

**Gregor and the Renegotiated Contract:
Dynamic Uses of Series and Fantasy Genre Conventions in the Underland Chronicles**

Series are typically static; however animated the reading experience within individual volumes, however frequent surprising plot twists might be, readers can anticipate “more of the same” as they move from volume to volume. In some series, characterization may grow deeper; the characters may grow older, and the reading level and plot complexity may develop along with the characters and implied readers, but the essential nature of series books is comfortably stable. Victor Watson notes the deliberate commitment readers make when reading a series and the “special relationship” that develops between reader and writer (1), using the terminology of “contract,” “implied promise,” and “authorial pact” in describing this relationship (87-90). Readers approach most genres, too, with expectations based on generic conventions, often choosing to read a book because of the pleasure they anticipate from the generic experience.

Suzanne Collins’s fantasy series for middle grade readers, the Underland Chronicles, exhibits many hallmarks of traditional (even formulaic) series books, but the series’ progression provides both the expected continuation of plot and characters and an atypical shift in the presentation of issues such as faith, authority, war, and the rightness of one’s own group. The early volumes allow readers to make comfortable assumptions about the trustworthiness of traditional authority and the inherent superiority of those with whom the readers are most likely to identify. As the series progresses, the volumes challenge the comfortable, privileged positioning of the implied reader and become more openly skeptical. Similarly, the series features many tropes of the high fantasy genre but inverts these conventions in this subterranean fantasy by eschewing the supernatural. If, as Watson argues, “there is a *promise* made by a series-writer, and a *recognition* of the readerly desires of young readers” (205), Collins might be said to entice readers with the familiar and comfortable, then renegotiate the implicit contract as readers progress through the dynamic series.