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Crossing Boundaries: Transatlantic Dialogues and Gendered Narratives

Selected Papers from the
46th International Conference of
Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies (AEDEAN)

Francisco Alonso-Almeida and Carmen Luján-García (Coords.)

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

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Abstract

In recent decades, the Spanish Civil War has become a popular backdrop in British historical novels. Curiously, some of these narratives are aimed at teenage audiences, who may be more drawn to adventures with less traumatic depictions of human cruelty. One such novel for young readers is Lydia Syson's *A World between Us* (2012), where a 17-year-old trainee nurse journeys to Spain in 1936 as a medical volunteer, following a young man who enlisted in the International Brigades. Following Peter Hunts's approach to analysing war stories in terms of what, how and why authors write them, this paper aims to provide an in-depth analysis of Lydia Syson's novel to examine how the Spanish Civil War is depicted in this young adult narrative.¹⁰

Keywords: Lydia Syson, Spanish Civil War, young adult fiction, historical novel.

From its inception, the Spanish Civil War piqued the interest of journalists, writers and intellectuals worldwide who, recognising its potential for world-historical significance, sought to personally witness and write about the unfolding conflict. In her book *Battling for News: The Rise of the Woman Reporter* (1994), British journalist and biographer Anne Sebba described The Spanish Civil War as “the biggest world story” of its day (95). In the twenty-first century, the Spanish Civil War has emerged as a prominent setting in British historical novels. Esteemed authors such as C. J. Sansom, Jack Ludlow, Colm Tóibín, Lindsay Ashford, and Patrick McGrath have drawn inspiration from Spain and its 1930s civil war to shape their plots and characters.

While the historical subgenre of Spanish Civil War literature is typically dominated by detective novels, romantic tales, and biographical narratives, it is intriguing that some of these narratives are directed toward young readers, considering this type of audience may typically gravitate towards other genres such as adventures or mysteries. One such novel tailored for young readers is Michael Morpurgo's *Toro! Toro!* (2001), which recounts the adventures of a young boy who experiences the harrowing bombing of his village and the subsequent destruction of his family in 1936.¹¹ In Joan Lingard's *Tell the Moon to Come Out* (2003), the narrative follows the escapades of a 16-year-old Scottish boy who embarks on a journey to Spain in 1939, fervently searching for his father who had mysteriously vanished during the war. Lydia Syson's *A World between Us* (2012) presents the story of a 17-year-old trainee nurse who undertakes a voyage to Spain in 1936 as a medical volunteer, following a young man who had enlisted in the International Brigades.

¹⁰ The research leading to the publication of this essay was supported by funding from the Ministerio de Ciencia e Investigación under the 2022 programme of grants for research projects (Reference PID2022-140013NB-I00).

¹¹ The novel was adapted for the stage by dramatist and director Simon Reade, along with two other war stories in *War Plays: Private Peaceful, Toro! Toro!, The Mozart Question* (2012).

Considering the inherently didactic nature and moral intent of young adult fiction, the inclusion of war depictions within these literary works has sparked spirited debates (Sarland 2005, 31). This contention arises from the fact that these war narratives often encompass unsettling imagery of violence and present vivid, traumatic portrayals of human cruelty. In fact, there has been a discernible increase in the prohibition of children's and young adult books in the United States, affecting various states and millions of readers within the public education system, particularly those titles that "touch on violence and abuse, health and wellbeing, or instances or themes of grief and death" (Ciabattari 2023). Nevertheless, American children's author Jenniffer Armstrong advocates for the merits of introducing accurate portrayals of war to young readers, arguing that war narrative afford them "the chance to think of what is just and unjust, to develop the capacity for philosophic inquiring doubt. It gives them the chance to contemplate the alternative to peace" (2002, 31).

While the horrors of warfare may no longer be deemed as taboo subjects in contemporary literature for teenagers, Peter Hunt, a British scholar from Cardiff University, underscores the need for a judicious approach to addressing these issues. He raises crucial questions, asking, "*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 offer a comprehensive analysis of Lydia Syson's *A World between Us* with the objective of addressing the four critical questions posed by Hunt in relation to the portrayal of war in young adult literature.

Hunt's response to his initial question concerning what we should or should not present to young readers is theoretically straightforward: we should provide them with "anything and everything" (2005, 14). Nonetheless, he emphasizes the significance of ensuring that war narratives incorporate an element of hope and do not solely adopt a pessimistic view of warfare (2005, 15). In *A World between Us*, the Spanish Civil War is not merely a backdrop to the character's actions; rather, the characters are actively immersed in the distressing and traumatic events of the conflict. The protagonist, Felix (Felicity Rose), stands out as an idealistic and courageous young British woman who arrives in Spain as a nurse. She dedicates herself to humanitarian work within various field hospitals situated near the front lines, where she tends to wounded and diseased soldiers. The narrative often unveils the harsh reality that innocent people become victims of the war, as evident in the book's opening scene, where Felix finds herself in an open truck, surviving an attack by enemy aeroplanes. Tragically, others are not as fortunate: "Felix watches the other—the old woman, and the mother with the child in her shawl—as they move backwards towards the truck. The baby is quiet now, because he is dead. Felix watches and can't speak. Her mouth is dry. She is burning up" (n.p.). Similarly, Nat Kaplan, the young and idealistic volunteer with whom Felix falls in love with, undergoes his own share of violence while fighting with the International Brigades. One of his initial experiences unfolds during the Battle of Jarama, where the sounds of bullets, the sensation of his dry throat, and the sight of his comrades falling one by one, "like dolls on a scrapheap, wounded or lifeless" (Syson 2012, 94), provide an unflinching, realistic, and accurate depiction of the scenes of the war. The narrative does not shy away from portraying the grim realities of warfare.

However, as Hunt alluded, there appears to be a glimmer of hope at the end of the narrative, particularly in the lives of the protagonists. While one of the main characters, George, tragically loses his life during an air raid while driving an ambulance on the Gadesa front, the two protagonists, Felix and Nat, emerge from the war, return to London, and eventually marry. Almost akin to a *deus ex machina* plot device, the narrative seems to neatly resolve all problems, culminating in a happy ending with the traditional wedding, featuring "Felix, happily arm in

arm with Nat” (2012, 260). It is April 1939, and the Spanish Civil War has concluded. True, the Republican cause they sought to aid did not achieve victory, and consequently, they were unable to prevail in their valiant defence of the fundamental values of freedom and democracy. Nevertheless, as the narrator conveys in the final chapter, “That war was over. Franco had won. But the fight wasn’t finished” (2012, 262). Perhaps, this foresight alludes to the impending Second World War, which is on the brink of commencing that very year, and in which the protagonists are likely to find themselves combating other oppressive regimes and ideologies.

Hunt’s second inquiry that merits consideration in young adult stories is *how* intricate issues such as war and violence are treated. Is war and violence depicted in a crude and unembellished manner, or does the narrative opt for a more delicate approach? Does the war narrative exalt violence as part of a grand adventure, or does it challenge the conventional notion of the soldier as a hero? In *A World between Us*, with Felix serving as a nurse in field hospitals and Nat as a soldier in the International Brigades, the ramifications of war emerge in their stark reality. The narrative leaves no space for delicacy; rather, violence and death are portrayed vividly through evocative imagery and detailed language. An illustrative instance is found in the scene involving Bernie, a volunteer of the British Battalion, who sustains wounds in battle and is subsequently brought to Felix’s hospital, only to die shortly after receiving a blood transfusion. The narrative maintains an unwavering focus on Felix’s perspective, as she experiences the ordeal: “Before she [Felix] could answer, Bernie’s eyes closed. The last breath left his blood-filled lungs” (2012, 104). In *A World between Us*, there is no gratuitous violence or glamorization of war, and when violence is depicted, the accompanying anguish and loss are equally conveyed.

Nevertheless, the scenes of violence and cruelty that permeate this young adult novel find their justification within a political and historical context; that is to say, with some kind of “mediation, introduction or policing by adults” as Hunt has suggested in his study on war in children’s literature (2005, 16). Syson clearly justifies the characters’ actions and decisions from the outset, when Felix and Nat cross paths during the so-called “Battle of Cable Street”, a working-class uprising against Oswald Mosley’s fascist Blackshirts that took place in London’s East End on October 4, 1936.¹² Nat, unwavering in his resolve, is already resolute about volunteering to combat the Spanish fascists, bolstered by support from Hitler and Mussolini (2012, 10). Felix too is swiftly convinced, readily echoing the rallying cry of “No pasarán”, as she describes the Cable Street incident to her family: “We won’t let the Fascists through. Not in Madrid. Not in London” (2012, 16). In case any doubt lingers concerning the motivations of the protagonists in engaging in this conflict, the author supplies a “Historical Afterward” at the story’s close, furnishing a lucid explanation of the International Brigades’ ultimate fate during the Spanish Civil war, casting them as the “volunteers who went to save democracy in Spain” (2012, 265).

Despite the array of details and clues that both the narrative and paratexts offer to facilitate an understanding the Spanish conflict, a question arises: to what extent can readers, particularly those at a young age, fully grasp the intricacies of these events? In Hunt’s words, “Does fiction about war actually contribute to understand what is real?” (2005: 21). It is reasonable to presume that, owing to their age, most readers may lack familiarity with many aspects of these historical occurrences, and for many, this may serve as their first contact with this historical conflict. Following a meticulous examination of the history of the Spanish Civil

¹² Kimberley Reynolds discusses the representation of these events young-adult fiction in her article “‘¡No pasarán!’ The Battle of Cable Street as a Political Context for Youth Activism in Fiction for Children and Young People” (2021).

War,¹³ Syson interweaves a multitude of authentic events, locations, and individuals into the narrative, thereby fostering a sense of authenticity and verisimilitude. In the final “Acknowledgements” section, the author herself affirms that “From the outset” she endeavoured to render the novel “as accurate” as she possibly could (2012, 271). Nonetheless, something that could potentially challenge historical accuracy is the introduction of the archetypal opposition of good and bad characters, a characteristic often found in stories intended for adolescent readers. In *A Word between Us* we encounter the “heroic” protagonists embodied by idealistic, courageous, and altruistic young Britons, burdened with a profound sense of duty, who willingly relinquish their lives to journey to Spain in defence of their ideals. They eventually emerge as war’s victims, bearing indelible post-war scars (2012, 261), thus eliciting the reader’s empathy. Conversely, on the sombre side of history, we encounter characters aligned with the Nationalist faction, exemplified by individuals such as Dolores, a treacherous Spanish nurse collaborating with Felix. Initially misperceived, it is subsequently revealed that she exacted revenge on Republican patients after her mother fell victim to the Republicans (2012, 185–193). She even tried to kill Felix and Nat using a “surgical blade” (2012, 199).

In addition to the use of stereotypical characters, another factor that contributes to a simplistic view of the war and distorts its reality is what remains unsaid. While Syson’s novel references the horrendous massacres against the Republicans occurring in Badajoz, with 4,000 men dead and the bullring “knee-deep in blood” (2012, 34), the “atrocities on the road from Malaga” once the city had succumbed to Franco’s forces (2012, 109), and the “flames rising from the burning city” of Guernica (2012, 148), no mention is made of the equally cruel acts perpetrated against Nationalists by the revolutionary committees that replaced democratically elected local governments in Catalonia, or the mass execution of suspected fascists just outside Madrid.¹⁴ In the context of war, as is often the case, both sides in the Spanish Civil War bore responsibility for widespread atrocities. Additionally, sometimes the image offered of those participating in the war remains incomplete. A notable example is the portrayal of the Guardia Civil, which in this novel is associated with Franco’s rebels as “Holed-up Fascist sympathisers” (2012, 49). Syson’s young readers are not informed that, similar to other military forces, the Civil Guard was divided, with some remaining loyal to the Republic’s government while others sided with the rebels.¹⁵ In fact, in the republican and anarchist Barcelona that Nat encountered upon his arrival in Spain, the Guardia Civil played a significant role in quelling Nationalists (Martínez Bande 2007, 303–24).

The final question Hunt raises concerning these war novels for young readers pertains to their purpose, specifically whether the primary intent behind these narratives is to educate and promote moral values. There is little doubt that Syson’s readers can learn about the nature of wars, violence, and suffering alongside appreciating values represented by the protagonists, such as selfishness, sacrifice, loyalty, and courage in defending their ideals. In this instance, these ideals are directed towards combating political ideologies prevalent in the 1930s, chiefly fascism, while paying a tribute to British volunteers who journeyed to Spain to aid the Republican side. Naturally, the author’s ideological standpoint is apparent from the outset. The

¹³ In the final “Acknowledgements” section, the author provides a comprehensive list of history books she had read, as well as details about museums, libraries and archives she consulted (2012: 272).

¹⁴ For further information regarding the violent episodes of the Spanish Civil war, see the book by José Luis Martín Ramos, Professor of Contemporary History at the University Autònoma of Barcelona, *Guerra y revoluci3n en Catalu1a, 1936–1939* (2018), and the monograph by Julius Ruiz, also a historian at Edinburgh University, titled *Paracuellos, una verdad inc3moda* (2015).

¹⁵ According to Spanish historian Javier Tussell, 51% of the members of the Guardia Civil remained loyal to the Republican forces (1994: 439).

selection of John Cornford's poem "To Margot Heinemann" as the novel's epigraph provides an initial clue. Cornford, a communist poet who joined the International Brigades, died in the fight against the Nationalists at Lopera, near Córdoba, in December 1936 (Celada, González de la Aleja, Pastor García 2009, 107–109). After constant details and nuances that reveal Syson's political stance throughout the narrative, the concluding "Historical Afterward" confirms the initial epigraph's intent. It features a reference to the Dolores Ibarruri's speech delivered during a parade in Barcelona in 1938, directed at foreign volunteers departing Spain in the conflict's later stages: "Go proudly [...] You are history. You are legend. You are the heroic example of the solidarity and universality of democracy [...]" (2012: 265).

The heroism exhibited by the story's protagonists aligns with the words of this communist leader known as La Pasionaria. It is evident that Syson does not offer an impartial perspective of the human tragedy that unfolded during the Spanish Civil War. Instead, individuals on one side are depicted as heroes combating the evil forces of the opposing side. While this unambiguous political purpose may find acceptance and provoke minimal controversy among British readers, the Spanish Civil War continues to evoke bitter controversy in Spain, and its full comprehension and interpretation remain contentious. Therefore, this novel by Syson can be regarded as a representative of a genre that, as Kimberley Reynolds observes in *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (2011), has produced "powerful and ethically challenging works for children in recent decades" (121). In this instance, the challenge does not lie in the blurring of the boundary between friend and foe, as seen in John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006), but rather, in the presentation of a one-sided view of a civil war without a clear condemnation of the conflict itself.

In conclusion, Lydia Syson's *A World between Us* admirably brings to life the Spanish Civil War for a young adult audience, offering a vivid portrayal of its characters' experiences with a realistic depiction of war, devoid of any glamorization or gratuitous violence. Syson's commitment to historical accuracy is evident through a meticulous integration of real events, locations, and people, fostering an authentic backdrop for her characters' experiences. However, it remains essential to recognize the existence of stereotypical characterizations and the omission of certain crucial aspects of the conflict, which may inadvertently simplify the multifaceted reality of the Spanish Civil War. The novel's one-sided perspective, emblematic of valiant protagonists and sinister antagonists, aligns with the clear political intent of paying homage to the British volunteers who joined the fight against fascism. This narrative approach may find acceptance within certain audiences but falls short of a comprehensive understanding of a historically contentious event.

Ultimately, *A World between Us* stands as an exemplar of a genre of literature that seeks to engage young readers with the moral and ethical dimensions of war, inspiring contemplation on issues of justice, ideology, and human suffering. Nevertheless, as scholars like Peter Hunt have urged, the complex portrayal of war in young adult literature necessitates careful consideration, as these stories play an influential role in shaping young minds. The enduring debate over the Spanish Civil War's historical legacy in Spain underscores the significance of comprehending the multifaceted and contentious nature of this conflict. As a result, while *A World between Us* offers a captivating and thought-provoking narrative, it also challenges readers to consider the complexities of historical narratives, the blurred lines between heroes and villains, and the intricacies of war's impact on individuals.

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El libro de actas titulado "Crossing Boundaries: Transatlantic Dialogues and Gendered Narratives", procedente del congreso 46th International Conference of Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies (AEDEAN), celebrado en Las Palmas de Gran Canaria en 2023, examina las interacciones multidimensionales entre culturas, historias e identidades a través del Atlántico. Se destaca, en este sentido, el papel central del lenguaje en este contexto mediante el análisis de textos literarios y culturales que trascienden fronteras geográficas y temporales. Dividido en dos secciones principales: "Cultural Crossings and Transatlantic Discourses" y "Narratives By or About Women", cada una ofrece una introspección profunda sobre cómo el lenguaje, la literatura, los medios de comunicación y las expresiones culturales reflejan y moldean las experiencias de diversas comunidades. La primera sección se centra en los intercambios históricos y culturales que han moldeado las identidades y narrativas de distintas comunidades, subrayando la importancia de la interacción cultural para fomentar una comprensión más profunda de los diálogos transatlánticos. La segunda sección aborda las representaciones literarias y culturales de las experiencias de las mujeres a través de diferentes contextos y períodos, proporcionando una comprensión exhaustiva de la evolución de la representación femenina en la literatura. El volumen incluye artículos como "Miguel de Zárrega and the magazine La Tribuna de Nueva York" de Juan Antonio Sánchez Jiménez, que presenta una historia detallada de la revista ilustrada en español más significativa de Estados Unidos, y "Anti-Catholic Literature: Joseph Blanco White as Pretext of Authenticity in Two Escaped Nun Narratives" de Eduardo José Varela Bravo, que analiza la apropiación ideológica de las críticas anti-católicas de Blanco White en la literatura nativista estadounidense del siglo XIX. Otros estudios destacados incluyen "The English Language of Seventeenth-Century Ireland: A Corpus Analysis of the 1641 Depositions" de Seamus Johnston, Zeltia Blanco-Suárez y Teresa Fanego, que contribuye a la comprensión del desarrollo histórico del inglés irlandés, y "Life as Ritual in Inga Simpson's Nest" de Bárbara Arizti Martín, que examina cómo la narrativa invoca la vida como ritual a través de las interacciones de la protagonista con la naturaleza y la comunidad.

