

The Depiction of the Spanish Civil War in British Young Adult Fiction: Lydia Syson's *A World Between Us*

Alberto Lázaro
Universidad de Alcala

In recent decades, the Spanish Civil War has emerged as a popular backdrop in British historical novels. Renowned authors such as Patrick McGrath, Colm Tóibín, Lindsay Ashford, Jack Ludlow, and C. J. Sansom have drawn inspiration from Spain and its 1930s civil war to craft their plots and characters. While detective novels, romantic stories, and biographical narratives dominate this historical subgenre, some of these stories target young readers. It is intriguing that the cruelty and horror of a civil war have become a source of inspiration for novels aimed at a teenage audience, which may be more inclined towards adventures or mysteries to solve. One such novel for young readers is James Watson's *The Freedom Tree* (1986), recounting the exploits of a young man who, despite his youth, manages to travel to Spain and join the frontlines. Similarly, Michael Morpurgo's *Toro! Toro!* (2001) presents the adventures of a boy and a bull against the backdrop of the Spanish war. In Lydia Syson's *A World between Us* (2012), a 17-year-old trainee nurse embarks on a journey to Spain in 1936 as a medical volunteer, following a young man who had enlisted in the International Brigades.

Considering the didactic nature and moral purpose of young adult fiction, the inclusion of war depictions in such texts has sparked lively debates (Sarland 2005, 31), since these narratives often feature disturbing images of violence and traumatic descriptions of human cruelty. Nonetheless, American children's writer Jenniffer Armstrong argues for the benefits of introducing accurate portrayals of war to young readers, suggesting that war stories offer them "the chance to think of what is just and unjust, to develop the capacity for philosophic inquiring doubt" (2002, 31). It appears that the horrors of warfare are no longer taboo in contemporary British literature for teenagers, although, as Peter Hunts suggests, their treatment must be carefully considered, raising the following questions: "What should we give (or not give) our child-readers, how should we give it to them; what will they or can they understand; and why do we or should we write about such thing?" (2005, 14).

This paper aims to provide an in-depth analysis of Lydia Syson's *A World between Us* in order to address Hunt's four questions regarding the depiction of war in young adult literature. The study reveals that this novel, along with other readings for young readers, encompasses the elements outlined by Juan Cervera in his article "La literatura juvenil a debate": adventures, risks, challenges, encounters with evil, exploration, mystery, and romance (1995: 13). However, through meticulous research on the Spanish Civil War, Syson also provides highly realistic and accurate descriptions of war scenes, including intricate details of gunfire, casualties, wounds, and the profound fears and emotions experienced by soldiers. Written from a clear ideological standpoint, the novel can be interpreted as a tribute to the foreign volunteers who came "to save democracy in Spain", as expressed by the author in a historical afterword (2012, 263).

References

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Keywords

Lydia Syson; Spanish Civil War; young adult literature; historical representation.