petie’s character and it is almost his final undoing. In his willingness to risk his life and the lives of his troupe of entertainers to attain the Red King’s wealth, Petie contracts the red fever and so his death seems inevitable and yet still he risks the unsuspecting Timkin’s life to carry away his newly found treasure:

... all the joy, all the new-found faith, died in her. For there, fully exposed, was the reason for his unnatural heaviness; the reason why her legs had almost buckled beneath her when she had carried him across the gulf. Fastened firmly about his waist was a broad money-belt, its pockets bulging with gold coins stolen from the Red King’s chamber.

This final betrayal destroys Timkin’s illusions about the reformation of Petie, and instead reaffirms the audience’s perception of him as more than simply good or bad but rather as paradoxical, ambiguous and carnivalesque. Petie’s final affirmation of this occurs in the last chapter when he reminds Timkin that “‘after all I am just a trickster and a thief.’”

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100 Kelleher 40-41.
101 Kelleher 136.
102 Kelleher 160.
103 Kelleher 164.
Like Petie, the Red King is a carnivalised figure for he too embodies the spectrum of good and evil, kindness and cruelty. At the beginning of the text we learn that the Red King is a figure of destruction who symbolises the corrupting influence of greed. He rules the forest kingdom by force of arms and brings death and destruction, through the red fever, to all who disobey his orders. The Red King is clearly the primary antagonist in this novel, and yet, to consider him an evil or inhumane character is too simplistic and does not explain the ambivalence generated in the audience through a knowledge of his prior good acts. Petie explains that at one time the Red King had been a hermit who had lived in a shallow cave beside a spring that proved to have the “power to heal wounds and cure sickness.”

'It's said the woodsfolk often went to [the hermit] for advice or help, which he gave freely. He asked nothing in return. For food, he gathered nuts and berries and roots from the forest; and for drink he had the spring right there at his door. Soon, people were coming from miles around - some dragging damaged or withered limbs, others bringing sick relatives or friends - to beg for a precious drink. He never refused them. Year after year he gave the water as freely as he had once given his advice, glad just to see the weak grow strong. That was his sole reward.'

As a hermit the Red King had shared the wealth of his spring with the woodsfolk and had asked for nothing in return. His actions were motivated by a philanthropic kindness and an eagerness to help others until the moment of corruption when he discovers that he is aging and realises his mortality, and thus, his inevitable death.

'Like all other men and women, he too began to grow old. He couldn't believe it at first. He, who had never known a day's illness, growing old! Facing death!.... there was no denying what was happening: his hair was growing thin and grey; his once

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104 Kelleher 52.
105 Kelleher 52.
firm cheeks were sagging; his teeth becoming worn and yellow. In his grief, he forgot about the bubbling spring beneath the snow; he forgot the years of health and happiness he had spent in the forest. All he could think of was the life he still possessed. Having avoided sickness, he now longed to go one step further and avoid death itself. 106

In his quest for agelessness the hermit abandons his cave and the woodsfolk and wanders the land until he discovers a "strange lightless flame burning at the heart of the distant mountains" and having stepped into the flame the hermit is metamorphosed into the Red King. 107

As the Red King, the hermit's philanthropic kindness and willingness to help others is transformed into a greedy possessiveness, his actions reflecting his avarice, cruelty and determination to stay young. The hermit is also changed physically by the flame, his face is melted "into a mask of gold; his brain burnt to the hardness of a diamond." 108 His physical appearance becomes ambiguous as he dons the scarlet robes of his station which also prevent the people from discerning if the figure presiding on the dais is "male or female, fat or thin, short or tall." 109 The Red King's authoritarian power contrasts with his physical frailty as Timkin notes that he is a "wraithlike being" 110 with a hand that is "so pale and thin it was barely human; the nails white and bloodless; the veins on it reduced to dry, snaking threads." 111 Therefore, evident within the single figure of the Red King is the dualism of the carnivalesque, a reflection of birth and death, power and weakness, kindness and cruelty, age and agelessness. Such duality, according to

106 Kelleher 52-53.
107 Kelleher 55.
108 Kelleher 55.
109 Kelleher 80.
110 Kelleher 141.
111 Kelleher 138.
Gardiner, "celebrates the 'joyful relativity' of all hierarchical, authoritarian structures."\textsuperscript{112} It functions to remind the audience at once of the potential for opposition and the proportionate nature of the physical, elemental, mortal and structural. This is reinforced as Timkin overpowers the Red King and finally kills him, the stultifying flame becoming the weapon through which the Red King is destroyed.

Despite the dualistic representation of Petie and the Red King in this novel, and thus its partial conformity to Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque, it must be noted that the grotesque, even in these characters, simply reiterates the stereotypical equation in which outer beauty reflects inner goodness, and conversely, a grotesque visage characterises a corrupt psyche.\textsuperscript{113} Both the hermit and Petie prior to their moral dissolution physically resemble their uninfected or uncorrupted psychological states. It is only when the hermit becomes corrupted by his desire for eternal youth and Petie by his greed for the Red King’s treasure that each encounters a metamorphosing event that alters their physical appearance and renders them grotesque.\textsuperscript{114} In contrast to Bakhtinian notions of the grotesque the flame does not degrade, materialise or bring the Red King "down to earth", as a subject he is not turned “into flesh”, but quite the opposite as he sheds his aging frame to become authoritarian, pompous, and ageless.\textsuperscript{115} The depiction of the grotesque in \textit{The Red King} is thus represented as a negative or monstrous physicality that stands in contradiction to Bakhtin’s utopian grotesque which “liberates the world from all

\textsuperscript{112} Gardiner 46.
\textsuperscript{113} Consider the “literary and artistic canon of antiquity, which formed the basis of Renaissance aesthetics and was connected to the further development of art.” Bakhtin 28-29. See also Marina Warner, \textit{From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers} (London: Vintage, 1994).
\textsuperscript{114} During his search of the Red King’s labyrinthian tunnels Petie is infected with the red fever which scars and disfigures its victims, leaving Petie with a “damaged face”. Kelleher 161.
\textsuperscript{115} Bakhtin 20.
that is dark and terrifying: it takes away all fear and is therefore completely gay and bright.\textsuperscript{116} Timkin alone stands in contrast to the ambivalence of Petie and the Red King. She is steadfast, unchanging and ultimately upholds the social and moral values of the text. In this triangular formation Timkin adopts the traditional adult role while the vacillating unpredictability of Petie and the Red King, manifested in Petie’s tantrums and the Red King’s petty cruelty, seem childish and unsophisticated. The result of this formulation is that the child protagonist ultimately becomes the defender of adult ideology and morality which in turn resurrects the normative and familiar in opposition to the carnivalesque.

Perhaps the most carnivalesque feature of \textit{The Red King} is its conclusion, for in the lack of closure, in the ambiguity and uncertainty that Petie, Timkin and their fellow travellers leave in their wake we find a distant reflection of Rabelaisian images which are “opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world-outlook.”\textsuperscript{117} In the final chapters of the novel Timkin vanquishes the Red King and carries Petie to the safety of their travelling caravan where she nurses him to health. As a troupe they travel from the fortress with the prized mask of the Red King “hanging from Tirrikin’s belt” signalling his death to all observers.\textsuperscript{118} The fortress does not collapse, the flame is not extinguished, the potential for future corruption is not expunged. Yet, in killing the Red King the hierarchical and dictatorial system he established through intimidation and murder is ostensibly over. The

\textsuperscript{116} Bakhtin 47.  
\textsuperscript{117} Bakhtin 3.  
\textsuperscript{118} Kelleher 156.
reader is told that "the people fled at the sight of the mask"\textsuperscript{119} dangling from Timkin's belt; there is no suggestion of jubilation or relief from those who observe this signal of the death of their ruler, but instead a sense of terror inspired by a youthful acrobat draped in the Red King's mask.

Into this mêlée of mixed messages we are told of a dream Timkin has in which:

... the Red King was still alive. He had left his mountain fortress and was dwelling somewhere in the forest. For what seemed a long time, she searched for him, finding him eventually in a sunlit glade. He was seated beneath a withered tree, his robes coloured sky-blue and brown, his face covered by a half-melted mask. Stealing upon him, she grasped the mask and tore it away. Only to discover Petie, his eyes turned mockingly towards her.\textsuperscript{120}

This image encapsulates much of the ambiguity of the concluding chapters for it can be read as either a regenerative and utopian image, in which the Red King is dethroned and Petie returns to the abundance of the forest with the mask of the Red King as a mocking symbol of the troupe's triumph, or as a dystopian foreshadowing of future corruption and evil as the authority and oppression symbolised by the mask transfers from the Red King to Petie. Thus, the overthrow of order and officialdom in \textit{The Red King} does not necessarily symbolise the triumphant return of harmony and democracy, rather it symbolises change in its many ambiguous and multifarious manifestations. In contrast to the form of closure offered in most children's novels the binary structures of power and powerlessness, freedom and slavery, good and evil, friend and foe – sustained through much of \textit{The Red King} – collapse in the concluding chapters rendering the overarching themes and morals of this text ambiguous.

\textsuperscript{119} Kelleher 156.
\textsuperscript{120} Kelleher 161.
Therefore *The Red King* does not manifest many of the features of the carnivalesque, as is evident in the scarcity of laughter and billingsgate speech; in the presence of hierarchically sanctioned performances which lack the subversive elements of carnival; and the single-dimensional representation of grotesque characters whose purpose is to terrorise and subjugate on behalf of officialdom, rather than to debase the high and liberate the people. However, the novel in its concluding chapters and its representation of Petie and the Red King still exhibits the ambivalence and potential for regeneration that are essential to Bakhtin’s theory.

The anxieties that often manifest around children’s literature are commonly associated with the morally transgressive and socially subversive elements of a text. *The Red King*, far from being transgressive, reaffirms many of the conventional, positivist attitudes and ideologies that are often held to be important in children’s novels. Like many other novels in this genre, *The Red King* is ultimately about a quest undertaken by Timkin to revenge her Old Master and free herself from the bonds of slavery. This quest, typically, becomes a method and metaphor for the protagonist’s identity formulation that concludes, with proof of her bravery and a reaffirmation of her honesty and integrity, in her increased maturation and emancipation from the bonds of childhood. According to John Stephens:

> Australian children’s literature, in its production and dissemination, is heavily committed to particular values and processes: it seeks to promote maturation, liberation, transcendence as shaped by a humanistic vision of moral commitment and altruism, courage, dignity, strength, social competence, spiritual progress, enlightened attitudes towards issues of gender and ethnicity, and so on.  

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These values and processes are evident in *The Red King* which challenges few of the accepted paradigms or parameters that bracket the genre of children’s literature.

In apparent contrast, John Marsden’s novel *The Journey*, with its explicit depictions of masturbation and sex as well as its oblique references to homosexuality and prostitution, incites the sort of anxiety and confusion that surrounds a genre which many still expect to fulfil a didactic function. This anxiety is evident in the statement Terry Lane offers on the back cover of the book which reads: “... an extraordinary book ... I would commend it to everybody. Although ostensibly it’s a children’s book, it’s something that any adult can read with great pleasure. It’s one of those books that don’t actually belong to any age group...”

Lane’s invocation of the term “pleasure” and then the shift from a claim that the novel falls “ostensibly” into the genre of children’s literature, to a belief that the text does not belong to “any age group” highlights the concerns about appropriateness, age and readership that constantly arise in relation to children’s literature. Clare Bradford claims that “[t]he marker that most sharply differentiates between discourses about children’s books and discourses about adults’ books, in the Australian literary context, is the pervasive reference in the former to values and moral codes.”

Therefore, more than simply a narrative about carnival, *The Journey*

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122 On page 28 of *The Journey* the reader is offered a description of Argus’s first masturbatory experience in which he “continues to stroke himself, fascinated by the growing thickness and coarseness of his organ, by its darkening colour, until at last the inevitable happened, and he was grabbing himself and at the unbearably stiff thing that had temporarily become the centre and focus of his life, and which was now convulsively shooting jets of thin liquid across the hay.” See also pages 27-29; 40; 51; 61; 76-79; 116-119; and 155 in which equally explicit descriptions of intercourse and oblique references to Argus’s confused sexual curiosity concerning Tiresias are discussed.

123 Terry Lane as cited on the back cover of Marsden, *The Journey*.

can be read as a carnivalisation of the parameters which surround Australian children’s literature, its concept of morality and age-appropriateness.

Unlike many of Marsden’s novels, including those discussed in later chapters, *The Journey* is not concerned with the reformation of a flawed psyche or the control and discipline experienced by the institutionalised. Rather it is a novel that closely follows the standard characteristics of the *Bildungsroman* in which a child undertakes a journey of maturation which results in their altered status as adult. Heather Scutter states that the “prime movement in such children’s novels is from innocence to experience (a standard characteristic of the realist *Bildungsroman*), and the prime sleight of mind they invariably perform is to represent the act of growing up as the act of resisting, and then taking on whole, those ideas and values endorsed by apparently reliable adult guides/mentors.”

This is true of *The Journey* as the primary protagonist, Argus, gains authority and personal sovereignty in his movement from home, childhood and subordination to homelessness, adolescence and independence concluding with a return to home, adulthood and compliance. In this novel Argus’s journey represents what Stephens has called “time out” whereby “the main character ... in some sense runs away from home and from the restrictions and socializing practices represented by the family.” In running away from home the protagonist often begins to question and subvert the normative beliefs and practices of the dominant society. Whilst Argus’s journey is fully sanctioned in that it is a traditional practice among his people that the young should leave home to

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begin a journey that heralds their growing maturity, Argus is continually discouraged from beginning his journey by his over-protective parents:

    Every year Argus asked his father, 'Is it time yet? Am I old enough?' And every year his father replied, 'No, you've got a while yet' or 'No, sorry son'. The first few times he laughed as he said it, as though the question were a droll one to be asked by someone of his son's age.127

Finally Argus decides that it is time to leave, with or without the sanction of his parents. This, evidently, is the first step in Argus's acquisition of independence and much of the book follows, in this manner, as thinly disguised didactic discourse moulded into plot-driven action.128 However, The Journey ultimately lends itself to a carnivalesque reading as Argus becomes a spectator through whose eyes the reader re-envisages and reconsiders social practices and normative behaviours.

    Like his namesake Argus Panoptes, the Greek mythological figure with a hundred eyes all over his body, one of the most important roles Argus adopts in his journey is that of observer. The rules that govern the journey involve the necessary acquisition of seven stories by each participant which "would be uniquely his, yet they would also be the stories of all the people – the same for everyone, recognisable by everyone."129 The journey, according to the rules, was not over until all seven stories had been collected and successfully presented to a Council of senior men and women who would then decide whether the participant had achieved maturity and was thus worthy of being treated as an

127 Marsden 9.
128 The didacticism of Argus’s life-lessons can be read as empowering the author’s opinions rather than those of the characters and, interestingly, many of those lessons mirror the methods of “becoming a man” that are identified in Marsden’s book Secret Men's Business: Manhood: The Big Gig (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1998) 16-62.
129 Marsden 11.
adult. Whilst this system appears to construct hierarchies of seniority and adulthood over that of commonality and childhood the recognition of the universal in each of the seven stories goes some way toward disrupting structures of social order and rank.

At the beginning of his journey Argus is lured by the prospect of anonymity to the towns and villages where he wants to “mix with crowds of people, to meet strangers and to smell their sweat, to hear their conversations and to watch their faces.” The materiality of this description, the shift from Argus’s self-perceived role of detached observation to physical incorporation, marks the beginning of carnivalisation. Working towards the coast, that physical and metaphorical point farthest from the norms of his society, Argus encounters various individuals who in their “witticisms and practical jokes” are a reminder of the common folk whom Bakhtin valorises in his text, for there they are also “blasphemous rather than adoring, cunning rather than intelligent; they are coarse, dirty and rampantly physical.” Having worked a full day for a meal and a bed Argus is accepted into the home of a farmer and his family who begin a guessing game based on parody. The game, in true carnival sense, incites laughter, collapses hierarchies within the family and involves self-deprecation:

One child would jump on the table and impersonate, with appropriate noises and contortions of the face and body, an object or creature; a parrot, for example, or a chair, and the others would try to guess what it was… After ten minutes or so, the adults began to join in. Argus, accustomed to the gravity of his father and mother, was confused but pleased as the game spread through the room. And no-one was more active and rowdy than the old man, who, ignoring his paralysis, seemed to shed sixty years.”

130 Marsden 14.
131 Marsden 19.
132 Holquist, Prologue, Rabelais and His World, xix.
133 Marsden 19.
The creation of spectacle and parody in this scene, which in turn incites laughter and rejuvenation, situates it squarely within the bounds of the carnivalesque.

In addition to being a form of self-deprecation, carnivalesque laughter can alleviate fear. This is particularly true when it is focus upon the “bodily lower stratum”\(^{134}\), the corporeal site upon which the gaze of the carnival, folk culture and grotesque imagery so often focuses. *The Journey* captures something of this sense of comic self-deprecation when Argus finding himself caught in a violent thunderstorm seeks shelter and a dry bed in nearby stables. There, amidst the stalls, Argus strips off his clothing and begins to dry himself with an old towel used to rub down the animals. In a comic aside to the “restless-looking, beautifully contoured young stallion”\(^ {135}\) residing in the stall beside his own, Argus invokes the long tradition of carnivalising the material body in which the lower body becomes the site of verbal comparison and anxieties associated with homosexuality can be laughed at and debased. “Don’t worry,” said Argus, grinning to himself, “I won’t be bending over in front of you.”\(^ {136}\) Comic references to the physical endowments of horses and mules was also a popular Rabelaisian image, according to Bakhtin, who writes: “[t]he ass is one of the most ancient and lasting symbols of the material bodily lower stratum, which at the same time degrades and regenerates.”\(^ {137}\)

Eventually Argus reaches the busy market town of Ifeka where he is “excited by the pressing crowds, the smells, the constant noise, the frenetic hurry that seemed to

\(^{134}\) Bakhtin 20.
\(^{135}\) Marsden 27.
\(^{136}\) Marsden 27.
\(^{137}\) Bakhtin 78.
In Ifeka Argus encounters a variety of folk who could as easily have populated Rabelais's works, from "the merry woman with laughing eyes" to the "merchants [who] seemed casually in control of the pavement." Here Argus experiences numerous manifestations of folk culture as he observes the behaviour and mannerisms of the market-goers and the merchants. Like Bakhtin's "common folk idiom" which is "to a great extent a culture of the loud word spoken in the open, in the street and marketplace", the people of Ifeka enter into a comic discourse in the markets that is punctuated by loud words, laughter and song. The discourse situates the 'king' of the markets as clown, inverting hierarchies and enabling the people to mock and debase him:

A huge man selling cheese dominated the street. Flushed and jovial, he was more involved in conversation than in business, and seemed almost to resent interruptions from customers wishing to buy. He was constantly laughing and rubbing his hands with pleasure, the gregarious centre of attention in the alleyway. Although Argus enjoyed his larger-than-life egotism, it occurred to him that the other stall-holders might dislike the man's power, under which the men chafed and muttered.

The structure or hierarchy of the markets is inverted when the dominance of the cheese seller, Grobian, becomes the focus of farcical entertainment. At a call from a fellow stall owner Grobian begins a comic dance and song that incites laughter among the crowds and throws Argus's theory "off-balance" forcing him to "wonder if the man was not a genial

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138 Marsden 46.
139 Marsden 46.
140 Marsden 47.
141 Bakhtin 182.
142 Marsden 47.
buffoon instead." Thus, laughter and billingsgate speech among the market people accentuates the liberating potential of popular cultural forms by debasing the high and rendering “the world more carnival.... bringing an atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity.”

The most obviously carnivalesque portion of _The Journey_ involves Argus’s encounter and employment at the fair. During his travels Argus comes upon a travelling show with “food stalls, games, a dance troupe, storytellers, and displays of various oddities, some of them animate and some definitely inanimate.” The animate oddities of this fair include a variety of human “freaks” who are caged and exhibited for the entertainment of the crowd in a large tent:

The animate were not so easily visible: there were pictures of them outside a tent but to see them in the flesh, one had to pay. They were supposed to include a two-headed woman, a fat lady, a human skeleton and a person who was half man-half woman. Argus could not pay his money quickly enough, and, heart fluttering with excitement, went in.

This “freak” show, with its segregation of the “normal” and the “abnormal”, sets up the clearest example of an hierarchical distinction in the text. The audience’s initial impression is that the ‘normal’ people appear to be privileged with the capacity to study, mock, laugh at, judge, insult and even threaten the freaks who are caged and passively accept the abuse. However, this hierarchical structure is soon challenged as the reader is made aware that the cages are used to protect the ‘freaks’ from the ‘normal’ people,
whose behaviour is often cruel and intimidating. Finally the distinctions between ‘freak’ and ‘normal’ begin to break down as Argus becomes aware of the normalcy of each of the ‘freaks’ and the freakishness of the ‘normal’ person, including himself. Argus explains that “‘with the freaks who work here you have to get over your first negative impression, which stops you from seeing them as people....”148 Ruth, “the fat lady ... [who is] naturally gregarious, spending all her spare time sitting in the sun at the front of her caravan, collecting gossip and chatting with all who passed....”149 helps Argus further destabilise this binary of freak/normal by encouraging him to become aware that:

‘Everyone’s a freak anyway. I’m just lucky that I don’t have to work at it. I make a good living out of being myself. I don’t have to do anything; people pay to see me as I am, whereas other people have to go and dig potatoes or trade or fish or sew clothes in order to keep themselves alive. They’re unlucky that their freakishness just isn’t as obvious as mine, so they can’t make much of it.’150

The element that separates the freakishness of Ruth from the fisherman or farmer is her apparent, corporeal difference, her grotesque body. All of the members of the freak show in some way represent the grotesque body, but in a true Bakhtinian sense in which the grotesque body is incomplete, unstable, ever growing, transgressing and degrading. With Argus’s burgeoning awareness of the universal and inseparable elements of both freakishness and normalcy in everyone, the bodies of Ruth the fat lady, Lavolta and Parara the conjoined twins, Titius the man of “incredible thinness”151 and Tiresias the “half man-half woman”152 attain a level of significance in the text through which the

148 Marsden 59.
149 Marsden 38.
150 Marsden 56.
151 Marsden 32.
152 Marsden 34.
characters and their corporeality "[can] not be considered for themselves: they represent a material bodily whole and therefore transgress the limits of their isolation. The private and the universal [are] ... blended in a contradictory unit."\(^{153}\)

Like the grotesque bodies of Rabelais, the freaks are subject to "abuses, oaths and curses"\(^{154}\) commonly incited by their grotesque corporeality. Yet in the travesty, debasement and materialisation of these insults we find the carnivalesque as the people are liberated from the societal norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times and instead give voice to their laughter and curses, behind which reside their diminishing fears.

There was something frightening yet compelling about the quiet figure who was looking out into the distance, over the heads of the crowd. Argus shivered and walked away. In front of him, as he left the tent, was a group of young people. They were subdued until they got out into the bright sunshine but then they broke into an uproar of speculation and jokes about the hermaphroditic figure they had left behind.\(^{155}\)

This reaction of the crowd to Tiresias's ambiguous gender threatens concepts of proper or appropriate behaviour and yet embodies a sense of freedom from hypocrisy and an alleviation of fear, for as Bakhtin states, laughter creates "no dogmas and [can] not become authoritarian; it [does] not convey fear but a feeling of becoming strength."\(^{156}\)

Tiresias the hermaphrodite is, to Argus, the "most disturbing"\(^{157}\) of the freaks and certainly the most ambiguous. According to Bakhtin the "androgyne theme was popular in Rabelais's time" for it encapsulated the many aspects of duality in an "inner bodily

\(^{153}\) Bakhtin 23.
\(^{154}\) Bakhtin 27.
\(^{155}\) Marsden 34.
\(^{156}\) Bakhtin 95.
aspect". It is little surprise then that such themes should appear in Rabelais's work where the "tendency toward duality can be glimpsed everywhere." An example of this theme arises in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* where an emblem adorning Gargantua's hat portrays "a man's body with two heads facing one another, four arms, four feet, a pair of arses and a brace of sexual organs, male and female. Such, according to Plato's *Symposium* was human nature in its mythical origins." Similarly Tiresias in *The Journey*, who is always referred to in the masculine pronoun despite the book's claims that 'his' gender is truly ambiguous, is described as "shadowy", "unsettling" and "elusive". These attributes lend Tiresias an indistinct quality that, in conjunction with 'his' ambiguous gender, cast 'him' as carnivalesque. As a hermaphrodite, Tiresias's body is a site of carnivalised or ambiguous sex and gender. In this context the terms sex and gender are *not* interchangeable as Golombok and Fivush suggest, but rather, are specific terms associated with the social, behavioural, and sexual patterns of an individual and their physiological status. Sex is the label given to biological identity or more correctly "the continuum made up of chromosomal sex, gonadal sex, and hormonal sex." Gender is socially oriented involving "socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro-political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and

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157 Marsden 40.
158 Bakhtin 323.
159 Bakhtin 323.
160 Rabelais from Book 1, Chapter 8 as cited by Bakhtin 323.
161 Marsden 40. To avoid confusion I too will refer to Tiresias in the masculine pronoun but am aware of the inconsistency of doing so in the light of Tiresias's ambiguous gender.
feminine ‘natures’. Society adopts the human sexual organs as signs of legal and social status, they are treated as something corporeal that informs its subject and determines its identity. Thus, when sex and gender identity clash within the individual it is manifested in gender dysphoria with its visible signals translated to such activities as the cross-gender dressing of transvestites and androgyns.

Society often perceives transvestism and androgyny as carnivalesque or aberrant behaviour that disrupts gender conformism. Similarly, hermaphrodites necessarily destabilise distinct gender categories by existing between and within both the masculine and feminine sex and gender categories. Michel Foucault, in his introduction to the memoirs of a nineteenth-century hermaphrodite, explains that the common practice and medical treatment for hermaphroditism from: the Middle Ages through to today has required that doctors decipher the sex of the body, a practice which reflects societal views that each individual body necessarily contains only one “true” sex and that all other sexual categories are “erroneous” or freakish. Foucault writes that “sexual irregularity is seen as belonging more or less to the realm of chimera.” Evidence of this dualistic corporeality is overtly depicted through Tiresias’s clothing and appearance.

Here was a person who was groomed and dressed as though split down the middle. One half was male: a short haircut, a moustache, men’s clothing. But all that ceased at the dividing line: the moustache was only half a moustache, the clothing specially designed. The hair on the female side was long and decorated with beads.

165 Thomas Lacqueur, Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 139-140.
167 Marsden 34.
Just as it is possible to deconstruct the signs and symbols of gender classification, it is also possible to reconstruct those behaviours and emblems in a pattern to alter an individual’s gender identity. This process of reconstruction is what transvestites, transsexuals and hermaphrodites commonly undertake. However, Tiresias’s cross-dressing “parodies the unity of identity and unambiguous gender”\(^{168}\), for far from creating a stable unitary concept of gender and corporeality, Tiresias instead materially represents ‘his’ ambiguity. Rather than embracing the temporary and often idiosyncratic attributes of a single gender Tiresias uses clothing, a social symbol, to manifest ‘his’ dual gender, as a means of performing ‘his’ hermaphroditism. “Argus could not decide to which sex he belonged. Under the artificial embellishments of the special clothes, the moustache, and the haircut, Tiresias was truly a sexually ambiguous figure.”\(^{169}\) Tiresias’s ambiguity disrupts the status quo and challenges the phallocentric ideologies that inform and inflect the construction of gender by challenging the norms of gender singularity.

Tiresias’s unwillingness to conform to the categorical gender distinctions of masculinity and femininity creates further ambiguity around the concept of sexuality. This in turn confuses Argus, whose awareness of Tiresias encompasses both “fascination and fear” and is revealed in a “prickling on the back of his neck and a reddening of his skin [which] always told him when he was near the mysterious half man-half woman.”\(^{170}\) Argus’s unspoken sexual interest and fascination with Tiresias is matched by “local men” and fair-goers who, “in search of something exotic” were “entertained” by Tiresias in his


\(^{169}\) Marsden 40.

\(^{170}\) Marsden 40.
Tiresias's sexuality, like 'his' gender, does not conform to simplistic or unitary notions of homo- or heterosexuality. Rather – it is ambiguous and complex, challenging notions of singular or unitary meanings, subverting concepts of social authority and paradigms of behaviour and morality which result in the casting of Tiresias's sexuality, like 'his' hermaphroditism, as carnivalesque.

In the first chapter of *The Journey* the audience is forewarned about the complexity and potential disruption of meanings in the novel when Argus receives a book which details the purpose and potential of the journey. It warns Argus, and through him the audience, that "nothing was simple: everything was complex, whether it be a leaf, a human, an idea, a word.... [T]he book also warned him that there were no absolutes; such extreme terms as good and evil, true and false, alive and dead, might be convenient words, but should only be seen as indications, not definitions."\(^\text{172}\) This complexity is borne out in Argus's interactions with the freaks, whose grotesque bodies have subsumed symbols of duality into a reconfiguration of the singular, disrupting notions of binaries and hierarchies. To Michael Holquist such disruptions mark an apparent contradiction of simultaneous differences which is at the heart of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque.

Carnival ... is merely one of several attempts [Bakhtin] made at a number of different levels over his long career to find terms that could overcome the apparent contradiction of simultaneous differences: in literature, of course, but as well in social interaction, in nature and above all in language. At different periods in his life Baxtin [sic] invoked various, different sets of terms for what is essentially the same problem: namely, the interaction, indeed the interdependence of elements quite different from each other, the complex wholes which result from otherwise non-identical parts.\(^\text{173}\)

\(^{171}\) Marsden 40.
\(^{172}\) Marsden 11.
For example, Ruth the fat lady and Titius the thin man represent opposing images of
gender, size and demeanour; for Ruth is female, fat, happy and an extrovert whereas
Titius is male, emaciated, dour and an introvert. Characteristics that render each
grotesque create a foil for the corporeality of the other, thereby constructing a unifying,
universalising whole.\textsuperscript{174} Similarly Lavolta and Parara embody opposing or binary
characteristics, which when situated within the single grotesque body unites these
dualisms and renders them carnivalesque:

The conjoined twins, Lavolta and Parara, held a great fascination for Argus. He
found that Parara, who had spoken to him that first day in the tent, was quite
different from her sister. Parara was lively, humorous and outgoing, while her
sister was dour and evasive. Parara would greet everyone she knew with warmth
and pleasure, and stop to chat. Lavolta, who obviously had no choice then but to
stop too, would stand slightly turned away, gazing into the distance and
contributing little or nothing to the conversation.\textsuperscript{175}

In this way, the grotesque characters in \textit{The Journey} differ greatly from those presented in
\textit{The Red King} for here both the individual grotesque characters and the troupe of freaks as
a whole represent the multi-dimensional, universal aspects of the body, until “no signs of
duality [are] left.”\textsuperscript{176}

Mayon, the storyteller, functions as Argus’s mentor during the time he spends at
the fair and it is Mayon who leads Argus toward a greater understanding of the
complexities that govern human behaviour and the overly simplistic ‘rules’ which do not
cater for the multiplicity that is humankind. Mayon identifies the carnivalesque elements

\textsuperscript{174} This is not to deny that the disposition ascribed to each of these characters is a stereotypical
means of relating body size to temperament.

\textsuperscript{175} Marsden 39.
of the fair and celebrates them as: individuals who do not conform; acts which subvert and challenge the norm; and constructs that interrogate official culture and concepts such as unitary definitions. In a conversation with Argus, Mayon explains that “‘as soon as you start to formulate rules and laws and codes of behaviour you’re in trouble. And that goes for something as simple as a system of manners. Because they don’t follow for the complexity of each situation, nor for the fact that each situation is different.’” 

Therefore, when Argus suggests that Tiresias is “weird” Mayon insists that “weird” simply means that Tiresias does not conform to the rules and conventions which supposedly dictate human behaviour and appearance and that it is the rules, rather than the individuals, which should be held in question for it is the rules that are categorical, impracticable and inappropriate. When Argus attempts to further generalise and universalise the behaviour of the freaks by claiming that they are “‘good people’” Mayon quickly reminds him that “[t]hey’re a mixture of good and bad, like everyone else...” thereby reminding the reader that the simple binary distinctions of normal and freak, good and bad, kind and cruel cannot apply to any one individual or group of people. What Mayon effectively achieves is the problematising, the carnivalising, the subversion of the overly simplistic, single-dimension, categorical assertions which society attempts to apply to individuals and groups of people and which fail to cater for alternative or opposing discourses.

Evidence of Mayon’s success in his carnivalising of social rules and norms appears at the end of the novel when Argus, having completed his journey, must present

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176 Bakhtin 321.
177 Marsden 82.
178 Marsden 83-84.
to the Council of senior men and women the seven stories which are uniquely his and yet
are also the stories of “all the people”\textsuperscript{180}. Argus’s fifth story concerns the “world’s
greatest circus” which was run by Zexta who “had a fine sense of climax” and included
performances by “twisters, rumblers and bouncers ... acrobats and stilt-walkers ...
scrabblers and contortionists.”\textsuperscript{181} The crowds would wander through the carnival
atmosphere of the circus and their roaming would culminate outside a huge pavilion
surrounded by banners which read: “‘SEE THE FREAK’, ‘ABSOLUTELY THE ONLY ONE IN THE WORLD’, ‘A UNIQUE BEING’, ‘POSSIBLY THE MOST AMAZING CREATURE IN CREATION’...”\textsuperscript{182} Forced into the pavilion in single file the crowd
would view the freak within and then exit leaving both the pavilion and the circus behind.
Argus concluded his story by saying:

‘And what did they see? Who was the freak?’ Argus smiled. ‘They saw a unique creature all right. For Zexta had placed nothing but a huge mirror in her splendid pavilion.’\textsuperscript{183}

Through utilisation of the carnivalesque in this story Argus recognises the
destabilisation of the binary distinctions; challenges the hierarchical differentiations; and
debases the normative constructs which once separated the ‘normal’ crowd of spectators
from the caged ‘freaks’ of the fair. According to Bakhtin, “[t]he downward movement is
inherent in all forms of popular-festive merriment and grotesque realism. Down, inside

\textsuperscript{179} Marsden 105.
\textsuperscript{180} Marsden 11.
\textsuperscript{181} Marsden 178.
\textsuperscript{182} Marsden 178.
\textsuperscript{183} Marsden 179.
out, vice versa, upside down, such is the direction of all these movements.\textsuperscript{184} The combination of the concepts of freakish and normative degrades notional hierarchies and thus carnivalises not only Argus's story but the systems which segregated individuals according to their physical appearance or freakishness. This movement downward, this degradation of the normative, is not a negative outcome but is instead positive and universalising in its affirmation of the material and bodily roots of the subject and the social. Furthermore, it creates a sense of egalitarianism which parallels the social structures that Bakhtin celebrates in his vision of carnival time, and reflects Mayon's assertion that: "[t]hey [the freaks] are all you, all a different part of you."\textsuperscript{185} Thus, Argus's story, far from ridiculing difference, celebrates the uniqueness of the individual and the potential for the carnivalising of all forms of social intercourse.

Argus's departure from the fair marks the turning point in \textit{The Journey}. Having reached the geographical and metaphorical site that was farthest from home and the norms of his society, Argus embarks on a slow progression home that culminates in his appropriation of the values and paradigms of his parents and society. His return journey treads a convoluted path through the terrains of sexual maturity, parenthood and familial obligations. Argus ultimately returns home with partner, Adious, and child in tow only to find his parents are old and "frail".\textsuperscript{186} Once there Argus arrives at the realisation that "in many ways his journey had been unnecessary, for all the things he had encountered and learned, could have been learned in the valley. Yet he also knew that he needed to leave.

\textsuperscript{184} Bakhtin 370.
\textsuperscript{185} Marsden 105.
\textsuperscript{186} Marsden 159.
Therefore, in contrast to *The Red King* in which the greatest potential for a carnivalesque reading resides in the ambiguous conclusion, *The Journey* concludes with Argus accepting the responsibilities of farming and family that come as the hallmarks of normalcy in his society. Yet this conclusion can also be read as carnivalesque for Bakhtin reminds us that the carnival only ever marks a “temporary suspension”\(^\text{188}\) which is predicated on a reinstallation of the norm. Argus’s journey, therefore, represents that period of carnival in which the ideals of his society are questioned and subverted and his return home symbolises the restoration of the status quo.

Thus, despite his growing awareness and carnivalesque interpretation of the hierarchical structures society creates and sustains, Argus ultimately conforms to the order, traditions, and ceremonial pomposity of his people when he stands before the Council of senior men and women who judge his worthiness to be treated as an adult. Without their approval Argus would be subject to:

> ... painful silences with friends and neighbours, for the embarrassment would often lie in the subjects which could not be raised, rather than in what was actually said. He would be excluded from privileges and responsibilities that went with the status of adult in the valley. Certainly, as time went on, and he aged, he would be accepted as an adult anyway, but without any ceremony or sense of pride. And the position of elder would be forever closed to him.\(^\text{189}\)

Argus’s claim that “he did not need a Council of senior men and women to tell him whether he had achieved maturity”\(^\text{190}\) is not reflected in his actions which suggest that

\(^{187}\) Marsden 161.  
\(^{188}\) Bakhtin 10.  
\(^{189}\) Marsden 162.  
\(^{190}\) Marsden 163.
this reaffirmation is exactly what he desires. In seeking the sanction of the Council Argus legitimates the existing social hierarchy and recognises the value that hierarchical and normative social practices place upon the judgement of the Council as the ultimate confirmation of social status. These paradigms of normalcy and hierarchy are what Argus once questioned and challenged whilst residing with the freaks, and his capitulation is evidence of how far he has travelled towards the sanctioned, traditional and conventional since leaving the fair. Therefore, Argus’s journey which begins as an act of carnivalistic resistance ultimately collapses into an endorsement of the values, structures, hierarchies and paradigms he once challenged – yet this conservative reinstallation is as essential to carnival as the initial journey and metamorphosis.

When in 1940 Bakhtin had completed his dissertation on Rabelais and the carnivalesque he could hardly have envisaged the application of his theory to the fields in which it is now readily adopted. Children’s literature, on first appearance, seems to lend itself to a carnivalesque reading, for here is a literature which is often trivialised and rarely canonised, a literature which is written for an audience which lacks political and social influence, a literature often concerned with playfulness and the developing body. Yet, unlike Rabelais’s works which tested and toppled boundaries and expectations, children’s novels often cling to the safety of the status quo, thereby appeasing the fears of the many censorious gazes which monitor its content but which do not challenge or destabilise some of the normative expectations which repeatedly arise in this genre. However, it must be noted that there are texts written for children which broach this gap and problematise the status quo.
John Marsden’s *The Journey* is an example of an Australian children’s novel which realises this potential by subverting hierarchical and normative expectations through the depiction of grotesque or carnivalesque characters. Whilst the conclusion to *The Journey* involves a return to a status quo in which the conservative values of a Council of elders is given precedence over Argus’s new social awareness, this reinstallation of the established order simply signals the impermanence upon which the carnival is predicated. Victor Kelleher’s *The Red King* similarly flirts with the potential for disruption and subversion through the construction of numerous grotesque characters and the centrality of fairs and carnivals in the plot. It is not through these devices, however, that *The Red King* realises its carnivalesque potential. Indeed these characters and settings ultimately oppose the carnivalesque for they stand as representations of the power and influence of the social hierarchy and the Red King. Instead it is in the conclusion of this novel that the reader finds some sense of the carnivalesque in its ambiguity and inconclusiveness, in its suggestion of utopian and dystopian potential and in the insurrection which sees the debasement of the Red King by a lowly acrobat. This is not to suggest that *The Red King*, any more than *The Journey*, can be considered carnivalesque in the same way that one can interpret Rabelais’s work through Bakhtin’s theory. Yet there are elements of both of these novels which suggest the potential for carnivalsation and which therefore indicate that a consideration of other children’s novels using this theory may be a productive endeavour.