From Adaptation to Appropriation? Exploring the Legacy of Ruth Stiles Gannett's Novel in Masami Hata's *Elmer No Boken* and Nora Twomey's *My Father's Dragon*

AUDREY LOUCKX

University of Mons

ABSTRACT

Ruth Stiles Gannett's début novel, My Father's Dragon *(1948), has inspired many generations of children worldwide. This inspiration was so significant that it gave way to an animated adaptation in 1997 by Japanese director Masami Hata.* Elmer no Boken *offers a relatively faithful adaptation of the novel's narrative. However, its aesthetic is resolutely transcultural as it shows inspiration from the original lavish grease crayon illustrations while imbuing them with some of the typical techniques of anime films. In 2022, Netflix released a new adaptation driven by five-time nominated Oscar Irish studio Cartoon Saloon.* My Father's Dragon *beautifully displays the studio's trademark reliance on "clean geometric shapes against stylized backgrounds" (Zahed, 2022, p. 26), in which director Nora Twomey presents stylized yet recognizable representations of Elmer and the dragon.*

Louckx, Audrey. 2025. "From Adaptation to Appropriation? Exploring the Legacy of Ruth Stiles Gannett's Novel in Masami Hata's *Elmer No Boken* and Nora Twomey's *My Father's Dragon*." *Transcr(é)ation*. Vol. 6.1 (Winter 2025) : 1-28. https://doi.org/10.5206/tc.v6i1.21629.

However, this new adaptation gives the audience a transformed version of the adventure that eventually brings together these two young children figures who learn to trust in their own and each other's capacities. Using Paul Wells's model of animated adaptations as subjective correlatives of their initial literary sources, this paper will seek to compare both adaptations to emphasize how the directors' style and the studios' aesthetic have come to support what appears to be radically different interpretations of the source material. As Sanders puts it, all adaptations seek to solve an "equation" (2016, p. 17), that of a tension between the old and the new. In this respect, Hata's and Twomey's films may well display an inescapable movement from adaptation to appropriation.

Keywords: *animated adaptation · My Father's Dragon · Masami Hata · Nora Twomey · Ruth Stiles Gannett*

Introduction: A Children's Classic

Deborah Cartmell, in her 2007 book chapter on adapting children's literature for the cinema, said "although it's difficult to pin down what exactly constitutes children's literature, it can be distinguished from other literature insofar as it is often more loved and better known[1]." Ruth Stiles Gannett's 1948 début novel, *My Father's Dragon*, unarguably complies with those characteristics. Besides its immediate recognition among its contemporaries—it was nominated for the Ambassador Book Award and won the Newbery Honor Award upon publication—a more meaningful clue would be the fact that the book has never gone out of print since its publication 82 years ago and was translated in no less than 15 languages[2]. More recently, *My Father's Dragon* appeared in online polls and published rankings establishing it among American teachers' and American children's all-time favorites[3].

Ruth Stiles Gannett was born in 1923 and published her first novel a few years after her graduation from Vassar College. The novel being an immediate success, Gannett wrote two sequels, *Elmer and the Dragon* (1950) and *The Dragons of Blueland* (1951). *My Father's Dragon* is a slim volume (80 pages) that recounts the story of Elmer Elevator, a young boy, presented as the unnamed first-person narrator's father, who, after meeting and secretly taking in an old stray cat, embarks—following the cat's advice—on an adventure to rescue a baby dragon from the animals of Wild Island. The novel, which is divided in ten chapters, relies on a quest narrative structure not unlike fairytales', as Elmer needs to go through repeated comic nonsensical confrontations with wild animals to eventually find and rescue the baby dragon. Like fairytales, the novel relies on a significant moral: when faced with ordeals, Elmer can always find a solution that, as he realizes, he has been carrying around both literally and figuratively in his own backpack. The novel also shares interesting characteristics with fables in the sense that it features

---

[1] Cartmell, Deborah, "Adapting Children's Literature", *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, Cartmell, Deborah, and Whelehan, Imelda (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 168.

[2] About My Father's Dragon, *MyFathersDragon.org*, no date, https://myfathersdragon.org/dragon/ (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

[3] Bird, Betsy, "The Top 100 Children's Novels Poll," *School Library Journal.com*, April 13th, 2010, https://afuse8production.slj.com/2010/04/13/the-top-100-childrens-novels-poll-1-100/ (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).
National Education Association, "Teachers' Top 100 Books," *Infoplease.com*, August 5th, 2020, https://www.infoplease.com/culture-entertainment/journalism-literature/teachers-top-100-books-children (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

both magical creatures and anthropomorphic animals which can all be said to represent human flaws (foolishness, vanity, pompousness, greed, or excessive authority). But perhaps the most recognizable feature is the novel's set of lavish illustrations by Ruth Chrisman Gannett, an artist and prolific illustrator, who also happened to become Gannett's stepmother. The novel includes one colored cover illustration and 39 black-and-white grease crayon illustrations ranging from sink (Fig. 1) to half, full (Fig. 2) and even double-page (Fig. 3) illustrations[4] as well as a complete map of the Island of Tangerina and Wild Island showing the landmarks of the protagonist's journey. These illustrations have undeniably contributed to the success of the novel by fixing the image of its main characters.

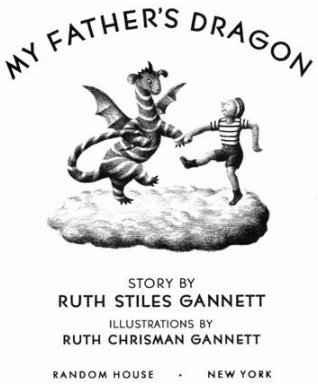
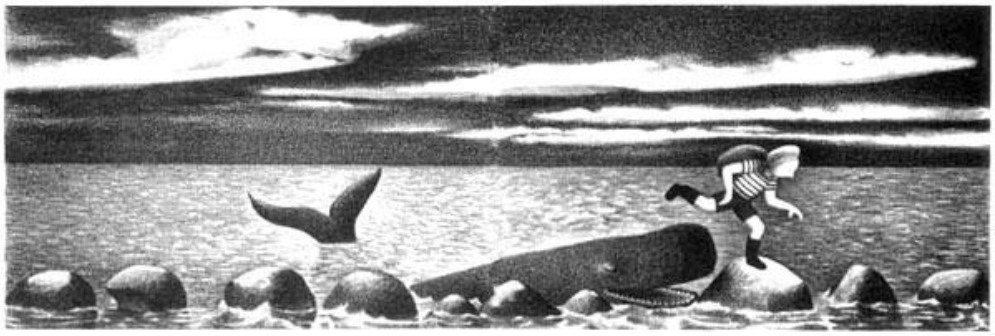


Fig. 1 – Title page of Gannett's novel showing Elmer Elevator and Boris, the dragon.

Fig. 2 – Full-page illustration from Chapter 1: My Father Meets the Cat.

Fig. 3 – Double page illustration from Chapter 3: My Father Finds the Island.



[4] All illustrations are reproduced from: Stiles Gannett, Ruth, My Father's Dragon, [1948], Project Gutenberg, September 8th, 2009, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30017/30017-h/30017-h.htm (retrieved on March 6th, 2024). This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or reuse it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, please check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Capitalizing on her observation about the rapturous reception children's literature boasts, Cartmell argues that because children's fondness for stories is often expressed by repeated readings, the stakes on filmic adaptations of children's books are usually higher, especially in terms of fidelity (2007, p. 168). On that basis, Cartmell proposes a tripartite model in which the status of a children's literary work somehow influences its adaptation and the perceived intertextual engagement a film establishes with its literary source. In other words, she argues that adapting classic, "obscure" (*Idem*), or popular children's texts, gives way to different adaptation practices and influences the adaptation's reception. Where classics (Cartmell mentions *Peter Pan* [Barrie, 1904], *Alice in Wonderland* [Carroll, 1865] and *Treasure Island* [Stevenson, 1883]) tend to inspire numerous adaptations (almost one per generation), lesser-known texts (such as *The Wizard of Oz* [Baum, 1900] or *Mary Poppins* [Travers 1964]) produce a single film—but if this film is successful it "becomes the ur-text in the minds of its viewers" (*Idem*). On the other hand, popular or bestselling texts (by authors such as Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl or J.K. Rowling) produce films that are typically underrated and rejected as "inferior to the books" *(Ibid*., p. 169).

When considering this tripartite approach, the case of Gannett's work and its two animated adaptations—Japanese director Masami Hata's 1997 *Elmer No Boken*[5] and *My Father's Dragon*, Irish studio Cartoon Saloon's feature film released on Netflix in 2022 and directed by Nora Twomey—seem to defy categories. Having been adapted twice, the novel would no longer fall in the obscure or popular categories—this is corroborated by the ongoing popularity of the work and the rather positive reception of Cartoon Saloon's adaptation[6]. But having had *only* two filmic adaptations[7], twenty-five years apart, in two arguably discrete[8]

[5] The transcription of Japanese kanjis can take different forms ("Eruma" instead of "Elmer" or "Bôken" instead of "Boken" to show the use of a long <ō>); this transcription was favored over others as it is the one retained on the Internet Movie Database.

[6] Between 65% and 87% considering the aggregated data from IMDB, Metacritic and Rotten Tomatoes.

[7] The novel was first adapted as an episode of the puppet television show, *Ningyo Geki*, broadcast on NHK in 1966, and was adapted again as a puppet stage show in 2018 (Elmer's Adventure, 2023; Events, n.d.). A stage adaptation was created in 2017 by the Enchantment Theatre Company as a celebration of the novel's 70th anniversary. At the time of writing, the show has been announced to go back on tour in October 2024 (Enchantment Theatre Company). Cartmell's model, however, centers on filmic adaptations and seems to restrict those to feature length films with a theatrical release. One can therefore assume that she would discard such adaptations in placing Gannett's work in her model. Similarly, since this article is interested in animated feature-length adaptations, these other adaptations will not appear in our discussion.

[8] Interestingly, Hata's film was never translated into English. The only versions in a foreign

cultural contexts probably would not make it a classic either. This would also be corroborated by the fact that Cartmell identifies what she calls the "Disney treatment" as another feature of the cinematographic adaptation of classics—*i.e.* the release of an animated or filmic adaptation by the Disney studio which typically "usurp[s] its source" (2007, p. 169).

My Father's Dragon's position as a popular children's story is undeniable, and the book certainly complies with the traditional definition of classic literature, especially when considering the numerous readers' online reviews recalling fond memories of reading the novel as a child or evoking warm family images of parents sharing their childhood favorite as a bedtime story. This was confirmed by Nora Twomey herself who recalls reading the book to her two sons and "immediately fe[eling] that Ruth was such a fantastic storyteller[9]." Moreover, *My Father's Dragon* and its sequels are, *in the facts*, labelled "a trilogy of classics" in their 2022 Swift Press edition. What, then, do these two adaptations say about the literary status and legacy of Gannett's novel? The chapter devoted to the "why" of adaptation in Linda Hutcheon's seminal *Theory of Adaptation* points to elements that provide a preliminary answer to that question. Hutcheon argues that adaptations become "upwardly mobile[10]" thanks to the cultural capital of their adapted material. Similarly, this cultural *cachet* often appears to be central to adapters' personal motives of paying homage to the adapted work.

Besides paying homage and asserting or recapturing the cultural capital of Gannett's novel as a classic of American children's literature, it can be assumed that Hata's and Twomey's adaptations also offer insights into the process of animated adaptation itself. Considering the significant aesthetic variety these adaptations display and the crucial difference in the degree to which their narratives diverge from that of the novel, they certainly point towards markedly different adaptation practices, their distinct and unrelated production contexts cater to different audiences' and industries' expectations which inevitably influenced the way in which the films transposed *My Father's Dragon* to make it appropriate to specific cinematic codes, whether influenced by stylistic or cultural expectations. The films also highlight a geographical, cultural, and temporal gap that affected the recontextualization of Gannett's novel, the reinterpretation of its

---

language are a French DVD release – *Elmer et le Dragon* (Metropolitan, 2008), and a German dubbed version known as *Elmer und der kleine drache* (Elmer No Boken, n.d.). The film was made available on YouTube in its original Japanese version as early as 2018 (George the Whale, 2018) but was only recently made available with machine translated English subtitles (Reynolds, 2024).

[9] Zahed, Ramin, *The Art of My Father's Dragon*, New York: Abrams, 2023, p. 12.

[10] Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation* [2006], Oxon: Routledge, 2013, p. 86.

central themes, characters and motifs, and the necessity of the novel undergoing a form of narrative rewriting.

This paper seeks to approach the films' intertextual engagement with their adapted material from the perspective of animated adaptations seen as a specific set of practices: "a distinctive form of film which offers to the adaptation process a unique vocabulary of expression unavailable to the live-action filmmaker[11]." Using the critical "toolbox[12]," Paul Wells established in his theory of the "subjective correlative" (1999, 2005, 2007), such a perspective can help discuss this intertextual engagement by reconsidering previous approaches that posited the creative process of cinematographic adaptations as engaging either in a form of "mediation"—"an interpretation or re-reading of a precursor[13]" which can be associated with adaptation *proper* or in a form of "*re*mediation" or appropriation where the intertextual relation is less explicit or more embedded. For animated adaptations, scholars have spelled this out as a seemingly irreconcilable opposition between merely illustrative efforts and full-fledged artistic creations.

Adaptation, Appropriation, Worldbuilding

Both *Elmer No Boken* and *My Father's Dragon* acknowledge their inherent kinship with Gannett's novel (if only by crediting the author and her work), they therefore qualify as adaptations in accordance with Linda Hutcheon's seminal definition: they are "deliberate, *announced*, and extended revisitations of prior works" (2013, p. xiv, emphasis added). As adaptations, they acknowledge their "transposition" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 3) of Gannett's novel through an "interpretive act" and an extended form of textual interplay.

Elmer No Boken (literally "Elmer's adventure") was released in Japanese theatres in 1997[14] (approximately 35 years after the novel was translated in Japanese [1963[15]]) and is the only animated adaptation feature-length of the novel

[11] Wells, Paul, "'Thou Art Translated': Analysing Animated Adaptation", *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, Cartmell, Deborah, and Whelehan, Imelda, (eds.), Oxon: Routledge, 1999, p. 198.

[12] A full description of Wells's theory is available in section 2.

[13] Sanders, Julie, *Adaptation and Appropriation* [2005], Oxon: Routledge, 2016, p. 3.

[14] Internet Movie Database, "*Elmer no Boken*," no date, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0332029/?ref_=fn_al_tt_2 (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

[15] It seems interesting to mention that the novel and its two sequels were translated during what can be called the second boom of translation of English-speaking children's book series, a period during which "children's literature was directly employed as a means to encourage a positive reception of American values" (Oltolini, 2024, p. 48).

in Japan. The film was directed by Masami Hata who was a seasoned director at the time and had already had a long career as an adapter of literary and pop culture characters[16]. Hata's experience with the codes of Japanese anime is undeniable to the extent that he seems to be able to navigate both animation traditions defined by Thomas Lamarre (cited in Oltolini[17]): the cinematic, a.k.a. full animation (typically feature-length films whose style is derived from the famous Toei Doga studio who sought to emulate Disney), and the animetic, a.k.a. limited animation (the economically efficient animation style developed by Osamu Tezuka when hoping to maximize manga-to-anime adaptations produced for television). *Elmer No Boken* is a talking example of Maria Chiara Oltolini's argument that associates the cinematic tradition with the adaptation of "children's [world] literature for a mainstream audience[18]" (2024, p. 71-72). It also confirms Dani Cavallaro's assertion that anime adaptations prior to the late 1990s and early 2000s "tend[ed] to consist of fairly loyal page-to-screen transpositions of popular literary sources[19]." Hata's film is indeed very close to Gannett's novel both in terms of narrative and aesthetics (Fig. 4[20]), as if his adaptation process was akin to a horizontal physical translation from one medium, the literary, to another, film—a mediation.

Fig. 4 – Cell illustration from Hata's *Elmer no Boken*.

[16] Early on in his career, Hata worked for a television series entitled *Andersen Monogatari* ("Andersen's tales"). In 1975, he joined Sanrio, the Japanese entertainment company known for its kawaii (cute) characters—Hello Kitty, to help develop the company's new animation department (*Anime Planet*, n.d.). There, he directed feature-length animated films based on the company's most famous characters. In 1989, he directed the Americano-Japanese animated adaptation of Winsor McCay's Little Nemo; *Little Nemo Adventures in Slumberland*. In spite of the film's lukewarm reception, this is certainly the work Hata is most well-known for (IMDB, Masami Hata, n.d.).

[17] Oltolini, Maria Chiara, *Rediscovered Classics of Japanese Animation: The Adaptation of Children's Novels into the World Masterpiece Theatre Series*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, p. 67-69.

[18] As opposed to the animetic which would typically favor "manga-to-anime adaptation catering to specific niche demographics" (2024, p. 71).

[19] Cavallaro, Dani, *Anime and the Art of Adaptation: Eight Famous Works from Page to Screen*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 2010, p. 2.

[20] Image retrieved from The Movie Database, *Elmer no Boken*, no date, https://www.themoviedb.org/movie/92113-elmer-no-b-ken (retrieved on January 30th, 2025).

My Father's Dragon is a joined production involving Cartoon Saloon, Mockingbird Pictures, and Netflix Animation, and it was released on the streaming platform in November 2022. The project was initially thought out by Bonnie Curtis and Julie Lynn at Mockingbird Pictures with the help of writer Meg LeFauve. All three rapidly agreed to reach out to Cartoon Saloon as their favored animation partner. The Kilkenny-based studio was co-founded by Twomey, Tomm Moore and Paul Young in 1999[21]. Over its twenty-five years of existence, the studio has created five feature-length animated films, a few short films, and several preschool and comedy TV series. The studio is most renowned for its trilogy of feature-length films inspired by Irish folklore[22]. This inspiration can also be observed in the studio's film structure which typically includes embedded narratives that emphasize a core reliance on oral storytelling. Aesthetically, these embedded narratives are also typically designed in a simpler style usually relying on sharp color contrasts and simplified line drawings. Added to this distinctive narrative identity, the studio is known for its state-of-the-art 2D animation and its "trademark style of using clean geometric shapes against stylized backgrounds[23]."

Twomey joined *My Father's Dragon* project and started working on the animatic (or animated storyboard) in 2018, but the film had to undergo numerous story changes as Twomey herself confides she "was still searching for what the film was ultimately about" (Zahed, 2023, p. 11). From the earliest screenwriting stages, the producers warned Gannett with whom they had established contact "that the movie would diverge quite dramatically from the book" (2023, p. 7)[24]. The central motif that the author asked the producers to retain was Elmer's personal agency and self-reliance—a rather bold stance to take at the time the novel was published as it was underrepresented in children's literature. The film departs from the novel's plot in four significant ways. First, Elmer's adventure on Wild Island is embedded in an extended frame narrative showing him and his single mother having to move from Dust Town, in the American countryside, to Nevergreen City, at the time of The Great Depression. Second, Elmer is sent on his adventure by the stray cat *without* any preparation after having run from an

[21] Netflix Behind the Streams, "Cartoon Saloon: The Story behind the Incredible Animation Studio," YouTube, November 12th, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlazLWCvGWk (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

[22] *The Secret of* Kells (2009) co-directed by Twomey, *Song of the Sea* (2014) and *Wolfwakers* (2020).

[23] Zahed, Ramin, "A Flight of Fancy: How Nora Twomey & Cartoon Saloon Brought *My Father's Dragon* to Life," *Animation Magazine*, vol. 325, 2022.

[24] Up until the end of her life (in June 2024), Gannett actively participated in the legacy of her work and its adaptation. In 2018, she travelled to Japan to attend the puppet stage adaptation, and she met with Twomey in 2019 to discuss Cartoon Saloon's adaptation (*About My Father's Dragon*, n.d.).

argument with his mother, making the central storyline more of a madcap adventure based on an on-the-spur decision. Moreover, the cat knowingly leaves out information about the dragon being held captive by the wild animals and needing to be rescued. Third, Boris, the dragon, appears early on in the film which enables a greater focus on the relationship between the two protagonists so that Elmer's quest ends up colliding with Boris's quest—a rite of passage that involves saving Wild Island, an artichoke-shaped floating island that sinks every hundred years and needs, legend has it, to be saved by a dragon. Fourth, the wild animals living there, although archetypal in some ways, are more round characters and Elmer's encounters with them are no longer exactly presented as a series of repetitive challenges but rather as a race against the clock to find answers to the island's mystery and rescue *all* the animals. The film shows a more liberal rewriting of Gannett's novel but offers a convincing mix of Cartoon Saloon's and Chrisman Gannett's aesthetics keeping Elmer and the dragon's appearance close to the one they were given in the original illustrations (Fig. 5[25]). As such, it can be read as a sort of stylistic remediation.

Fig. 5 – Elmer and Boris in Twomey's *My Father Dragon*.

Both films are revisitations of Gannett's work, in the sense that they display a repetition of the novel's narrative and illustrative material with a degree of variation—modal[26], at the very least. Relying on their undeniable differences, they

[25] Cartoon Saloon, *My Father Dragon*, 2024, https://www.cartoonsaloon.ie/my-fathers-dragon/ (retrieved on January 30th, 2025).

[26] In accordance with Hutcheon's view that adaptations involve shifting from one to another of the "three major ways we engage with stories" or "modes of engagement"; *i.e.*, telling, showing and interacting (2013).

could initially be approached as examples of opposed practices belonging to adaptation or appropriation. Sanders devoted a whole volume to the discussion of these practices which she defines as realizations of the "rewriting impulse which is much more than simple imitation" that is perceptible in a great variety of texts; even more so in our contemporary mediascape in which "we are exposed to new modes of intertextuality in operation […] through the collective creativity […] of the user-maker generation" (2013, p. 2-3). In such a context, "it is fair to say that adaptations and appropriations (or mediations and remediations) can vary in how explicitly they state their intertextual or connective purpose" (*Ibid*., p. 3). Adaptations "declare themselves as an interpretation or rereading of a precursor" (*Idem*), while appropriations "effect as a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product" (*Ibid*., p. 35). As such, adaptation and appropriation can be conceived as opposite yet related ends of a continuum "involved in the performance of textual echo and allusion" (*Ibid*., p. 6). Both sets of practices differ in the way they engage with the "fundamental and contrary impulse towards dependence and liberation" (*Ibid*., p. 7).

The concerns of adaptation scholars related to some kind of initial line drawn between adaptation and other forms of appropriation have found echoes in recent volumes on animated adaptation. In *Adaptation for Animation*, Giannalberto Bendazzi speaks of the many practices that range from illustration to adaptation *proper*[27]; while in *Adaptation littéraire et court-métrages d'animation*[28], Patrick Barrès goes in a similar direction by identifying creative practices that range from adaptation to adoption (2020, p. 37) or from version to variation (*Ibid*., p. 39). If we leave terminological disagreements aside, both Bendazzi and Barrès seem to base their conceptualization of adaptive practices on the aspect that Hutcheon presented as the third defining element of adaptations, *i.e.* "the extent of the [adaptation's] intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (2013, p. 3). In other words, and in spite of the heavy moralistic and *passé* connotations of the term in adaptation studies, both scholars appear to categorize animated adaptations on the degree of *fidelity* the adaptation displays towards the adapted material, *i.e.* the degree to which the adapted material remains recognizable in the adaptation. Bendazzi frankly bases his conceptualizing of successful adaptations on abandoning "faithfulness" (2020, p. 18); where being faithful to the original text

[27] Rall, Hannes, *Adaptation for Animation: Transforming Literature Frame by Frame*, London: CRC Press Taylor and Francis Group, 2020, p. 18.

[28] Barrès, Patrick, "Adaptation littéraire et court métrage d'animation ; Poïétique de la circularité de l'écart", *Adaptation littéraire et courts métrages d'animation : Au milieu de l'image coulent les textes*, Dutel, Jérôme, (dir.), Paris : L'Harmattan, 2020, pp. 35-46. My translations from Barrès.

somehow inevitably leads to the creation of an illustration (that may vary in quality), adaptation suggests a movement away from the adapted material, a "re-stylisation" or "caricature" (*Ibid*., p. 17). Barrès identifies a similar dichotomy which he explains by drawing on the etymological roots of the words "adaptation" and "adoption". "Adaptation" is derived from Latin *ad-aptare*: make able to or make fit for (but also to join or conform); "adoption," on the other hand, derives from *ad-optare*: to opt for, to choose, to graft or to acquire. Similarly, where an adaptation is like a version and revolves (*vertere*) around its model, adoption like variation necessarily implies diversification and diversion:

> [V]ersions always refer to a model, retaining its structure, narrative continuity and various motifs. […] Variation […] introduces variety, diversity and mobility. Variation thus introduces the playfulness of interpretation and unfurls proper construction work (2020, p. 39).

What remains to be established is the level at which this diversion or construction can take place. Hutcheon argues that most adaptation theories "assume […] that the story is the common denominator, the core of what is transposed across different media and genres, each of which deals with that story in formally different ways" (2013, p. 6). Barrès seems to concur as he establishes the difference between adaptation and adoption as representative of the opposition between "*cinéma des conteurs*" and "*cinéma des peintres*," *i.e.* animation as a mode for storytellers—formally based on narration, or one for artists—formally based on poiesis and metamorphosis (2020, p. 36). On the same line, Wells observes that, historically, the development of full animation by lead studios spelled out as a shift in focus from repeated gags to a story and all aspects of *mise en scene* that should strive to support it: "this shift [was] of great significance because it articulate[d] a key difference in the 'textual' interests of the animator" (1999, p. 205). Wells further observes that

> creating a story within a studio environment required approaches by which everyone involved knew their particular function within the construction of the work, but, more importantly, was working within the same narrational guidelines and instructions as everyone else (*Ibid*., p. 207).

Such observations align with Hutcheon's further development of what a story is. Although her initial definition is wide-encompassing, she adds that it is a work's storyworld, or "heterocosm" (2013, p. 10) that is being adapted: the world which includes what she calls "the stuff of the story," *and* its material and physical dimensions, in other words what provides a heterocosm with "the truth-of-coherence" (*Idem*.). In the preface to the second edition of her *Theory of Adaptation*,

she insists that "thematic and narrative persistence is not the name of the adaptation game, world building is" (*Ibid*., p. xxi). World-building certainly is the process at stake in creating animated films (be they adaptations or original works). Bendazzi insists that "[animation] is world-building from scratch" (2020, p. 19).

Considering Wells's, Bendazzi's or Barrès's theorization of animated adaptation involves approaching adaptation as world-building: construction work that necessarily involves the metamorphosis of the literary material in order for it to be transmediated essentially through a process that goes beyond simple illustration or retelling. "[Animated adaptation] is the world which is within the head of the artist" (2020, p. 10), Bendazzi argues, a world that Wells identifies as the "subjective correlative" of the literary work: "a demonstration of the specific and particular world of the literary text as it is made animate, not merely in the imagination, but in a visual language most pertinent to its apprehension and exhibition[29]." Drawing from modernist literary theory, most importantly T.S. Elliot's "objective correlative" representing the fact that the perfect work of art is independent from its creator and materialized in "a set of objects, a situation [or] a chain of events" (2005, p. 92), Wells identifies animation's capacity for metamorphosis, condensation, anthropomorphism, penetration and symbolic association as the specific vocabulary that makes it able "to embrace the minutiae" of literary texts (*Ibid*., p. 85). He therefore developed the concept of the subjective correlative to account for the literal and metaphoric act of metamorphosis involved in animated adaptation. The subjective correlative constitutes Wells's formal "toolbox to unpack the adaptation process[30]." It "determines how and in what ways, and with what outcomes the animator 'transmutes' the literary source" (2007, p. 202). In other words, the subjective correlative "defines a process which views any text—linguistic or visual—as a model of transmutation which must account for its execution; its wit; its solipsism; its simultaneity of the literal and the abstract; its spatial discourse and its intended effect" (*Ibid*., p. 204).

Starting from these observations, the following sections will be devoted to a comparative reading of Gannett's *My Father's Dragon* and its two animated adaptations aiming at interrogating the transmutation of the novel's initial heterocosm in its two animated counterparts. Using the six aspects described in

[29] Wells, Paul, "Literary Animation and the 'Subjective Correlative': Defining the Narrative World in Brit-lit Animation," *Animated Worlds*, Buchan, Suzanne, (ed.), Barnet: John Libbey & Company, 2005, p. 92.

[30] Wells, Paul, "Classic Literature and Animation: All Adaptations are Equal but Some Adaptations are more Equal than Others," *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, Cartmell, Deborah, and Whelehan, Imelda, (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 205.

Wells's toolbox, the analysis will seek to elicit how Hata's and Twomey's films constructed their storyworld. Both films sought to pictorialize the novel's structure by embracing its plasmatic potential and by adopting an ideographic logic. They also evoke a self-figurative perspective by enunciating its conflicts in a serio-comic mode, creating an illustrative process based on the characters' interiority and exteriority while using ambiguity as a mode of revelation.

World-Building from Scratch?

This section will consider narrative point of view and plot structure as the initial aspects Hata and Twomey had to transpose. Since readers are given primary access to a text's heterocosm through narrative point of view, it is safe to say that transposing this element will crucially impact the construction process of the adaptation's storyworld. Similarly, because animation is "a site for action predicated purely on that constructed in and from the text" (Wells, 2007, p. 201), the transmutation of plot structure in storyboarding choices will inevitably affect all other interpretative decisions necessary in the world-building process.

As mentioned earlier, Gannett's novel features an unnamed first-person narrator which is established by the fact that the narrator refers to the protagonist as "my father." This, however, constitutes the only element supporting a first-person narration. Had the protagonist been referred to as Elmer (or Elmer Elevator) the novel would read as a typical third-person omniscient narrative. In fact, this is the narrative perspective Gannett preferred in the second and third volumes of the trilogy. The presence of this unorthodox narrator makes *My Father's Dragon* an unusual yet pleasurable read as it imbues it with a specific form of authenticity and familiarity. Twomey's adaptation, in spite of its significant departure from the novel's initial plot, retained a first-person narrator. A female narrator (Mary Kay Place), whose voice arguably evokes an older woman's, speaks in a voice-over commentary at the beginning and at the end of the film. This device echoes Gannett's authorial voice and serves to highlight the tale-like nature of the film and its inherent kinship with oral storytelling, supporting a *mise-en-abyme* of Elmer's adventure with Boris. Such a choice exemplifies two aspects of Wells's subjective correlative. First it confirms the use of ambiguity as a mode of continuity and revelation as the voice-over "enrich[es] the potential meaning of [the] text while condensing and minimizing its imagery" (Wells, 2007, p. 203). But it also demonstrates the self-figurative perspective that incorporates the presence of the animator in the text and makes the adaptation a *subjective* correlative. As explained earlier, this reliance on the metafictional nature of oral storytelling is typical of Cartoon Saloon's style and Twomey's more particularly.

Hata's film, on the other hand, removes all references to this possible though discrete, first-person narrator. This can easily be explained by the fact that, as is obvious from the novel's title in Japanese (エルマーのぼうけん literally "Elmer's Adventure"), the first-person narrator was abandoned in its Japanese translation since all three volumes of the series were translated and published together—thus ensuring greater textual coherence[31]. It is interesting to remark that although Hata's storyline is very similar to that of the novel, the director decided to open the film by recounting—using animation only—the reason for the baby dragon's predicament on Wild Island. The story of the baby dragon falling from the sky on Wild Island is an episode recounted by the cat at the beginning of Gannett's novel. Hata's film opens on images showing dragons living on the summit of a spiky mountain range in Blueland[32]. The baby dragon is then shown with his mother and father displaying his clumsy flying abilities and he is then taken away by a storm. In the manner of a flashback[33], this displaced plot element can be read as a frame narrative for the film's main plotline placing it within the trilogy's greater chronological time frame. It also quite conveniently enables Hata to show the dragon, however briefly, at the beginning of the film. Here again, this choice relying on a more ambiguous, fully ideographic, recounting mode serves to establish the self-figurative presence of the animator reconstructing the specific identity the novel acquired in the Japanese tradition: essentially the first book of a larger-encompassing trilogy.

Both adaptations retained the fragmented structure of the initial storyline. Where Hata's film reproduces all of Elmer's quirky encounters with the animals on Wild Island, Twomey's adaptation transforms it in a rapid succession of characters that Elmer meets only for them to disappear a few minutes later. Elmer's mother, the customers at their countryside shop, their grumpy landlady, a group of children in Nevergreen City, the stray cat, and a whale all appear and disappear within the first 24 minutes of the film. Although this has been criticized by some reviewers as "problems rooted in the necessity of putting characters from the famous […] novel on screen[34]" with no consideration for their contribution to

---

[31] Wikipedia, "Elmer's Adventure (Eruma no Boken)," October 2023, https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/エルマーのぼうけん (retrieved on March 6th, 2024). The content of this webpage was browsed using the machine translation into English provided by the Internet search engine.

[32] A place that readers only discover in the third volume of the trilogy.

[33] The scene is referred to again twice later in the film once to recount it from the point of view of the stray cat and a second time when Boris explains it to Elmer.

[34] Massoto, Erick, "*My Father's Dragon* Review: Cartoon Saloon's Latest Favors Generic Journey over Complex Themes," *Collider*, November 11th, 2022, https://collider.com/my-fathers-dragon-review-jacob-tremblay-gaten-matarazzo-cartoon-saloon/ (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

the film's narrative, it equally works as a filmic equivalent of the novel's fragmented structure and reliance on nonsensical experience. This also serves as a further reliance on ambiguity as a mode of revelation since most of these characters evoke, through their appearance or behavior, animals that Elmer meets on the island or foreshadow later action. For example, the recurring presence of characters expressing their love of strawberry lollipops echoes the novel's episode of Elmer using lollipops to build a crocodile bridge to cross the river on Wild Island. Twomey's film also preserved most of the animals that Elmer encounters in the novel (though not in order), retaining even the quirky episode of chewing gum being offered to tigers as a diversion.

This does not help to make the storyline of the movie less chaotic, nor do the multiple story arcs that the film sought to encompass, but although such references could be read as a problematic attempt at trying to hold on to the adapted material, they also qualify as ways of embedding its intertextual engagement using amusing references. Twomey's adaptation contrasts significantly with its adapted plot, arguably to explore psychological and moral depth—what in Wells's toolbox would correspond to the adaptation's serio-comic mode and reliance on both interiority and exteriority. The film reads as a bundle of not-always-converging storylines: that of Elmer and his mother experiencing dire straits and having to move to the "big city" because of an economic crisis; that of the animals on Wild Island engaged in a race against the island's "ticking clock" (Zahed, 2023, p. 32); that of Boris's rite of passage; and quite meaningfully those of the two contrasting versions of the legend of a dragon (or after-dragon) saving Wild Island. All of these make *My Father's Dragon* a film about the importance of imagination and telling stories *as well as* about the dangers associated with losing these stories. Boris's predicament when arriving on Wild Island is due to the fact that Aratuah, a huge tortoise who was the memory keeper of the island, died before being able to reveal the answer to Wild Island's scariest mystery to Saiwa, a gorilla and leader of all the animals. Aratuah's death leaves the animals, Boris, and eventually Elmer, to find that answer themselves. This insistence on storytelling on top of making the most of animation's "self-reflexiveness" (Wells, 2007, p. 204) is also a striking example of what Wells calls "animated adaptation's ideographic logic." As self-reflexive metafictions, animated adaptations generate the inner logic of the created world by relying on a *literal* animation of the text: a striking example is the animation of the engraving Boris and Elmer are looking at when Boris tells Elmer about the legend of the after-dragon. Moreover, after having saved the island, Boris insists on his story being properly told and passed on to future generations notably through new and "more realistic" (01:22:46) after-

dragon engravings. Twomey has her character engage in a metafictional allusion to the film itself, positing that adaptations are retellings of previous stories.

If, compared to Twomey's film, Hata's adaptation seems to replicate its adapted plot, it nonetheless adds subtle elements borrowed from the other books of the trilogy—as was already suggested with the example of the film's opening scenes. Such additions, both emphasize the trilogy's continuity and enable the film to display a typical characteristic of Japanese culture, "that of audaciously celebrating the coexistence of calm and turmoil as the inextricable polarities of human life" (Cavallaro, 2010, p. 13). Hata's additions are sometimes more of an amplification or extrapolation of existing events. In the novel, Elmer does not need much convincing on the part of the cat to agree to go on with his quest. In Hata's movie, however, he initially refuses, arguing that he does not have the necessary skills or spirit to become an explorer, and only agrees after having had a nightmare in which he sees scary wild animals hurting the baby dragon which can be heard screaming. This scene is followed by a series of calmer unspoken scenes showing Elmer's preparation with the cat's help. Similarly, Hata adds a storm scene during Elmer's crossing to Tangerina—the inhabited island closest to Wild Island. During the tempest, Elmer saves a seagull who tells him that a child should never go to a dangerous place such as Wild Island—this is a reference to an episode found in book two of the trilogy. Such additions, on top of making the plot more action or suspense-driven also highlight Elmer's inner conflicts. Such conflicts are only brushed upon in the novel while Hata seeks to evoke them more openly, relying on a vocabulary that is specific to animation. These scenes also exemplify Wells's focus on animation's potent ability to evoke processes of interiority / exteriority.

An analysis of world-building would be incomplete without considering spatial discourse—one of the aspects subjective correlatives need to account for in Wells's view. Gannett's novel opens on a map indicating its protagonist's journey (Fig. 6[35]). This seems to establish the central importance given to the settings and the very literal mapping of the story. The map itself also appears *in* the story: the stray cat gives it to Elmer in preparation for his adventurous rescue. The presence or absence of that map confirms the diverging approaches taken by Hata and Twomey. Hata's film is directly correlated with the specific setting of Wild Island,

[35] This image was retrieved online on January 30th, 2025, and is submitted to a CC-BY license without further copyright information.

as is clearly exposed by the film's poster which reproduces the map in the most exact fashion (Fig. 7[36]).

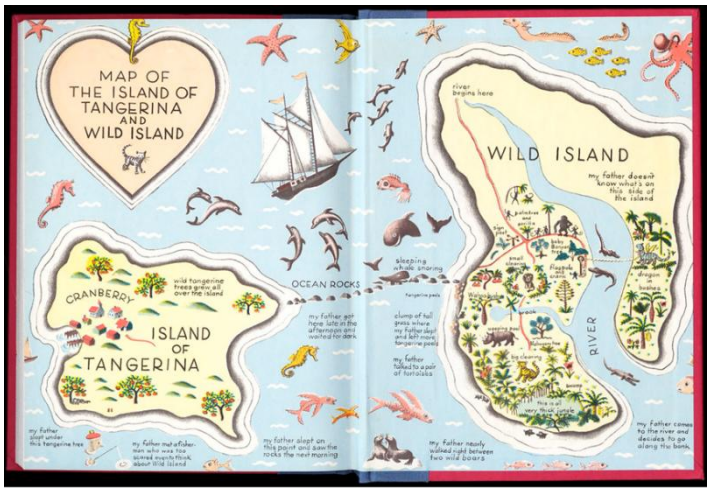


Fig. 6 – Double page illustration of the map from an early edition of Gannett's novel.

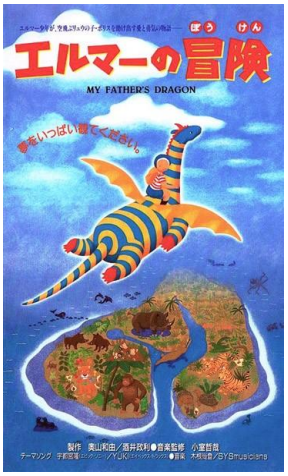


Fig. 7 – Poster of Hata's Elmer No Boken.

During his preparation, Elmer is, in fact, seen drawing the map following the cat's advice (00:20:19) and discussing his final colored version before leaving (00:20:29), which places an even greater emphasis on Elmer's agency. The settings of Wild Island and Tangerina seek to faithfully reproduce the ones evoked by the novel's descriptions and illustrations, including the ocean rocks that separate them. Tangerina, although appearing very briefly, is certainly worth mentioning for the exotic treatment Hata sought to give to it. In stark opposition with the idealized western-looking seaport city of Nevergreen where Elmer lives with his parents, Tangerina appears as a mix of exotic references with dark-skinned women wearing brightly colored attires, dancing to the music of Caribbean-looking instruments (which seems to be confirmed by the musical score), and turban-wearing merchants trading with sailors who live in a village evoking the white buildings of Greek Mediterranean islands. This confirms a typical trend in anime, where settings "are intricately detailed and *most liberal* in their adoption of artistic effect" (Cavallaro, 2010, p. 15, emphasis added), and draw on convincing props, accessories or objects that can economically allude to entire cultures or lifestyles—arguably a way of embracing animation's ambiguous and plasmatic potential imbuing it with an intercultural twist.

[36] This image was retrieved online on the 30th of January 2025, and is submitted to a CC-BY-SA-NC license without further copyright information.

The settings in Twomey's film are bespoke Cartoon Saloon style showing meticulous art direction and a profound sense of color and light effects. As explained in Zahed's *The Art of My Father's Dragon*, the team wanted to "combine a stylized design with a realistic feel[37]." Elmer goes through many different settings, and it was important that he would not seem to be "just strolling through a painting" (*Ibid*., p. 23). Although none of the settings in the film correspond with Gannett's novel's descriptions, they each have been given a specific color palette and range of light effects to imbue them with a different and authentic atmosphere. This, once again, evokes the fragmented structure of the original plot. Even though the map does not appear in the film as Elmer's journey to Wild Island is no longer a carefully planned crossing on a ship but an impromptu elopement on the back of a whale, the identity of all these settings has been so profoundly thought-out that they are presented as "Wild Island Map" in *The Art of My Father's Dragon* (*Ibid*., p. 152, Fig. 8). No longer an island, Tangerina becomes three tangerine trees seemingly lost at sea, and reminiscent of the opening scenes showing Elmer and his mother as shop owners negotiating to buy a crate of tangerines. The setting in the opening and closing scenes showing Dust Town and Nevergreen city were also built on evocative references to the history of cinema: "[Twomey] wanted the visuals to look like a [1940s] movie set" (*Ibid*., p. 23). The closed village shop that Elmer and his mother leave evokes an inhospitable, sandy, brownish dustbowl landscape, while the grueling skyscrapers in Nevergreen's bleak, grey, black and dark green color palette are clearly evocative of film noir, thus inscribing the film in recognizable literary and cinematic traditions.

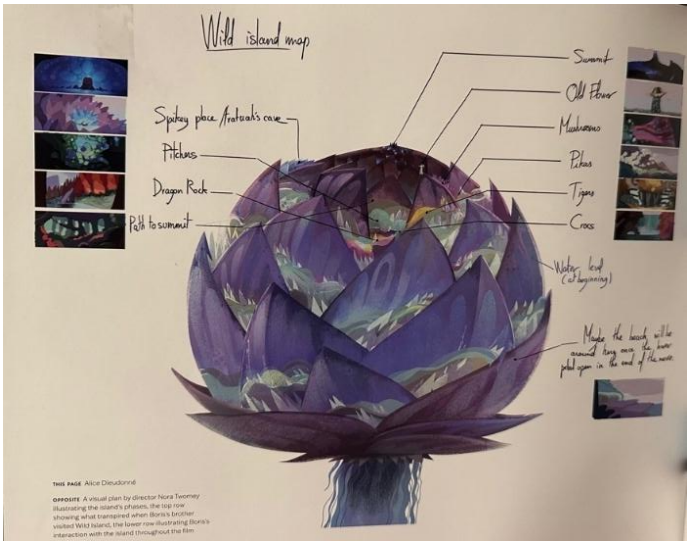


Fig. 8 – Wild Island Map

[37] Zahed, Ramin, *The Art of My Father's Dragon*, New York: Abrams, 2023, p. 22.

Through their transposition of the sequential and fragmented structure and narrative point of view of Gannett's novel, Hata's and Twomey's films testify to the fact that animated adaptations rely on pictorializing and metamorphosis, notably through the self-figurative presence of the animator, while securing the films' position in culturally specific cinematic fields. Here, the inherent ambiguity of animation's vocabulary, notably in terms of spatial discourse and ideographic logic, transmutes Gannett's nonsense fable while clearly inscribing the adaptations in cultural traditions: that of oral storytelling and literal animation for Twomey, and that of the coexistence of calm and turmoil for Hata.

Deepening "a Surreal Little Parable"

In his review of *My Father's Dragon*, Oli Welsh argues that Twomey "turn[ed] a bizarre children's book into a bigger, deeper movie," making Gannett's "surreal little parable into something that is more like a conventionally structured kids' movie, but they've also made it more exciting and resonant[38]." The same can be argued for Hata's adaptation, but for different reasons. Both directors' reinterpretations of *My Father's Dragon* show a deeper, more psychological treatment of the characters, motifs and thematic concerns than appear in the novel.

Both adaptations have ensured that Boris, the baby dragon, appears earlier in the plot of the movie than he does in the book—the dragon only appears in the final chapter and is not given much treatment (which Gannett makes up for in the second and third volumes of her trilogy). Hata and Twomey have each, in their own way, expanded on Boris's characterization, which constitutes a reliance on animation's wit and simultaneity of the literal and the abstract. Hata presents Boris as a rather frail, clumsy, baby dragon in the opening scenes. Later on, when Elmer eventually comes to rescue him on the island, Boris is shown as a fragile, scared and self-doubting character—in short, a child in need of recognition from a caring figure. Boris in Twomey's film is the second half of a protagonist duo. He explains that his dragon's age corresponds to that of a ten-year-old and behaves accordingly: he can be a goof, he is clumsy, inattentive and absent-minded, but friendly and fun-loving. Saiwa describes him as "foolish and frightened" (01:14:48) upon his arrival on the island. Just like his counterpart in Hata's adaptation, Boris needs a caring figure who will trust in his capacities to successfully perform his rite of passage. Though in completely different ways, both films hint, through

[38] Welsh, Oli, "*Wolfwalker*'s Studio Gets Emotional Again with *My Father's Dragon* on Neflix," *Polygon*, November 11th, 2022, https://www.polygon.com/reviews/23404509/netflix-animation-my-fathers-dragon-review (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

Boris's figure, at the importance of role models and parenting relationships for children to develop the self-reliance and agency that was so groundbreakingly central in Gannett's novel. In both films, that role is first performed by another character for Elmer: the stray cat in Hata's movie (Elmer's parents are presented as rather harsh and oblivious), and the mother in Twomey's (acting both as the parenting role model and the catalyst for Elmer's escape). Both films also stage a role reversal when Elmer meets Boris and takes on the parenting role himself. Elmer's quest enables him to figure out the importance of self-reliance and the necessity to trust in one's capacities: "everything is possible if you really want it[39]," (01:25:11) he says in Hata's film, while in Twomey's film Boris nicknames him "The answer guy" (00:34:56). But Elmer also eventually transmits the lesson he learnt to Boris, his own mother in Twomey's film, and the audience.

In Hata's film, Elmer is first presented as a helpful but rather clumsy absent-minded nine-year-old who, on the cat's advice, agrees to go on an explorer's quest. When expressing doubts about his courage and abilities, Elmer is told: "Just say I will. If you're determined, nothing is impossible" (00:22:31). The central concern of the film is then this becoming of an explorer, both literally and figuratively, by showing determination and trusting in one's own capacities. Elmer repeats the cat's advice to Boris at the end of the film, making the message come full circle. Trust in oneself and in others is, by Twomey's own admission, also "a thematic element" in *My Father's Dragon* (Zahed, 2023, p. 12). Characters are consistently encouraged to trust in others' judgements and decisions, but also to see their trust breached due to fear caused by the situation. Elmer's (and Boris's) coming-of-age adventure is therefore one in which they learn to cope with their innermost fears and the fact that vulnerability is part of the process: "there's a lot of self-awareness and bravery in the admission of fear; at any age. That's something that I'm really happy we got onto the screen" (Twomey in Zahed, *Ibid*., p. 13). This appears to be a textbook example for Wells's argument that only animation can express both the interiority and exteriority of characters that literature explores.

It is also through fear and the many ways in which fear can be felt and dealt with that Twomey adapted the archetypal characters in Gannett's novel. Saiwa, the leading white gorilla, Kwan, the Sulawesi monkey, and Tamir, the tarsier, are particularly interesting in that respect. They reflect Wild Island's social structure—a more formal and hierarchical structure than in the novel where animals simply live together. In Gannett's novel, the gorilla is also in charge of the dragon—he needs to ensure that the dragon complies with the taxiing role that the animals

[39] All quotes from Hata's films are my translation from the French dubbed DVD.

have assigned to him, but it is through brute force that he shows his authority. Kwan certainly represents that aspect of Gannett's character: his fear leads him to use force. Saiwa's leadership is more subtle; he also had Boris tied up, but these ropes are meant to enable Boris to try and lift the island every time it sinks. This, as Saiwa later confesses, was his answer to the dragon's role in the mystery of the sinking island. Rather than telling the animals about Arathua's death and the disappearance of an answer, he explains that this was the only acceptable reaction he could fathom to respond to Tamir's panic. The tarsier is a transmutation of the comic character of the mouse in Gannett's novel. The mouse represents the fact that Elmer's incursion on the island is causing disruption, but it also serves comic relief. Due to the fear caused by the discovery of an intrusion, the mouse keeps mixing up words, a comic device Hata retained in his adaptation. In Twomey's film, Tamir works as an allegorical transmutation of the mouse's character. Arguably, Tamir's behavior is a much sterner one that metaphorically represents fearmongering; as Saiwa explains, having seen Tamir's panic, he "kn[e]w that fear would drown [them] before water did so [he] kept the truth from them" (01:13:42).

Gannett's archetypal characters also find meaningful echoes in Hata's film: their realistic representation, although directly inspired by Chrisman Gannett's illustrations also correspond to the typical characterization of Japanese animation where "relatively realistic physiognomies" are paired with a deployment of facial characteristics to "convey a wide range of emotions" (Cavallaro, 2010, p. 14). Emotive states, as suggested earlier, are of particular importance in Japanese animation and culture and are sometimes realized through the use of SD (Super Deformed) facial expressions. SD is an extreme actualization of plasmaticness, what Eisenstein defined as "a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form" (quoted in Wells, 2007, p. 203). Cavallaro argues that as part of characterization, SD "play[s] a key role in drawing the audience into the anime's adaptive universe […] by delivering varied galleries of personae that are cogently situated in a specific and well-defined social milieu" (2010, p. 14). Hata's reliance on SD is limited but particularly effective in giving a greater emotional depth to the animals as nonsensical and comical as they may still appear. This can be observed in some of Hata's added scenes: the festive lioness' song that engages all the animals in a dancing parade through the jungle or a community meeting scene in which the wild pigs report on the Gorilla's failed attempt to eliminate the "intruder" (01:17:35) and its worrisome consequences.

The unusual quality of Gannett's novel based on its comic nonsense, its otherworldly settings and fable-like characters makes it part of a literary tradition that relies on dream narratives, the most famous of which would be *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll. Elmer's crossing of the sea, just like Alice's fall down the rabbit hole, leads him to the surreal world of Wild Island. Both adaptations build on that dream portal motif, therefore "literally creating the process of interiority/exteriority as an illustrative outcome" (Wells, 2007, p. 203). Hata gives more significance to Elmer's crossing of the sea rocks between Tangerina and Wild Island; this crossing happens at night (like in the novel) but turns into Elmer's literally discovering a magic passage through a world of sea-life and luminescent wonder (Fig. 9[40]).

Fig. 9 – Elmer is crossing the ocean rocks.

This sequence is one of the few associated with a song in the film which highlights its importance. Twomey's film frames Elmer's adventure as a dream-like journey in another universe altogether, as when he comes back it seems his mother and the landlady have only been looking for him for a few minutes. This was interpreted as the film's "fever dream quality[41]". Moreover, the scenes during which Elmer runs away from his mother in the scary streets of Nevergreen city evoke a descending movement similar to that of the mind descending in the subconscious of dreams (Zahed, 2023, p. 20; Fig. 10).

[40] Screenshot (Hata, 2008, 00:37:17).

[41] Lee, Benjamin , "*My Father's Dragon* Review – Sweet-Natured Animated Netflix Adventure," *The Guardian*, November 4th, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/nov/04/my-fathers-dragon-netflix-nora-twomey-review (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

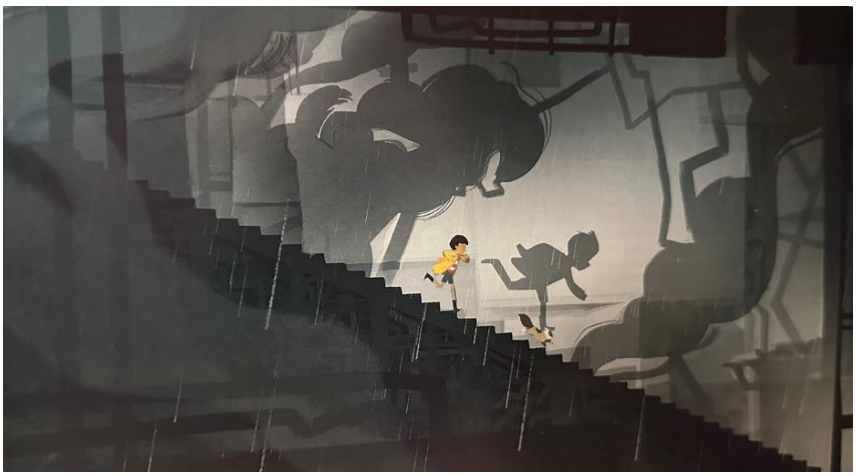


Fig. 10 – Elmer runs away from his mother.

The nightmarish shadows surrounding Elmer on his way down support this quite efficiently. Similarly, on his way back, Elmer ascends the same alleyway, which is now bathed in a warmer light, potentially evoking morning.

Finally, both directors sought to use music, songs, and actors' and actresses' voices to inscribe their film in its historical and cultural context. Hata's film stars a famous pop singer as Elmer. Yu-ki a member of the TRF pop band that was particularly famous in the 1990s not only lent her voice to Elmer, she also performed the theme song which explains its technopop genre—which might seem surprising in a children's film. This, however, shows a clear intention of chronicling the film in its specific context. Similarly, *My Father's Dragon* boasts an impressive list of famous actors in its cast including: Jacob Trembley as Elmer, Gaten Matarazzo as Boris, Whoopi Goldberg as the stray cat, Alan Cumming as Cornelius the crocodile, Ian McShane as Saiwa, and Rita Moreno as Mrs Mc Laren. This shows the importance of referentiality in establishing the specific context in which the adaptation was created and released. Twomey's film relies on music to establish atmosphere, but it also underlines the centrality of its unique theme song by having Elmer and Boris use it as their danger whistle signal. Interestingly, the music recalls Celtic music inspirations, thus recalling Cartoon Saloon's specifically Irish identity. The theme song, "Lift your Wings," is performed by English transgender singer and visual artist Anohni, thus endorsing even more diverse meanings of the movie's central theme and moral:

Lift your wings to the sky
Let your breath become light
Though your questions have no answers
I will be your guiding light.

Hatas' and Twomey's animated adaptations show reinterpretations of the main themes and subtext of Gannett's novel, showing how topical and universal the theme of self-reliance inspired by meaningful role models can be. Interestingly, it is through a similar expansion of characterization relying on the wit of animation and its ability to evoke exteriority and interiority, the literal and the abstract, and the evocative nature of dream narratives, that they prove the importance of being both a true and metaphorical explorer so that fears can be overcome.

Conclusion

Having approached them as subjective correlatives, we can see that both animated adaptations engage in a dialectic movement between version and variation, adaptation and adoption, adaptation *proper* and appropriation. They testify to Barrès's observation that "film adaptation involves poetics of circularity (in the sense of turning around, as in a version) and poetics of deviation (in the sense of diverting, as in variation)" (2020, p. 40). Both films establish their kinship with the adapted material and in that way seek to maintain a form of sameness, but their varying intertextual engagement spells out as a way to establish their own alterity and identity as full-fledged artistic creations. Although they differ in their level of "sameness," and can therefore be placed at different levels of Sanders's adaptation-appropriation, Bendazzi's illustration-adaptation or Barrès's adaptation-adoption continuum; they markedly express a form of reinterpretation of the novel that is not altogether different, and show a clear effort to situate their films as "wholly new cultural products" (Sanders, 2013, p. 35) inscribed in specific and meaningful cultural and temporal contexts. Considering their provenance and the significance of their recontextualization practices as a particularly rich network of intertextual and transmedial references, these animated adaptations say something about animation's relation to a transcultural literary canon. A canon of works that can transcend, through animated adaptations, their initial cultural boundaries and build a long-lasting transgenerational legacy.

References

About My Father's Dragon, *MyFathersDragon.org*, no date, https://myfathersdragon.org/dragon/ (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

Barrès, Patrick, "Adaptation littéraire et court métrage d'animation ; Poïétique de la circularité de l'écart," *Adaptation littéraire et courts métrages d'animation: Au milieu de l'image coulent les textes*, Dutel, Jérôme, (dir.), Paris: L'Harmattan, 2020, pp. 35-46.

Bird, Betsy, "The Top 100 Children's Novels Poll," *School Library Journal.com*, April 13th, 2010, https://afuse8production.slj.com/2010/04/13/the-top-100-childrens-novels-poll-1-100/ (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

Cartoon Saloon, *My Father Dragon*, 2024, https://www.cartoonsaloon.ie/my-fathers-dragon/ (retrieved on January 30th, 2025).

Cartmell, Deborah, "Adapting Children's Literature," *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, Cartmell, Deborah, and Whelehan, Imelda (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 167-180.

Cavallaro, Dani, *Anime and the Art of Adaptation: Eight Famous Works from Page to Screen*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 2010.

Gannett, Ruth Stiles, *Three Tales of My Father's Dragon*, [1948], London: Swift Press, 2022.

Gannett, Ruth Stiles, *My Father's Dragon*, [1948], Project Gutenberg, September 8th, 2009, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30017/30017-h/30017-h.htm (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation* [2006], Oxon: Routledge, 2013.

Internet Movie Database, "*Elmer no Boken*," no date, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0332029/?ref_=fn_al_tt_2 (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

Lee, Benjamin , "*My Father's Dragon* Review – Sweet-Natured Animated Netflix Adventure," *The Guardian*, November 4th, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/nov/04/my-fathers-dragon-netflix-nora-twomey-review (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

Masami, Hata, *Elmer no Boken* [Elmer's Adventures], Shochiku, 1997.

Masami, Hata, *Elmer et le dragon* [Elmer and the Dragon], Metropolitan, 2008.

Massoto, Erick , "*My Father's Dragon* Review: Cartoon Saloon's Latest Favors Generic Journey over Complex Themes," *Collider*, November 11th, 2022, https://collider.com/my-fathers-dragon-review-jacob-tremblay-gaten-matarazzo-cartoon-saloon/ (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

National Education Association, "Teachers' Top 100 Books," *Infoplease.com*, August 5th, 2020, https://www.infoplease.com/culture-entertainment/journalism-literature/teachers-top-100-books-children (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

Netflix Behind the Streams, "Cartoon Saloon: The Story behind the Incredible Animation Studio," YouTube, November 12th, 2022,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlazLWCvGWk (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

Oltolini, Maria Chiara, *Rediscovered Classics of Japanese Animation: The Adaptation of Children's Novels into the* World Masterpiece Theatre *Series*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024.

Rall, Hannes, *Adaptation for Animation: Transforming Literature Frame by Frame*, London: CRC Press Taylor and Francis Group, 2020.

Reynolds, Christopher, "Elmer no Bouken エルマーの冒険 (My Father's Dragon) 1997 ENG subs," YouTube, April 9th, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIRZ9_VEyac (retrieved on September 4th, 2024).

Sanders, Julie, *Adaptation and Appropriation* [2005], Oxon: Routledge, 2016.

The Movie Database, *Elmer no Boken*, no date, https://www.themoviedb.org/movie/92113-elmer-no-b-ken (retrieved on January 30th, 2025).

Twomey, Nora, *My Father's Dragon*, Netflix Animation, Cartoon Saloon, Mockingbird Pictures & Parallel Films, 2022.

Wells, Paul, "'Thou Art Translated': Analysing Animated Adaptation," *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, Cartmell, Deborah, and Whelehan, Imelda, (eds.), Oxon: Routledge, 1999, pp. 199-213.

Wells, Paul, "Literary Animation and the 'Subjective Correlative': Defining the Narrative World in Brit-lit Animation," *Animated Worlds*, Buchan, Suzanne, (ed.), Barnet: John Libbey & Company, 2005, pp. 79-93.

Wells, Paul, "Classic Literature and Animation: All Adaptations are Equal but Some Adaptations are more Equal than Others," *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, Cartmell, Deborah, and Whelehan, Imelda, (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 199-211.

Wikipedia, "Elmer's Adventure (Eruma no Boken)," October 2023, https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/エルマーのぼうけん (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

Welsh, Oli, "*Wolfwalker*'s Studio Gets Emotional Again with *My Father's Dragon* on Neflix," *Polygon*, November 11th, 2022, https://www.polygon.com/reviews/23404509/netflix-animation-my-fathers-dragon-review (retrieved on March 6th, 2024).

Zahed, Ramin, "A Flight of Fancy: How Nora Twomey & Cartoon Saloon Brought *My Father's Dragon* to Life," *Animation Magazine*, vol. 325, 2022.

Zahed, Ramin, *The Art of My Father's Dragon*, New York: Abrams, 2023.

Biobibliographie de l'auteure

Audrey Louckx is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting (FTI-EII) at the University of Mons (UMONS) in Belgium. She obtained her Ph.D. in contemporary American Literature in 2013. Her current research focuses on cinematographic adaptation and intermediality in American literature and pop culture. As a member of Disnet – the Disney, Culture and Society Research network, as well as several American pop culture associations, she has also been working on intertextual and intermedial references (a.k.a. Easter eggs) and nostalgia in Disney Films. Her most recent article on Disney's transtextual use of Easter eggs was published in *The Journal of American Culture* (2024, 47:2, pp.131-142).