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Lester, Catherine

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Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Lester, C 2024, 'Bloody bunnies on the small screen: Adapting Watership Down for children's television', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*.

Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal

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Download date: 13. Jan. 2025

Bloody bunnies on the small screen: Adapting *Watership Down* for children's television

Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972) is an epic fantasy novel about anthropomorphic wild rabbits who embark on a quest across the English countryside for a new home after one of their number, the clairvoyant Fiver, has a prophetic vision of their warren's imminent destruction by human real estate developers. The rabbits' dangerous journey is presented in detail as they encounter threats from humans, animal predators, and even other rabbits, imbuing the novel with the persistent threat of death. The 1978 cel-animated film adaptation directed by Martin Rosen brought the novel's brutality to life: rabbits are killed or maimed on screen in stark and bloody detail, and surrealist imagery depicts Fiver's haunting visions of death and destruction. As such, the film has gone on to gain a reputation for having 'traumatised an entire generation' of children (Power, 2018a). This was exacerbated by it receiving a U certificate from the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), indicating suitability for viewers of all ages. The film's questionable status as children's entertainment remains hotly debated thanks to its ongoing presence on television; for instance, in 2016 and 2017 screenings of the film by the British broadcaster Channel 5 on consecutive Easter Sundays sparked outrage on social media due to perceptions that it would negatively affect children in the audience (Duncan). The film's 'traumatic' legacy haunts further adaptations of the novel. The BBC/Netflix 2018 computer-animated television adaptation aimed at family audiences aimed to be less 'harrowingly violent' than the film, once again generating debate about *Watership Down*'s intended audience, the value of distressing content in children's media, and whether a non-violent *Watership Down* is *Watership Down* at all? (Raeside) Indeed, the 1999-2001 cel-animated adaptation produced for linear children's television received little public or media attention and is not well-remembered, perhaps because it

stripped away the horrific aspects that have kept the 1978 film in public memory for nearly half a century.

This article seeks to contribute to understandings of *Watership Down*, and of children's horror media more broadly, by attending to the role of television in its cultural history and significance. Television adaptations have been neglected within *Watership Down* scholarship, including my own edited collection on the film (Lester 2023), despite their vastly different approaches to adapting horror and violence. Given that '[d]ebates about children and television have largely been preoccupied with the potential impact of "harmful" material' (Davies, Buckingham and Kelley, 5), *Watership Down* is a useful case study for examining how children's media creators translate potentially 'harmful' material – particularly bloody violence – across different media, for different audiences, and in different industrial contexts. After outlining my approach to screen adaptations of *Watership Down*, this article examines the role of television in helping to form the 1978 film's reputation as 'traumatising', especially in its national production context, the United Kingdom. I then draw from paratextual, industrial and textual analysis to discuss how the 1999 and 2018 television versions approached the process of adaptation to directly address children and families, especially regarding the representation of violence. This reveals that the 1978 film was just as significant an influence as the novel in shaping the two television series, in that the producers were careful to distance their adaptations from the film and its horrific legacy in order to better position their adaptations toward children and families, and to avoid replicating the controversy that the film attracted. The conclusion considers the importance of transgression of boundaries and expectations to the reception and ongoing cultural legacy of children's horror screen media, and *Watership Down* specifically.

Adapting children's horror

This article is in conversation with the growing and intersecting bodies of work on children's adaptations and children's horror films and television (e.g. Antunes; Balanzategui; Hunter; Lester 2021a; Lester 2021b; McCallum; Meeusen; Wheatley 2012). Two works that directly engage with the issue of how frightening material for children is translated to the screen are Anne Marie Bird's 'Women Behaving Badly: Dahl's Witches Meet the Women of the Eighties' and Lindsay Myers' 'Whose Fear Is It Anyway?: Moral Panics and "Stranger Danger" in Henry Selick's *Coraline*'. The authors are concerned with the way that children's film adaptations employ the aesthetics of horror cinema, such as the use of misogynistic visual language of the monstrous-feminine in *The Witches* (Nicolas Roeg, 1990) and the use of 'stock horror tropes' like 'unexpected twists, sensational scenes, and dramatic crescendos' to heighten child endangerment in *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009) (Myers 252-53). Both Bird and Myers criticise these films for prioritising adult fears and socio-political concerns, especially concerns about children's endangerment from strangers, over the fears and concerns of children themselves.

Although these works lay some useful groundwork for considering horror in children's screen adaptations, they are representative of what Robert Stam calls the hierarchical and moralistic tendency of literary criticism to assess film adaptations by their fidelity to the source, where departures are framed as 'violations' or 'betrayals' (54). When it comes to children's horror, the weight of such moral concerns is heightened on account of long-standing debates over whether horror is appropriate for children, especially when presented visually (see Sarah Cleary for a history of such debates, and their problems). However, the notion that horror is an 'adult' genre that children should be shielded from is widely challenged in children's horror scholarship, just as much as the fidelity argument is challenged in adaptation studies (namely Antunes; Lester 2021b). Accusations of infidelity,

violation and inappropriateness plague the 1978 film adaptation of *Watership Down*, as illustrated by children's author S. F. Said's criticism that it 'makes things so literal, and forces its images on us'. Similarly, Noam Murro, executive producer and director of the 2018 *Watership Down* mini-series, condemned the film's 'gratuitous violence' (in Gullickson). The illustrator of the 2023 graphic novel adaptation of *Watership Down* also positioned his work as more authentic than the film by expressing the 'hope that this book will help people correct their memory of Watership Down' (Joe Sutphin in Schuerman). Yet such characterisations of the 1978 film as a 'bad object' wielded as a promotional tool by subsequent adaptors in order to position their own works as more 'correct' or child-friendly (a concept that is just as slippery as fidelity), ironically canonise the film as just as influential a source text as Adams' novel. Even so, it is arguably true that the film offers a more visceral experience than the novel, and it is worth considering an example in detail that demonstrates why the film evokes such emotive responses, and why it has a reputation as a 'traumatic' children's film.

The novel opens with an epigraph from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, in which the prophet Cassandra describes a vision of a 'house [that] reeks of death and dripping blood' (in Adams 1972, 1). This is followed immediately the first proper line of the novel – 'The primroses were over' (1) – providing a solemn, ominous tone that foreshadows Fiver's similar vision some pages later, in which he anticipates the imminent destruction of the warren to make way for a housing development: 'There isn't any danger here, at this moment. But it's coming – it's coming. Oh, Hazel, look! The field! It's covered with blood!' (4-5). Fiver is described as 'shiver[ing]', 'cower[ing]' and 'whimper[ing]' with fear (5), although this emotional state is cushioned through the way the passage is expressed in the third-person from the perspective of another rabbit, Hazel, who is comparatively calm, but concerned for Fiver.

By contrast, the film places the viewer directly in Fiver's subjective and terrified point-of-view. As in the novel, Fiver and Hazel are peacefully eating grass when the start of Fiver's vision is signified by the non-diegetic sound of quiet, high-pitched strings on the soundtrack. The strings gradually become louder and more frenetic as Fiver's fur is bathed in a red glow emanating from off-screen, which he hops toward, saying 'I know now. A terrible thing is coming.' Fiver pauses at the boundary between two fields, and an over-the-shoulder shot shows the trembling Fiver as he says, 'Look. The field – it's covered with blood!' as deep brass notes punctuate the score and a growing pool of red seeps across the grass in the distance. The film cuts over to an unfazed Hazel – 'Blood? Don't be silly', he says – before cutting back to Fiver as the 'blood' on the field quickens in its spread as the strings increase in volume to an overwhelming wail (Figure 1). The shot tracks toward the blood-red field to fully immerse the audience in Fiver's feverish perspective as the black silhouettes of trees on the horizon stretch and warp to fill the frame. Finally, the image fades back into the over-the-shoulder view of the field, which has returned to normal, and the score gives way to a soft woodwind melody.

There is evidently a dramatic difference between how Fiver's vision is presented on the page and screen, where the latter employs visual and aural strategies of horror cinema to situate the audience in Fiver's state of terror. Non-diegetic music and extreme colours 'intensif[y] the nightmarish qualities of Fiver's visions' (Weston 155) and 'provide a sense of overwhelming fear and danger' (Rickards 170). Given this sensory overload, it is likely that a child watching this would become distressed. Indeed, film critic Phil Hoad recalls his own childhood terror upon seeing this 'far too vivid' 'apocalyptic vision' in the cinema (Hoad). I do not intend to debate whether the intensity of the film adaptation of *Watership Down* is appropriate for children or not, as this is dependent on how one defines 'children', and complicated by the fact that the film was not meant by its makers to be a 'children's film' at

all, as I will explain below. Nor do I wish to fall into the trap of measuring fidelity. Rather, this comparison provides a basis from which to assess *how* the film adapts Adams's novel in order to later demonstrate what the television adaptations are doing differently. In this endeavour, it is useful to draw from more recent scholarship which has provided productive analyses of children's adaptations by moving beyond or nuancing the fidelity arguments which have resulted in overwhelmingly negative assessments of the representation of horror in children's films.

In her study *Children's Books on the Big Screen,* Meghann Meeusen frames differences between children's novels and film adaptations as 'thematic amplifications' rather than 'distortions' (33). Echoing Adams' own position that 'a film is not a book. They are two distinct forms of art' requiring 'different tools' (Adams, 1978), Meeusen challenges Myers' take on *Coraline* and argues instead that the film's use of Hollywood horror formal strategies takes advantage of cinema's medium specificity to 'amplif[y] conflict' through the intensification of thematic binaries (41). Tom Jordan anticipates this view in his own analysis of the *Watership Down* film, which he commends for employing the audio-visual language of cinema to 'recreate the tone of the book' (232). Following Meeusen's approach, I contend that the film's representation of Fiver's vision employs conventions of horror cinema to *amplify* the danger facing the rabbits, as it does not have the luxury of the novel's length in which to let this unfold through a gradually building atmosphere of unease and uncertainty.

Meeusen's notion of 'amplification' provides a useful framework with which to examine how the *Watership Down* television adaptations approach the representation of horror and violence. However, it is important to acknowledge that, while some arguments on adapting novels to film also apply to television – due for example to a shared aesthetic language – there are industrial, contextual and formal differences that impact a work's adaptation to television, which I will address below. My approach to adaptation in this article

therefore follows Meeusen by foregrounding medium-specificity and resisting hierarchical evaluation based on fidelity. As such, I aim to treat the literary and audio-visual tellings of *Watership Down* as equally legitimate texts, and by turn I treat both the 1972 novel and the 1978 film as equally important in shaping the television adaptations. I consider what aspects of *Watership Down* the television adaptations are (or are not) amplifying, especially with regard to horror, violence, and the depiction of blood, and how these differences are shaped by their medium and target audience.

***Watership Down* (1978) on television**

Prior to discussing the television adaptations of *Watership Down*, it is important to address the role that television played in the development of the film's reputation as 'traumatising' in the UK. Neither Adams' novel nor Rosen's film were intended to be strictly 'for children'. The novel originated as stories that Adams told his young daughters, and it was received as a children's book upon publication by critics and award bodies, winning the Carnegie Medal for outstanding children's fiction. However, Adams was uncomfortable with the classification of his novel as 'children's literature', a category that he saw as enforcing a limiting perspective of childhood as innocent and comfortable (Adams, 1975). It is clear why the novel would be considered a children's book given its focus on anthropomorphic rabbits, but the novel itself belies this assumption. It is long, written at an advanced reading level, contains no illustrations, and features epigraphs from classics such as the aforementioned *Agamemnon*, which in some editions is presented in the original Greek. None of these elements disqualify *Watership Down* from being a children's novel – indeed, such prestigious qualities, combined with its environmental themes, led to its approval by middle-class parents for their children as well as success with a growing counter-cultural youth movement in the 1970s (Pawling 213-14). But the novel is arguably not accessible or appealing to very young children who might be likely to be distressed by its contents. The film, by contrast, made the

novel accessible to a younger, even pre-literate, audience through its short runtime and presentation in cel-animation.

Like Adams, however, Rosen did not consider his film to be 'for children'. He claims to have tried to adequately forewarn audiences of the film's tone and content through its marketing, including the poster which displayed an illustration of the silhouette of a rabbit caught in a snare, referencing a scene in which the rabbit Bigwig almost chokes to death:

> I did not make this picture for kids at all. […] I reckoned a mother with a sensitive child would see [the poster] and reckon, "well maybe this isn't for Charlie – it's a little too tough". (in Power, 2018a)

Rosen shows awareness of individual differences affecting how children respond to screen media, which are often elided in considerations 'child-friendliness', and the need for adult guardians to be able to make informed decisions for their children. This is further evidenced by his disagreement with BBFC's decision to award the film its most permissive rating, U for 'Universal', which remains widely associated with children's entertainment (Roberts 11). Despite this, British film critics recommended *Watership Down* as 'a straightforward children's adventure' (Whitehead 30) and framed frightening elements as educational, akin to Grimms' fairy tales (Malcolm 12). It is tempting to view these perspectives with incredulity, but Frances Critchley points out that *Watership Down* was not an outlier among British children's culture of the 1970s, which included similarly disturbing texts such as folk horror series *Children of the Stones* (1977), live-action animal stories that ended in death like *Ring of Bright Water* (Jack Couffer, 1969), and public information films like *Lonely Water* (Jeff Grant, 1973) which employed horror conventions to caution children about everyday dangers (Critchley 29). *Watership Down* may not have been conceived as a children's film by its makers, but it is clear how and why it might have been received as such by adult regulators,

critics and guardians in the late-1970s. Additionally, *Watership Down* was not received as a horror film by adult critics upon its initial release. This generic status appears to have been conferred over time as children who were impacted by it have aged and shared their recollections in the media (as per Hoad) and online fan spaces.

Television and home media formats were crucial in cementing *Watership Down*'s iconic status as 'kindertrauma'. Prior to the film's release it was framed as children's entertainment on Barry Norman's BBC film review programme *Film '*78 (tx. 15 October 1978), the Children's BBC programme *Animal Magic* in an episode that focussed on rabbits (tx. 7 February 1978), and on US television when a *Watership Down*-themed float featured on NBC's broadcast of the 52nd Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade (tx. 23 November 1978). Later, the maudlin song 'Bright Eyes', written for the film by Mike Batt and performed by Art Garfunkel, became the best-selling single of 1979 in the UK and held the number one spot for six consecutive weeks (Allen). A montage of scenes from the film, showcasing the film's countryside imagery, was a visual accompaniment to the song's numerous appearances on *Top of the Pops* (1964-2005). Broadcasting of the film on British television was also key to how it was perceived as a children's text. Long before Channel 5's Easter Sunday broadcasts, *Watership Down* was shown on British television throughout the 1980s and '90s at times when children would likely be watching, such as at weekends and on Christmas morning. As a result, I have argued elsewhere that 'the combination of talking animated rabbits, U certificate, "child-friendly" broadcasting strategies and home media releases […] would not adequately prepare anyone, adult or child, for the markedly more mature – or "traumatic" – contents, style and tone of the film' (Lester 2023, 12).

The above might suggest that television had a detrimental effect on how children received *Watership Down*. However, there is a growing academic consensus that television may be the ideal home for children's engagement with horror because it has equal potential to

mitigate and enhance a viewer's level of fear. David Buckingham's empirical research into children's viewing experiences of horror (95-138) illustrates how television and its domestic viewing context can afford greater flexibility compared with the cinema, as it can allow children to control and alleviate their fear, and where adult co-viewers are more easily able to comfort frightened children. Equally, however, television can also enable unexpected or unsupervised viewing. Indeed, apocryphal legends surround *Watership Down* as something that children saw unsupervised in the home after a guardian mistook the film for a light-hearted cartoon. Television is also theorised as able to evoke fear in ways specific to its medium and domestic viewing context (e.g. Wheatley, 2012; Jowett and Abbott; Lester 2021a). Although the 1978 adaptation of *Watership Down* was designed for theatrical exhibition, its circulation on television and home media has undoubtedly made it even more accessible to children and contributed toward its reception as a horror film that generates intense, formative experiences. For better or worse, this helped the film to garner a cult legacy as a film that is both beloved and controversial precisely because of its transgressive qualities. In this context, and in light of criticisms levelled at the film for being a misrepresentation of the novel or inappropriate for children, it follows that producers of the two subsequent television adaptations might want to tread carefully in how they positioned their works for young viewers. The discussion turns next to detailed consideration of these efforts, and the extent to which they were successful, through examination of the production, form and reception of the 1999 and 2018 adaptations.

***Watership Down* (1999-2001) as children's television**

The first television adaptation of *Watership Down* was a cel-animated, British-Canadian co-production initially broadcast between 1999 and 2001 for thirty-nine episodes. The production team, including Rosen returning as an executive producer, appear to have viewed the series as an opportunity to make a version of *Watership Down* that would be tailored

specifically for young children; different contemporaneous sources cite a target age range of five-to-eight (Bell 15) and six-to-eleven (Barker 106). While there is a clear commercial imperative to this expansion of the *Watership Down* 'brand' to a new generation through the series and extensive cross-promotional merchandising (including a variety of child-oriented products such as cuddly toys, video games and picture books), this adaptation also presented the opportunity to correct some of the film's perceived missteps. In terms of violence and horror, I argue that the 1999 series took an approach of *omission* rather than *amplification* of the violent material already present in the novel. Aside from the handling of horror, a number of other adaptive choices were made to position the series as a version of *Watership Down* specifically for young children.

One of these changes was the anthropomorphisation of the rabbits to a greater degree than in the film in order to respond to complaints that the rabbits in the film were difficult to tell apart (Mount 10). In addition, the 1999 series changed the sex of some of the characters in order to address critiques of the novel and film for their almost total lack of female characters (e.g. Le Guin). This drives the narrative in the latter part of the story: upon reaching their new home on the titular Watership Down early in the novel, the rabbits realise that they have no does (female rabbits) to mate with and ensure the longevity of the warren. To resolve this, they infiltrate a nearby warren, Efrafa, run like a concentration camp by a fascistic rabbit named General Woundwort, to liberate some oppressed does and bucks (males) along with them. The 1999 series attempts to rectify this gender imbalance by changing the sex of some existing male rabbits and adding new female characters. Robyn McCallum argues that adaptations of children's texts 'provide a rich resource for the examination of the transmission and adaptation of cultural values and ideologies' (1), which is evidenced by Rosen's claim that the more equal gender balance was intended to make the series 'more inclusive for all children' (in Mount 11). This was taken further by the 2018

mini-series, which gave female rabbits like Clover larger and more active roles, while the voice cast foregrounded gender, racial and regional diversity through its casting of British household names with international recognition, such as James McAvoy, Olivia Colman, John Boyega and Peter Capaldi.

Beyond representation, the 1999 television series also made changes to language and character names. Adams constructed a fictional rabbit language, Lapine, for his novel, much of which is integrated into the film. The Lapine language is also found in character names, notably the rabbit folk hero El-ahrairah, meaning 'Prince with a Thousand Enemies'. In the 1999 series, however, the name is pronounced 'El-ahrah' with only three syllables, presumably to make this easier for children to remember and pronounce themselves. The fact that the series was accompanied by a series of educational children's picture books indicates that accessibility of language by young children was an important consideration for the series. The 1978 film was also accompanied by a roll-out of merchandise, but this was not so clearly directed toward young children as that of the 1999 series.

Media-specific characteristics of television such as broadcasting channels and times are also reflective of the series' target audience. It was broadcast on dedicated children's channel YTV in Canada and in the UK on ITV's children's programming block, CITV, on weekday afternoons. This broadcasting slot was primely positioned for children to tune in upon returning home from school. The choice to present the new adaptation on television, rather than film, was a deliberate move in addressing a child audience. Rosen explained, 'This was the opportunity to introduce the story to these new generations, in a form that is more readily available to them, as a TV series rather than a movie' (in Mount 10). As discussed above, this notion that television is 'more readily available' to children than film is supported by a wide range of scholarship. Filipa Antunes (131-33) and Jessica Balanzategui (207-8) show that North American children's horror was particularly well-served by

industrial shifts in the television landscape in the 1990s. Digital technology, deregulation and market expansion facilitated ‘narrowcasting’, as opposed to the mass-audience implications of ‘broadcasting’, where increasingly niche child audiences could be targeted through scheduling blocks or entire channels, without the commercial imperative to address adults faced by theatrically-released films (Antunes 131, 132). If the 1999 *Watership Down* benefitted from this ‘below-the-radar’ broadcasting context, this is a significant difference to extreme cultural visibility of its novel and film predecessors.

Of course, the handling of violence and horror was a key way in which the 1999 series was positioned toward a younger audience than the novel and film. Ahead of the broadcast, Rosen provided assurance that death would be an important part of the series, with the caveat that ‘It’s not there to titillate but it’s part of life’ (in Mount 10). Another executive producer, Simon Vaughan, claimed that ITV’s controller for children’s programming Nigel Pickard ‘had a view that we had to be careful not to deal with some of the more aggressive issues in the film. We had already taken a commercial decision that you can have jeopardy and tension and drama without blood and guts’ (in Barker 106). Alongside this was an emphasis on high production values and conventional, and exportable, notions of British televisual ‘quality’. In a 1990 article on this problematic concept, Charlotte Brunsdon identifies four ‘quality components’ (85-86) that were then emerging in British television, all of which apply to the 1999 *Watership Down*: ‘Literary source’ (Adams’ novel); ‘The Best of British Acting’ (including Stephen Fry, Dawn French, and the return of John Hurt, who voiced Hazel in the film, to play Woundwort in the series); ‘Money’ (an above-average children’s television budget of £6 million (Bell)); and ‘Heritage export’ (the animation recreates the real-world English landscape locations in a postcard fashion, complemented by a score performed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra). These attempts to foreground artistic merit and authenticity while downplaying horror are consistent with a pattern that

Antunes has observed in the promotion of 1990s children's horror films, such as *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Henry Selick, 1993), in order to avoid controversy and align them more closely with mainstream tastes (Antunes 99-106). In the case of the *Watership Down* 1999 series, the producers' comments likely intended to reassure concerned adults of the series' quality and suitability for unsupervised children.

With regards to the representation of violence, Vaughan's distancing of the series from 'blood and guts' is an accurate characterisation. As established above, blood is a prominent feature of the novel from the opening *Agamemnon* epigraph and Fiver's vision, which is intensely depicted in the film. This scene aside, the film doesn't necessarily contain *more* blood or moments of violence than the novel. Rather, as Rosen described it, the film is a 'concentration of all the emotional highlights of the book' (in Mount 11). Where the film concentrates – or *amplifies* – violence and horror, the 1999 television series *omits* them, using the formal qualities of children's television to do so. As a medium that favours long-form storytelling, serial television is suited to adapting novels (Jowett and Abbott 61) and so, Rosen claimed, this format allowed the 1999 series to 'revisit the original story, to expand it and get closer to the novel' (in Mount 10). As such, the series loosely and leisurely follows the plot of the novel, with the addition of original subplots such as a trip to the seaside home of Kehaar the gull in series two. Kehaar provides much-needed comic relief in the novel and film, and this is amplified in the series through his larger role and vocal performance by comedian Rik Mayall. Moments of threat and violence are therefore spread thinly throughout the entire series, and they are carefully structured so that frightening encounters are resolved by the end of each episode. This episodic restoration of equilibrium is common in television, but *Watership Down*'s executive producer Neil Court maintained that it 'is very important in a kids' series' (in Bell 15). In this way, the *Watership Down* series takes its generic cues not

from horror, but from the form of children's television to reposition the story for a younger audience.

This repositioning is also reflected in the aesthetic representation of blood. As Julia Kristeva theorises in her landmark work *Powers of Horror*, bodily fluids including blood, and the wounds it seeps from, are powerful symbolic forces that evoke abjection by disturbing boundaries, identity, and acting as unwelcome reminders of the inevitability of one's own death. It follows then that in *children's* texts, where such existential and violent notions are often considered unsuitable for the target audience, blood and gore is rarely depicted in detail, or at all. Olivia Railton suggests in her analysis of blood in the 1978 *Watership Down* film that the mere presence of blood on screen might increase one's perception of how violent an image is (12). Coupled with the backlash against the 1978 film for being too violent, it is therefore unsurprising that the 1999 *Watership Down* series uses blood sparingly, sometimes omitting it altogether. This is best demonstrated through the differences in how the novel, film and series depict the aforementioned scene in which Bigwig almost chokes to death in a snare trap.

In the novel, the snare draws blood that is evocatively described as 'drops […] dark and red as yew berries' that 'welled one by one down [Bigwig's] shoulder' (Adams 1972, 95). This is amplified in the film as streams of blood running from Bigwig's mouth and nose, which increase in detail and volume as Bigwig comes closer to death (Figure 2). In the 1999 series the sequence is entirely bloodless, but the urgency of the situation is conveyed through fast-paced music and the tense voice performances of the other rabbits as they work to free Bigwig (Figure 3). In other cases, bloody sequences from the novel and film are absent or deferred in the series, such as Fiver's vision of Sandleford's destruction. The series opens *in media res* after the rabbits have already escaped Sandleford. Less than two minutes into the first episode Fiver does have *a* vision, but this is a version of a utopian, rather than dystopian,

moment that comes much later in the novel, when Fiver has an entirely bloodless premonition of where the rabbits should set up their new warren: Watership Down. Thus, if the 1978 film amplifies the rabbits' proximity to death through the prominence of blood as 'an index of the unspeakable horror of mortality' (Railton 13), the 1999 series' reduction or omission of bloody images puts greater distance between life and death in order to better align with the expectations of children's television.

This strategy appears to have worked. The show ran for three series, and it was warmly received by British and Canadian critics who did not see any cause for concern about its approach to violent material or lack thereof. One reported that it 'preserves the integrity and charm of the book and filmed properties, while adding new narratives in the spirit of the original works' (Barker 106). However, I have not been able to trace viewing figures, and the opinions of the target audience of children are difficult to come by. While the series now has a small but quite devoted community of adult fans (such as the Fiver's Honeycomb online message board: fhc.soopergrape.com) it is not widely well-remembered among the general public. This is undoubtedly down to the way the series significantly tempers the violent content that is a core part of the film's legacy, and as such drew no comparative ire or distress from audiences. Recalling Antunes' argument regarding the overlooked cultural status of children's television, it might be that the series was so successfully repositioned toward children – through more anthropomorphic characters, simplification of language, omission of bloody violence, the cushioning of threat through comedy and episodic structures, and its broadcasting on child-oriented channels – that it was simply not widely noticed by adult culture and thus not given the same degree of attention as the film in the public sphere. Indeed, another critic lamented that the series might not have much to offer 'grown-ups' who were fans of the novel and film (Davison 61). This very invisibility may have been a benefit, allowing the series to be covertly appreciated its target audience of young children and

providing an accessible gateway for more intense and mature material, including the *Watership Down* novel and film. As the next section argues, the 2018 mini-series was granted no such invisibility: it deliberately courted adults as part of wide, intergenerational audience of address, with the added complication of bridging traditional broadcast and streaming markets, and simultaneously trying to avoid the traumatic connotations of the 1978 film.

***Watership Down* (2018) as family co-viewing**

The next television adaptation of *Watership Down* was a four-hour 3D computer-animated mini-series, first broadcast in the UK on BBC One in December 2018, and then distributed internationally by Netflix. When it was announced in 2016, the 1999 series was scarcely mentioned or ignored entirely in the media reporting (e.g. Plunkett 2016). Rather, the 1978 film was the main point of comparison, the controversial legacy and cult status of which had intensified since 1999. This is likely down to the ubiquity of the internet allowing GenX and Millennial adults to share their childhood experiences of viewing the film, even to the point of creating and circulating memes and fanvids about its 'traumatic' effects (Weston 158-61). The furore over the 2016 Easter Sunday broadcast of the film less than one month prior to the announcement of the mini-series also brought the film and its gory reputation back into the spotlight and generated fresh media debate about its appropriateness for children. It is unsurprising, then, that the announcement of the mini-series began a concerted media strategy to set expectations about its levels of violence, appropriateness for children, and to distance it from the horror genre and from the 1978 film of *Watership Down* in particular. In doing so, however, this strategy and the representation of violence in the programme sent a confusing message about its intended audience and struggled to shake off the film's violent legacy. The 2018 *Watership Down* mini-series is thus a testament to the difficulty in presenting family-friendly horror on screen (and a version of *Watership Down* specifically) that satisfies audience expectations of violence without attracting unwanted controversy.

The mini-series was positioned from its announcement as family viewing, with BBC Drama commissioning editor Matthew Read likening it to *Harry Potter* and stating that *Watership Down* 'will unite the whole family and bring this classic story to a new generation' (in Jaafar). Executive producer Rory Aitken stressed the adaptation's 'suitability' and authenticity to the novel in his assurance that while it 'won't shy away from the darkness in the book, visually it won't be as brutal and scarring' (in Furness 2016). Executive producer and director Murro went further to distance it from the film's violent legacy. In an interview coinciding with mini-series' Netflix premiere, he stated the intention to address the contemporary moment through the amplification of the novel's environmental themes, and stressed that 'It was never the idea to remake the movie, and certainly not remake a horror movie' (in Gullickson).

This eco-conscious and family-oriented approach made *Watership Down* a good fit on the surface for both the publicly funded, national broadcaster BBC and global commercial streamer Netflix. It was broadcast on BBC One in two feature-length parts on consecutive evenings the weekend of 22 and 23 December 2018 at 7pm and 7.20pm: prime-time, pre-watershed Christmas scheduling that indicated an inclusive, intergenerational address. In this way, the series sat neatly between the BBC's history of prestigious, family-friendly literary adaptations, like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1988), and the broadcaster's flagship science-fiction-horror programme *Doctor Who* (1963-) which is renowned for frightening and thrilling children as part of a family audience. In its international distribution context on Netflix, *Watership Down*'s intended audience could not be indicated through linear scheduling, but was situated within Netflix's catalogue of 'Family Watch Together TV'. *Watership Down*'s broad target audience was also confirmed through tie-in merchandising including picture books, colouring books, ceramics and family wall calendars. Paratexts for

the 2018 mini-series thus encourage nostalgic co-viewing between adults and children that might help to mitigate distress generated by the programme's more intense sequences.

However, the mini-series' status as a BBC/Netflix partnership is a meeting of opposites that speaks to tensions in the text's positioning. In their monograph on Netflix's 'Family Watch Together TV' label, Djoymi Baker, Jessica Balanzategui and Diana Sandars argue that this 'Netflixification' of family co-viewing does not simply recreate the broadcast family viewing model for the streaming era, but it 'also subversively disrupts this model' (4, 10). 'Family Watch Together TV', they argue, is driven primarily by boundary-pushing, dark fantasy programming such as *Stranger Things* (2016-) that raises questions about 'suitable' children's content and unsettles established paradigms of family viewing; perhaps those exemplified by a public service broadcaster like the BBC. The tension implied by this relationship extends to a wider confusion in the UK marketing about the mini-series' intended audience and levels of violence. For instance, Read's citation of cross-over success *Harry Potter* alludes to the problems with the mini-series' positioning: *Harry Potter* has also been met with controversy around child-appropriateness, but unlike *Watership Down* it had the benefit of being able to increase its levels of intensity and complexity with the age of its audience over the course of a multi-year franchise (Brown 195); something that a four-hour mini-series broadcast on two consecutive evenings, or released to streaming in a binge-watch model, cannot do. As the UK premiere date drew closer, *Watership Down* publicity continued to send an unclear message about what viewers could expect. This is exemplified by a post of the trailer by the official CBeebies Facebook page. The post showed the trailer accompanied by the caption, 'Note: still not for kids, this isn't the 70s!' (CBeebies). In one sense, this was a smart move on the part of the BBC: CBeebies is their channel addressed to pre-school children, and so this post presumably targeted parents in order to promote the programme to them, and perhaps their older children, while simultaneously warning them of the

programme's unsuitability for the very young (Lester 2023, 13). (It is worth noting here that there is very little difference between the trailer in this CBeebies post and the trailer used on the Netflix interface, and both of them foreground the programme's tonal darkness.) However, CBeebies' blanket – and admittedly tongue-in-cheek – statement 'still not for kids' muddies the waters by grouping child viewers of all ages into one homogenous group and declaring the mini-series inappropriate for all of them. While this sort of murkiness might have made the programme a good fit in Netflix's subversive 'Family Watch Together TV' catalogue, marketing strategies like the CBeebies Facebook post suggest a deep unease about *Watership Down*'s situation as family programming within the UK context. This unease was no doubt informed by the still-looming legacy of the 1978 film's controversial broadcasting history in the UK as well as the BBC's responsibility as a public service broadcaster, which has a long-standing reputation as paternalistic, respectable, reliable and needing to avoid controversy, especially when it comes to serving children.

The muddiness regarding the target age group of the programme extends to the programme's formal and aesthetic properties, which draw from film as much or more than from television. Although Murro stressed that he was adapting the novel, not remaking the film, he also stated his intention to treat the mini-series – which was his first directing credit for serialised television and for animation of any kind – like a live-action film (Gullickson). Ironically, this *aligns* Murro with Rosen, who had no prior experience in directing animation either, and apparently approached the 1978 *Watership Down* like a 'live' film (McAsh). Another similarity is that the film and the mini-series both depict a night-time fight with rats in a graveyard which is only a passing mention in the novel (Adams 1972, 104), although the mini-series changes the rats to crows. Both sequences are entirely bloodless, but this is where similarities between the film and mini-series cease. The latter takes its aesthetic cues not from the 1978 *Watership Down* film and the horror genre, but from contemporary blockbuster

action cinema, turning what is a brief, one-minute skirmish in the film into an elaborate, five-minute set piece. To describe television as 'cinematic' has been widely critiqued by television scholars who suggest that this imposes a value hierarchy that positions television as an inferior medium rather than one that is equally as capable as cinema of producing spectacle (Jaramillo; Mills; Wheatley 2016). Murro appears to have internalised such rhetoric that devalues both television and animation, to the mini-series' detriment. This is because the 'cinematic' aspirations provide further confusion about intended audience and suitability.

In a comparative analysis of the aesthetics of violence in 1978 film and 2018 mini-series, Sam Summers argues that the latter, which is almost entirely bloodless, 'shies away from indulging in […] the levels of graphic violence found in the original film, despite […] its mimetic potential to depict far more realistic images of gore' on account of its status as 3D computer animated (189). This avoidance, he explains, is due to the more convincing sense of volume afforded to the 3D computer-animated rabbits compared with their 2D counterparts in the film. As this realism could have ended up making the mini-series *more* shocking, it follows that Murro opted to forego bloody violence on par with the film in order to position the mini-series as tasteful family entertainment. However, in order to convey dramatic stakes, the mini-series replaces blood and gore with the conventions of contemporary action-adventure cinema. This is exemplified by the crow set piece, where the switch from rats to birds facilitates a visually dynamic battle between ground and sky. Taking advantage of its status as computer-animated, the sequence displays sweeping virtual camera movements through the air and along the ground, combined with rapid editing to highlight shifts in power and perspective between the crows and rabbits. The sequence is undeniably thrilling but also potentially frightening. Close-ups show crows viciously pecking, biting and tearing at rabbits' bodies, but blood is conspicuously absent from the sequence and the mini-series as a whole. The sequence concludes with the implication that Bigwig kills one of the crows by

tearing at its throat; but just as Bigwig launches his deadly bite, a cut-away to a long shot of the graveyard, punctuated by a crash of thunder on the soundtrack, elides the gory details. Shortly afterwards a medium shot reveals the crow's lifeless, but conspicuously bloodless, body (Figure 4). To return to Meeusen's framework, the mini-series mimics the film's *amplification* of the danger facing the rabbits by depicting and even elaborating on what Rosen called the 'emotional highlights' of the novel, presenting these through the formal strategies of action-adventure cinema more than horror. Yet the mini-series also follows in the footsteps of the 1999 series by *omitting* traces of blood from sequences of violence. This may be what Murro alluded to when he stated the intention 'to deal with violence in a responsible and critical way, really stemming from the emotional point of view, rather than just the shock point of view' (in Gullickson). However, it is possible to query whether depicting intense violence while omitting its consequences, whether through bloody injury or death, is indeed the more responsible approach; this is an issue that extends beyond *Watership Down* to broader trends in contemporary blockbuster film and television, and it warrants further investigation beyond the scope of this study.

The *Watership Down* mini-series' conflicted approach to violence was met with equally conflicted critical responses in and outside of the UK. The programme's reception was severely impacted by what was perceived to be the sub-par, uncanny quality of its computer-animation (Mangan, Travers). Striving for cinematic hyper-realism on a comparatively small television budget of £20 million (Plunkett), this is yet another way that the mini-series seems caught between oppositional poles: 'dark' like the novel but not 'brutal', scarring' or 'a horror movie' like the film; family-viewing but 'not for kids'; striving for aesthetic realism but bloodless; linear programming on a British public service provider but also a global commercial streaming enterprise. Similarly, assessments of its appropriateness for children ranged from praise that it was 'a welcome opportunity to

introduce children to the sheer beauty of Richard Adams' stories without things getting too intense' (Brigden) to criticisms that 'it simply isn't scary enough' (Power, 2018b). Another critic expressed concern for child viewers due to the programme's 'unrelenting dark[ness]' and likened it to adult folk horror films *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Piers Haggard, 1971) and *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973) (Pearson). Such assessments suggest that Murro and his team's efforts to distance their work from the horrific legacy of the film were unsuccessful.

Conclusion: transgressive television

What, then, can these adaptations reveal about adapting children's horror broadly and *Watership Down* in particular? It is tempting to argue that they are indicative of shifting attitudes in what (British) adult culture considers 'child-friendly' entertainment, as also suggested by the change of the 1978 *Watership Down*'s BBFC classification from U to PG in 2022. But one might just as easily point to the heightened curiosity and debate that surrounds *Watership Down* adaptations and other 'kindertrauma' texts as revealing of a desire on the part of audiences – of any age – to have the opportunity to see material that is surprising, unpatronising, and which challenges conventional notions of 'child-friendly' screen media and children as an audience. Furthermore, the continued attempts to make an 'authentic' *Watership Down* that 'corrects' the sins of the film – whether through television, stage, radio, games, or a graphic novel – reveal how the essence of this text remains contested. Adaptation scholars caution against being drawn into limited discussions of the elusive notion of the essence or spirit of a text, but such debates around *Watership Down* are instructive for children's literature studies on the matter of expectations and boundaries when it comes to children's horror on television, and how these impact the way that horror for children is received and remembered.

As Antunes and Balanzategui both argue, children's horror television is defined by its transgression of expectations and boundaries: between the horror genre and children's media, and between children and adults. This is part of what gives *Watership Down* its staying power, and this transgression manifests in different ways in each screen adaptation. If the novel captured the zeitgeist in part because its combination of anthropomorphic rabbits, intertextuality and complexity seemed to exceed expectations of children's literature, the 1978 film echoed this with its amplified presentations of violence and death; this was exacerbated by its situation on television and transgression of what children's (animated) programming should or should not look like. By contrast, the 1999 series attracted no such controversy because it remained within clearly defined boundaries and generic expectations of children's television, utilising the medium's form, aesthetics, and overlooked cultural status to its advantage; in doing so, the series may have defied expectations not of children's television, but of *Watership Down* as an inherently violent text. Finally, the 2018 series was perhaps most transgressive of all because it did not set clear expectations about its target audience, refused to commit to either side of a boundary in terms of its representation of violence, and its uncanny CG-animation defied norms of aesthetic taste. Although I have framed these qualities as problems, it is possible that children have connected with the programme in spite of these; only time may tell if it ends up gaining a legacy on par with the film or fades into relative obscurity like the 1999 series. However, it is notable that the 2018 mini-series is now available on Netflix within the UK, which may be its more natural home than the BBC on account of the streamer's intentional pushing of boundaries. Further, the mini-series' instant availability on Netflix means that it is likely the definitive, or at least introductory, version of *Watership Down* for new cohorts of children and their families around the world. This resonates with arguments that Netflix's non-linear and nostalgia-informed family programming has the unprecedented ability to connect 'childhoods past

[and] present' (Hunter 89), inviting 'affective intimacy [and] encouraging intergenerational sharing of memory and media experiences' (Baker, Balanzategui and Sandars, 17). The *Watership Down* 2018 mini-series thus extends the original property's characteristic transgression of generic, aesthetic and generational borders to the crossing of international and even temporal ones.

Above all, the film and television adaptations of *Watership Down* attest to the importance of television – and all of its changing modes of production, distribution and reception – in the cultural footprint of this classic text, and children's encounters with the horrific. Further research in children's literature and adaptation studies must continue to attend to this undervalued medium which occupies a key role in the media lives – and nightmares – of children.

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