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When the Harry Potter series became a global phenomenon, adult editions were published that replaced the brightly illustrated covers with dignified photographs of inanimate objects on a black background.

Publishers presumed there was a need to cater to adults who wanted to read a fantasy series about a boy wizard, but who didn’t want fellow train commuters to judge them as juvenile or unintelligent.

A recent Slate article suggests that adults should be embarrassed to read books marketed as “young adult” fiction.
Regardless of the problems with the suggestion that any kind of reading should be embarrassing, why should the intended age of a book’s readership determine whether reading it is “shameful”?

For one, just how do we distinguish between books for young people and books for adults? Many popular classics for young adult readers, such as J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye, were originally written for adult audiences. While canonical works in their own right, including Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Charles Dickens’s Oliver Twist and Great Expectations, have attracted young readers since their publication in the Victorian era.

Children’s literature evolved to fulfil didactic aims. John Newbery, a pioneering publisher of children’s books in the early 18th century, aimed to provide “instruction with delight” in the books he published. (He’s responsible for Goody Two-Shoes.)

Education was seen as integral to reading as a leisure activity for children. The concession to entertainment or “delight” was relatively recent. Much early children’s literature is tedious to the modern reader because of its moral and educative focus.

From the “golden age” of children’s literature in the second half of the 19th century, didacticism decreased and the boundary between books for adults and books for children became permeable. Books – and plays, such as J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan – often satisfied a dual audience of children and adults.
While Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland was originally presented by Lewis Carroll to 12-year-old Alice Liddell as a gift, on publication it found a lasting audience with both adults and children.

Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island and Kidnapped were first published in Young Folks magazine and were seen as “boy’s books”. Yet both Henry James and Arthur Conan Doyle published reviews or commentary on both novels, in a way that the dismissal of children’s books would probably preclude today.

In 1905, two of Mark Twain’s novels were challenged as inappropriate for child library patrons. In response, Twain claimed that he wrote “Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn for adults exclusively”. Yet he pointed out that the unexpurgated Bible should also be removed from the children’s room lest it “soil” young minds, mocking the very notion of shielding children from literature that features characters “no better than Solomon, David, Satan”.

If a book “for adults exclusively” is a faintly ridiculous concept, then so too is a book “for children
exclusively”. Adults are the authors of children’s books and quite often they write to please and entertain adults too. The possibility of a dual audience is readily accepted in successful children’s animated films in which jokes and references that only adult viewers would understand punctuate the storyline.

Adults are now buying young adult fiction in such great numbers that the primary readership for these books might not actually be young people. Yet at the same time as adults are reading The Fault in Our Stars, Twilight and The Hunger Games, there remains incredulity at the idea that young people and adults can both be entertained and satisfied by the same book.

Instead there is guilt associated with reading children’s literature. This shaming is baseless when literature for young people that is well-written and intellectually challenging, such as the work of Philip Pullman and Sonya Hartnett, is dismissed wholesale. Yet cliched, formulaic and poorly written “adult” fiction does not carry the same weight of embarrassment.

Arguments against adults reading children’s or young adult titles often present life as an opportunity to absorb a limited number of books, with time spent on “lesser” literature destroying the chance to read Proust or defiantly finish Ulysses. Yet this claim about time being wasted in reading children’s books is infrequently applied to popular bestsellers such as Fifty Shades of Grey or The Da Vinci Code.

The truth is that a sophisticated reader will want to sample the most compelling, imaginative and lasting books of the past and the present. Some of these will be difficult and full of complex allusions. Others will be pleasurable genre fiction that follow a predictable, but satisfying, formula.

But there should always be a place for Alice, Peter, Dorothy, Anne, Holden, Katniss, and the March sisters alongside them.