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Reimagining Blighty

Historic Aesthetics and Pedagogy in Emma Carroll's *Letters from the Lighthouse* and Lucy Strange's *Our Castle by the Sea*

Abstract: This article examines the relationship between aesthetics and pedagogy in two recent historical novels for children about the British Home Front during the Second World War: Letters from the Lighthouse (2017) by Emma Carroll and Our Castle by the Sea (2019) by Lucy Strange. It argues that the representation of civilian life during the war in both novels is conditioned by recent socio-political events in Britain, namely, the recurrent appropriation of the wartime past in support of nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric. The texts discussed in this article seek to counter this narrative, foregrounding immigration as a vital part of Britain's wartime past. Drawing upon historical fiction studies and cultural analysis, the article begins with an exploration of the aesthetic treatment of wartime Britain in the texts more broadly, arguing that Letters from the Lighthouse participates in and subverts idealised visions of the Home Front, while Our Castle by the Sea rejects nostalgia entirely. I conclude my discussion with an examination of the use of the wartime spy story as an aesthetic template for exploring concepts of xenophobia and prejudice in the two novels. Ultimately, this article contends that literary aesthetics perform a pedagogic function in both texts, presenting the contribution of immigrants and refugees as crucial to the story of the Britain Home Front.

Keywords: historical fiction, World War II, immigration, nostalgia, pedagogy, Emma Carroll, Lucy Strange, aesthetics and pedagogy

The images and narratives associated with the Second World War hold a powerful position in the British cultural imagination and expressions of national identity. The Home Front, or “Blighty” as it has been more colloquially known,¹ occupies a potent place within the mythos of wartime Britain and is associated with a fusion of heroism and everyday life that has come to define visions of British civilian experience during the war (Calder 14). The Second World War has also been a source of contention in public discourse in Twenty-First Century Britain and has frequently been appropriated as a conduit for far-right nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric. During the 2016 Brexit referendum, for example, the war was, at times, tied to anti-immigration sentiment, with moments from wartime history such as the evacuation of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain deployed in pursuit of a jingoistic vision of a Britain that could stand alone outside of the structures of the European Union (Reynolds 1).² Immigration was, Matthew Goodwin and Caitlin Milazzo argue, a core issue within the Brexit referendum and was often linked to questions of identity, historic change, and concerns regarding national decline (451). The language and imagery used by the British far right often invokes the Second World War in its contributions to this debate. Wendy Webster, author of *Mixing It: Diversity in World War Two Britain* (2018), cites one such instance, prior to the referendum itself, in which the far right and Eurosceptic British National Party produced a poster for the 2009 European elections depicting a Spitfire, the iconic British wartime fighter plane, with the caption “Battle for Britain” (2). The plane in question, Webster notes, was in fact flown by a Polish squadron. As Webster argues, narratives placing the history of Second World War Britain in opposition to immigration are antithetical to the historical realities of the scale of movement and migration which occurred in Britain during the war (2).

This article examines two recent works of British historical fiction for children which seek to foreground the role of immigration within the nation’s wartime past: *Letters from the Lighthouse* (2017) by Emma Carroll and *Our Castle by the Sea* (2019) by Lucy Strange. In both texts, I argue, literary aesthetics serve as a central pedagogical tool; through both the participation in and subversion of established visions of the Home Front in the British cultural imagination, the two novels invite the implied child reader to consider the importance of immigration to the nation’s wartime past. I begin my analysis by considering the aesthetic treatment of the Home Front in the texts more broadly, before moving on to examine the role of the mystery narrative as a means of exploring immigration and xenophobia in both novels.

Aesthetics and Pedagogy in Historical Fiction for Children

The Second World War is a popular topic in British children's literature and wartime narratives populate much of the historical fiction published in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While there has been significant critical discussion of depictions of wartime Britain in historical novels published in the late twentieth century – including texts such as *Carrie's War* (1973) by Nina Bawden, *The Machine Gunners* (1975) by Robert Westall, and *Goodnight Mr Tom* (1981) by Michelle Magorian – there has been little critical analysis of more recent representations of the Home Front in historical fiction for children, particularly those published in the twenty-first century.³ *Letters from the Lighthouse* and *Our Castle by the Sea* are part of a group of novels about the war which have been conditioned by recent socio-political events in Britain,⁴ and the significance of immigration within both narratives, alongside the complex aesthetic treatment of wartime Britain, can be read as a response to the appropriation of the war in far-right nationalist rhetoric.⁵ Other recently published historical novels for children explore immigration as a central aspect of life on the Home Front: Helen Peters' *Anna at War* (2019), for example, depicts the Home Front from the perspective of a young Jewish refugee. *The War I Finally Won* (2017), the sequel to Kimberly Brubaker Bradley's 2015 novel, *The War that Saved my Life*, uses the main character's prejudice towards a Jewish refugee to consider the implications of wartime propaganda for recent immigrants.

I have, however, chosen Carroll's and Strange's novels for discussion in this article, as there are a number of similarities and resonances between the texts and how they approach the historic period. Both novels are set in rural locations on the South Coast of England and concern the experiences of young female protagonists during the early years of the Second World War (1939–1941). In *Letters from the Lighthouse*, Olive is evacuated from London to Devonshire, while *Our Castle by the Sea* follows Petra's attempts to help her family as their safety and family home in the local lighthouse are threatened by internment. As such, the two narratives explore the effects of wartime upon children and childhood experience, a feature that is common to historical fiction for children set during the Second World War (Agnew 84). Both novels illustrate a desire to introduce the contemporary implied child reader to what life was like for children in Britain during the war.

Historical fiction for children is a genre deeply entrenched in pedagogical concerns, as a body of literature seeking to foster and develop an implied child reader's knowledge of and interest in

the past. As Catherine Butler and Hallie O'Donovan maintain, the "informative" aspects of historical fiction form a significant part of the "literary experience" of historical novels (2), alongside the aesthetic qualities which form the narrative. Thus, aesthetics and pedagogy have the potential to be intertwined and mutually impactful aspects of historical fiction. As John Stephens argues, the tendencies of fictional narrative to lend shape and meaning to history can be "radically ideological" (202), imposing significance, causality, and interpretation upon historical events. Stephens writes:

The historical novel in children's literature is not a genre which, in some abstracting preoccupation with the past, constitutes a closed system of signification, re-presenting a pre-existing and essential reality, but rather is the discursive product of firm ideological intentions, written and read in a specific, complex cultural situation. (Stephens 205)

For Stephens, the manner in which history is constructed, interpreted, and relayed by fictional narrative is ideologically charged, producing its own form of historical knowledge and information. In order to mediate between the past and present, historical fiction seeks encoding strategies which can render the past sufficiently accessible to the implied reader, while also simultaneously depicting it as distinctly other to the present, a process that Stephens terms "making the discourse strange" (202). The relationship between history and fiction is hence a complex and fundamentally interdependent one, as the pedagogic aspects of historical fiction are inflected by the aesthetic qualities of fictional narrative.

In this sense, historical novels participate in what Jerome De Groot terms the "historical imaginary" (2): fictional representations of the past via the prism of a set of, often familiar and recurrent, "aestheticised models" (3). De Groot argues that, rather than substandard forms of historiography, historical fictions constitute their own form of historical knowledge and can provide "discursive spaces" (2). De Groot writes: "[historical fictions] contribute to the historical imaginary, having an almost pedagogical aspect in allowing a culture to 'understand' past moments [...] they allow reflection upon the representational processes of history" (2). Through engagement with familiar imaginative strategies in depicting the past, historical fiction can propose counter narratives to dominant visions of history, while also engaging with questions regarding how history is represented and for whom. However, this effect is complicated in historical fic-

tion for children, as representative models of the past may not be familiar to inexperienced readers, who may be encountering particular periods in history for the first time. Indeed, as Maria Nikolajeva contends, for inexperienced readers who may have no prior knowledge of a historical period, the temporal distance of eras in historical fiction can be akin to entering the imagined worlds of fantasy fiction (55). Historical fiction for children thus often inducts its reader into the historical imaginary, potentially introducing them to particular tropes and ideas associated with a period of history for the first time.

Participation and Rejection: The Aesthetics of Nostalgia

Taking De Groot's understanding of the historical imaginary, it is useful, at this point, to consider some of the features which are recurrent to British cultural depictions of the war. There are a number of "staple features" (Butler and O'Donovan 148) in historical fictions depicting the Home Front, such as gasmasks, food rationing, Pathé newsreels and reports on the wireless, local officials and wardens, and air raids, all of which appear in Carroll's and Strange's novels. The inclusion of such features serves an informative function and provides an overarching texture to the depiction of civilian life during the war. Such features thus contribute to the appeal of the text and can engage with familiar images of the Home Front in the historical imaginary. The depiction of the Home Front in the British cultural imagination has been the source of much commentary, and certain invocations of the period have been criticised for producing nostalgic, idealised visions of civilian life during the war. Owen Hatherley argues that many depictions of Britain during the years of the Second World War and those immediately succeeding it are characterised by a "dreamlike perception" of the past (15), participating in an aesthetics of nostalgia that has been present in Britain since the late twentieth century.⁶ As Patrick Wright, author of the seminal study of heritage culture in British life, *On Living in an Old Country* (1985), has commented about the resonance of his text with the current climate:

[...] more recent events have confirmed the potency of simplifying and politically motivated narratives that appeal to British patriotism in public life [...] The perceived enemy may oscillate back and forth between Europe, the welfare state, and migrants, but from the 1980s to the present we've been locked in the same battle. (Hassan and Wright 101-102)

The appropriation of the Second World War as a conduit for nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric in Twenty-First Century Britain is thus not a new phenomenon, but rather a renewed iteration of an established ideological construction of the past.

In many senses, *Letters from the Lighthouse* participates in a nostalgic vision of Britain's wartime past. Narrative events are coated in a glossy aesthetics of "post-box red lipstick" (Carroll 4), Pathé newsreels, and copious amounts of tea with bread and jam. Carroll's characters speak in a self-consciously antiquated patter, with exclamations of the "cat's pyjamas" (2) and references to trips to the "lavs" (7) peppered throughout the dialogue. As such, Carroll's characters use language that distances them from their implied reader, yet simultaneously is intended to induct the implied reader into the historic imagination. Speaking in an interview about the novel, Carroll states that the initial concept for *Letters from the Lighthouse* was for "a sort of Land Girls meets *Carrie's War*, except they'd both been done before" (Greengrass). From this statement, it is evident that Carroll is conscious of writing within a tradition of representing the war in British historical fiction, while also seeking to achieve something new with her text and to reinterpret this tradition for a contemporary implied child readership. Indeed, as one reviewer writes of Carroll's text: "*Letters from the Lighthouse* has the feel of a classic" (O'Connell). The "classic feel" of the novel derives from its participation in an established representational mode of wartime Britain that is recognisable to the reviewer. Indeed, the historical fictions referenced by Carroll in the quotation above – *The Land Girls* (1998), a period film concerning three young women who volunteer for the Women's Land Army during the war, and *Carrie's War* (1973) – illustrate the broad base of cultural material with which the novel is engaging. Carroll's text encapsulates what Geoff Eley terms "the promiscuous mélange of imagery and citation [and] dense palimpsest of referentiality" that often characterises images of the Second World War in the British cultural imagination (891).

There is, however, a self-conscious quality to many of the cultural references in the text and the impression that these might form upon an implied child reader. This is particularly evident in the use of historic propaganda slogans, such as "Careless Talk Costs Lives" (Carroll 93) and "When in Doubt Lights Out" (126), as chapter titles. The novel's first chapter is titled "Keep Calm and Carry On," a reference to the slogan and poster that is frequently invoked in reference to the "Blitz" spirit. The slogan itself, as Hatherley writes, is "a historical object of a very peculiar sort" (16). The poster was

designed for the Ministry of Information in 1939 but was archived for use in the case of invasion. Thus, “Keep Calm and Carry On” did not appear in public view until 2008, when the few archived copies of the poster were purchased at auction and published for mass consumption (Hatherley 16). Hatherley locates the slogan’s subsequent success and cultural prominence within the context of the 2008 economic crash and recession: “The power of ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ comes from a yearning for an actual or imaginary British patrician attitude of stiff upper lips and muddling through” (21). The slogan conjures a vision of national response to crisis which is, Hatherley argues, “both reassuring and flattering, implying a virtuous (if *highly* self-aware) consumer stoicism” (21). In this sense, “Keep Calm and Carry On” establishes Carroll’s novel within an, albeit anachronistic, established aesthetics of the Home Front.

But what of pedagogy? Carroll discusses her choice of propaganda slogans for chapter headings in a 2017 interview:

Looking at propaganda posters I wrote a list of all the headings/messages and saw that they fitted into what my story was trying to achieve. They also added a nice bit of historical flavour because they give us an insight into the mood of the era. The “Keep Calm and Carry On” phrase has been adopted for modern usage and will probably be familiar to readers – that’s why it comes first. (Tobin)

It is clear from this quotation that Carroll is more concerned with conjuring a specific aesthetics of historical representation, as opposed to stringent historical accuracy. The implied reader to whom Carroll refers here is one who has potentially already come into contact with cultural pastiche of wartime material, for whom this particular model of the past might to some degree be familiar. Carroll’s statement denotes a conscious decision to capitalise upon existing and established cultural images of the war; through the incorporation of an existing aesthetics of wartime Britain, the text imposes its own meaning on these images. When Olive attends the cinema for example, the Pathé newsreel, synonymous with wartime culture, includes footage that shows the conditions of Jewish people in Nazi-occupied Europe: “Tonight’s news switched from RAF men to a city somewhere abroad [...] Watching, I began to feel uncomfortable instead of proud. The Pathé news voice – jolly and brisk – jarred with what I was seeing” (Carroll 5). The juxtaposition between the newsreel voiceover and images of starving people diverges from the initial patriotic sentiment of the passage, in which Olive was filled

with pride at news reports about the RAF, to growing awareness of the persecution of Jewish people by the Nazis. As such, the passage destabilises Olive's own somewhat idealised perception of the war, thus inviting the implied child reader to consider the gap between representation and reality in the newsreel. The text self-consciously draws upon familiar cultural images of the war, in this case the stoic clipped vowels of the Pathé voiceover, while also puncturing any previous nostalgia in the passage with the suffering depicted in the newsreel. The passage also serves to foreground Olive's relationship with a Jewish refugee, Esther, later in the text. The newsreel serves as a device with which to configure the experiences of Jewish people in Europe and refugees as central to the narrative of the Home Front, a theme which will become of increasing importance as the novel progresses.

Our Castle by the Sea takes a less idealised view of the Home Front from the outset, and the novel's aesthetic approach to the past is reflective of this. The beginning of the novel is characterised by mounting concerns for the safety of Petra and her family; Petra's mother, referred to as "Mutti" in the text, is German, and the family find themselves increasingly more ostracised by their local community with the outbreak of war. While the novel includes many of the recurrent tropes of the Second World War in historical fiction, the familiar features of blackouts, gasmasks, and air raid wardens are tinged with a sense of anxiety, serving as emblems of the wartime conditions which threaten Petra's family. In this sense, the novel differs from *Letters from the Lighthouse*, insofar as rather than engaging with romanticised and idealised visions of the war, Strange's novel rejects the aesthetics of nostalgia outright. The novel opens with Petra's older sister, Magda, arriving home from school with a bloody lip, the result of a fight with a group of students who insulted Mutti (Strange 12). The family are excluded from many opportunities for participation in the civilian war effort, as engagement with the community brings with it the threat of xenophobic attack and prejudice. Other characters in the novel also suffer as a result of their heritage: Mr and Mrs Rossi, two Italian immigrants who own a local bakery, have their business vandalised and are eventually interned as "Enemy Aliens." The Millers, an elderly couple who fled Nazi Germany and anglicised their German surname Müller, are also interned; Mr Miller is killed while on a ship transporting internees. In this manner, the locality is depicted as culturally heterogeneous, and Petra's family is one of a community of people who came to Britain as immigrants and are now at risk from xenophobic attack.

The social cohesion and unity that often accompanies depictions of Britain during the war is thus replaced by an atmosphere of fear and claustrophobia. Indeed, it is the time before the war, when they “were just like any other family” (Strange 20), that is rendered with nostalgia in the novel. Petra’s interactions with the local community, such as a gasmask demonstration in the village hall, are characterised by a sense of alienation. The gasmask becomes a metaphor for the sense of suspicion and hostility in the village. When Petra first tries on her gasmask, the experience is likened to drowning: “The village became a sinking ship, swaying its way down to the bottom of the deepest greenest sea, taking me and everyone else down with it” (3). This sensation is reiterated when Petra’s mother is convicted as a Category A Enemy Alien, deeming her a high risk to national security, supported by evidence given by former friends and neighbours. In this moment, Petra recalls, once again, the “grip of the gas, the choking bitterness, the suffocation” of the gasmask (102). In this manner, the gasmask, a familiar feature in cultural depictions of the Home Front, becomes a symbol of the persecution of Petra’s family and other immigrants in the local community.

Strange has explicitly commented that the text was written with the intention of bringing the experiences of those who were interned as “Enemy Aliens” in Britain to light:

There’s that famous quote from Winston Churchill that haunted me when I was doing my research. He famously said, “Collar the lot” [...] And I felt there were parallels there in terms of prejudice and xenophobia and what happens to our humanity [...] when we’re encouraged through politics or the press to view a nation as the enemy. (Roper)

Here, Strange articulates a desire to complicate glorified narratives of Britain’s wartime past for the implied child reader, emphasising the relevance that issues such as intolerance and exclusion bear for today. Referencing Prime Minister Winston Churchill, a figure more often associated with his coinage of the term Britain’s “Finest Hour,”⁷ Strange counters oversimplified and jingoistic articulations of the nation’s wartime past, advocating rather for a more nuanced understanding of life in Britain during the war. The quotation from Churchill is directly addressed in the text, and the reader is told that this is the primary justification given for the arrest of Mr and Mrs Rossi: “With everyone in the country so angry and frightened and expecting invasion any minute, Mr Churchill had ordered the police

to ‘Collar the lot!’ – anyone who could potentially be a supporter of the enemy; anyone born in the wrong country” (Strange 213). The Rossi family’s bakery is attacked on the morning that they are arrested for internment, thus emphasising the connections between fear, suspicion, and xenophobia in the village community.

Carroll’s and Strange’s novels thus take very different aesthetic approaches to the Home Front. *Letters from the Lighthouse* at times participates in a romanticised view of civilian life during the war, and the injection of material such as propaganda slogans and newsreels creates a vivid cinematic aesthetics of the Home Front. Such aesthetics do not go unexamined, however, and the text often draws the implied reader’s attention to the gap between the fantasy of civilian life during the war and reality. *Our Castle by the Sea* rejects the aesthetics of nostalgia, opting instead for a vision of the Home Front that is characterised by anxiety and isolation. The changes to daily life brought on by the war, such as gasmasks and blackout blinds, become symbols of instability and the wider community’s rejection of their Italian and German neighbours. In both novels, however, wartime aesthetics are a vital means of asserting the significance of immigration and immigrant experience within the history of wartime Britain, as I now discuss further.

Subversion: Mystery, Codes, and Spies

The narrative conflicts in *Letters from the Lighthouse* and *Our Castle by the Sea* both centre upon secrets and espionage, and the unravelling of these mysteries provides one of the primary reader pleasures of both texts. Narrative features such as codes, hidden pasts, and secrets construct a sense of mystery and tension in the two novels, while also providing a site for exploring xenophobia and patriotism. Both texts reject the trope of the enemy infiltrator or spy, common to children’s literature published during the war, thus engaging the aesthetics of espionage in order to subvert reader expectations. Spies and mystery were popular features of children’s literature of this period, as the adventurous exploits of many familiar characters were repurposed in aid of the war effort (Fox 23). Owen Dudley Edwards also comments upon the ubiquity of espionage and “quislings” – collaborators with the enemy – in children’s literature published during the war and argues that intertextual networks of spies between texts “created resonances of a united front” for the wartime implied child reader (101).⁸ Indeed, stories of “juvenile reconnaissance” (Trumpener 504), in which child characters were responsible

for the apprehension of Nazi spies, enabled a framework in which both character and implied child reader could be implicated as citizens with patriotic duty to the war effort (Fox 30).⁹ If, as James Purdon writes, the figure of the spy in wartime rests upon “a fantasy of personal responsibility in increasingly impersonal societies” (365), then the wartime spy novel for children pivots upon a fantasy of childhood agency, in which child characters have a personal hand in matters of national security.¹⁰ Espionage and encounters with enemy spies thus hold a prominent position within the historical imaginary of the Second World War and are recurrent features in historical fiction for children about the war.

Much of the plot of *Letters from the Lighthouse* concerns Olive’s search for her older sister, Sukie, who disappears during an air raid in the first chapter. Clues to Sukie’s whereabouts appear in the form of a series of codes, the first of which Olive finds on a note in Sukie’s coat pocket. The significance of the note is established in the first chapter, as the last time Olive sees her sister, Sukie is seen taking a piece of paper from a “strange man” with “slicked back hair” and a belted trench coat in an alleyway (Carroll 12). Compounded by references to Sukie’s recent “mysterious” (2) behaviour and secretive correspondence with her new pen pal, Queenie, the reader is made aware from the outset that all is not as it appears. When Olive is evacuated to live with Queenie in a rural coastal village, she becomes increasingly convinced that Queenie is withholding information from her, and that Sukie’s disappearance is connected to these codes and the local lighthouse. Olive struggles to reconcile her sense of responsibility for uncovering the truth with the depictions of spies in the books that she has read, as these “random clues” (107) do not fit her understanding of the solitary figure of the lone spy. There is thus a self-referential quality to the text’s appropriation of espionage and mystery, as Olive’s preconceptions of what a spy should look like are based upon representations which she has encountered in literature.

Comprised of a series of letters and numbers, the codes appear on the page in block print: “DAY 9/I 26 8 T/U I...” (Carroll 108). In this manner, the codes are configured as an interruption to the main body of the narrative, cryptic symbols for both Olive and the reader to decipher. Thus, ciphers and encoded language not only create an aesthetics of mystery, but also facilitate proactive engagement on the part of the implied child reader; the pleasures of any code surely lie, in part, in cracking it. While Olive attempts to decipher the codes, she meets another evacuee, Esther, who is Jewish and originally came to Britain on the Kindertransport.¹¹ Through Olive’s relationship

with Esther, the text diverges from a spy narrative, as the codes are revealed to refer to tide times and dates which pertain to a rescue mission for Jewish refugees. Olive and Esther have a hostile relationship initially. The text uses pointedly othering language to describe Olive's first impression of Esther as a "naughty girl" who speaks English "a bit oddly" (40). Olive is forced to challenge her own prejudice, however, as she and Esther must work together to alert Queenie that a group of refugees will be arriving from mainland Europe by boat that night. Olive's character development comes not via catching a spy, but rather by challenging her latent antisemitism and gaining an increased awareness of the experiences of refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. Olive becomes an advocate for tolerance and inclusion within the community, supporting Esther in organising a welcome event for the Jewish refugees, a tea party in the village hall: "it was her story to tell. And I could think of plenty of people who could benefit from hearing it" (231). In this sense, the text retains the focus upon the child's moral agency that is common to spy stories, but converts this from protecting the nation from external threat to aiding refugees who are seeking safety in Britain.

The emphasis upon Olive's sense of social responsibility at the end of the novel reads as a direct address to the implied child reader: "I wouldn't keep quiet. I had a voice, and it was time to make some noise with it" (Carroll 167). While Carroll's text is ensconced in a film of cultural reference and popular pastiche, it also probes at narratives of national and social unity during the war. Olive and Esther may welcome the group of refugees with all of the trappings of tea and cake, but the reader is told that the group will eventually move on "to countries that aren't as strict as ours about refugees" (150). In this sense, the nostalgic vision of wartime Britain within the text is perhaps not so much a means of romanticising the past, but rather of projecting an idealised vision of the future. The complex appropriation of the historical imaginary in Carroll's text exemplifies postmodernist theorist Linda Hutcheon's assertion that "the aesthetics of nostalgia might [...] be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealised history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present" (195). As Clementine Beauvais writes, children's literature is a "discourse of latency" (19); the resolution and final address of Carroll's text emphasises the part that refugees played within the war effort and Home Front, while also encouraging the implied child reader to apply this narrative to their understanding of the present.

Suspicions of espionage first appear in *Our Castle by the Sea* when Petra's mother is accused of sending a "package of information and drawings" about the local landscape and British naval movements to Germany during her trial as a potential "Enemy Alien" (Strange 96), leading to her eventual internment. Mystery also appears in the form of coded messages in Strange's novel, as Petra's initial hopes for proving her mother's innocence also hinge upon a "list of incomprehensible numbers" (130) which Magda takes from "Spooky Joe," a local misanthropic recluse who, it transpires, is Petra's paternal grandfather. Over the course of the novel, the source of the diagrams and drawings used to incriminate Mutti is revealed to be Mrs Baron, the air raid warden and a "pillar of the community" (34). The Baron's allegiance to the Nazis is first revealed by Michael, Mrs Baron's son, who threatens to kill Petra when she finds him gathering information by the cliffs one night: "My father always said that this country desperately needs a ruler like Hitler – someone to bring back the discipline and wealth of the old Empire!" (247). The reader eventually learns that the Barons are members of the British Union of Fascists and framed Petra's mother in order to distract from their own collusion with Nazi intelligence. This is revealed during a climactic passage, in which Petra tries to prevent Mrs Baron from lighting up the coastline for Nazi planes: "And the best thing is that your family will get the blame for this [...] Who would suspect the ARP warden of operating the lamp in the lighthouse?" (285). The dramatic tension of this final reveal is redolent of children's spy novels published in the 1940s, as it is Petra's duty to alert the authorities and save Britain from potential invasion. The text draws upon and subverts the trope of the foreign enemy infiltrator, instead configuring the threat to national security as a domestic one. Thus, simplistic distinctions between the foreign enemy outsider and patriotic British civilian are challenged and problematised, as the risk in the novel derives from fascism that is homegrown.

In both novels, the aesthetics of spying and mystery are deployed as a means of foregrounding the contributions of immigrants and refugees to wartime Britain. Another resemblance between the two novels is the role and significance of the lighthouse as a connective site between Britain and other nations. In *Letters from the Lighthouse*, the lighthouse is a crucial tool in guiding the refugees to safety and serves as the central meeting point for the rescue mission organisers. In *Our Castle by the Sea*, the lighthouse is symbolic of the family's unity and resistance against internment. Thus, rather than empha-

sis Britain's isolation as an island, the lighthouse is an emblem of passage and migration in both novels.

Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between aesthetics and pedagogy in two recent works of historical fiction about the British Home Front. Arguing that both novels emphasise contributions of immigrants to civilian life in Britain during the war, I have examined the manner in which *Letters from the Lighthouse* and *Our Castle by the Sea* aesthetically approach the Home Front to this end. Both texts respond to the use of the Second World War in far-right nationalism and anti-immigration rhetoric in British public discourse, an appropriation which was particularly evident during the 2016 Brexit referendum. Carroll's and Strange's texts react to the aesthetics of nostalgia within depictions of the war in the British historical imaginary: both texts absorb and subvert these familiar images and motifs in order to assert immigration and the immigrant experience as fundamental to the British wartime history. In *Letters from the Lighthouse*, this takes the form of the participation in and transformation of familiar aesthetic models, while *Our Castle by the Sea* rejects cosy or glossy images of the Home Front outright. There are, of course, important distinctions to be made between the two texts: the differences between Olive and Petra as first-person narrators and focalisers impact the manner in which immigration is mediated in the texts. Olive's character development takes the form of a growing awareness of the experiences of Jewish refugees, while prejudice and xenophobia are part of Petra's own personal experience as the child of a German immigrant in Britain during the war. Both texts, however, demonstrate the mutually reinforcing relationship between aesthetics and pedagogy in historical fiction for children as a genre which seeks not only to impart information, but also to encourage the implied child reader to reflect upon the representational structures of historical narratives. This is particularly evident in the representation of espionage narratives in the texts, in which both novels invert the aesthetics of spying in order to explore xenophobia towards immigrants in Britain during the war. In this manner, literary aesthetics perform a crucial pedagogic role in both novels, serving as a means of countering homogeneous and jingoistic narratives about Britain's wartime past and positing immigrant and refugee experiences as vital to the story of the Home Front.

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Notes

1 "Blighty" is an informal and often humorous term for Britain used by soldiers during the First and Second World Wars.

2 According to statistics cited on the UK Electoral Commission website, the referendum result was fifty-two percent to leave the European Union and forty-eight percent to remain ("Results").

3 For criticism of depictions of the Home Front in late twentieth and early twenty-first century historical fiction for children see: Butler and O'Donovan (144–163); Agnew (84–135); Collins and Graham (10–23); Talley (195–221). Talley discusses some texts published post 2010, such as *The War that Saved my Life* (2015) in a recent article about Second World War evacuation in children's literature.

4 Other recent historical novels for children depicting Britain during the war include: *Wave Me Goodbye* (2017) by Jacqueline Wilson; *When We Were Warriors* (2019) by Emma Carroll; *The Valley of Lost Secrets* (2021) by Lesley Parr; and *The Swallows' Flight* (2021) by Hilary McKay. While immigration is not the primary focus in all of these texts, each text approaches issues such as cultural memory or transnational wartime experience in a manner that seeks to provide a more nuanced and multi-perspective vision of the Home Front for the implied child reader.

5 This is not to argue that earlier texts did not explore themes of nationalism and xenophobia, but rather that the approach to these ideas in more recent historical fiction for children about Britain during the war has not been sufficiently critically examined.

6 For further discussion of the development of the narrative of the Second World War in British public and political discourse during this time see: Wright; Samuel.

7 Britain's "Finest Hour" is a phrase deriving from a speech delivered by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the House of Commons on 18 June 1940.

8 Dudley Edwards is, however, keen to point out that representations of spies and collaborators in children's literature during the war were not homogeneous. Richmal Crompton, for example, satirised the "excess of patriotic zeal" in *William and the Evacuees* from 1940 (100–101).

9 Notable examples of children's spy fiction published during the Second World War are *Four Plus Bunkle* (1939) by Margot Pardoe and *Mystery at Witchend* (1943) by Malcolm Saville, the first novel in the Lone Pine Club adventures series. Even the students at the Chalet School had to apprehend a spy in their midst in Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's *Chalet School in Exile* (1940). For further reading see Fox (22–34).

10 As Geoff Fox notes: "at one point in *Four Plus Bunkle* (1939) 'the whole difference between war and peace in Europe and the safety of England' are in the children's hands" (30).

11 The Kindertransport refers to the rescue of approximately ten thousand Jewish children from Germany, Austria, and then Czechoslovakia. The unaccompanied children were brought to the United Kingdom by train and were placed with British families. For further information see: Zahra; Fast; Craig-Norton; Homer.

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