

OUR CASTLE BY THE SEA

BY LUCY STRANGE

SYNOPSIS

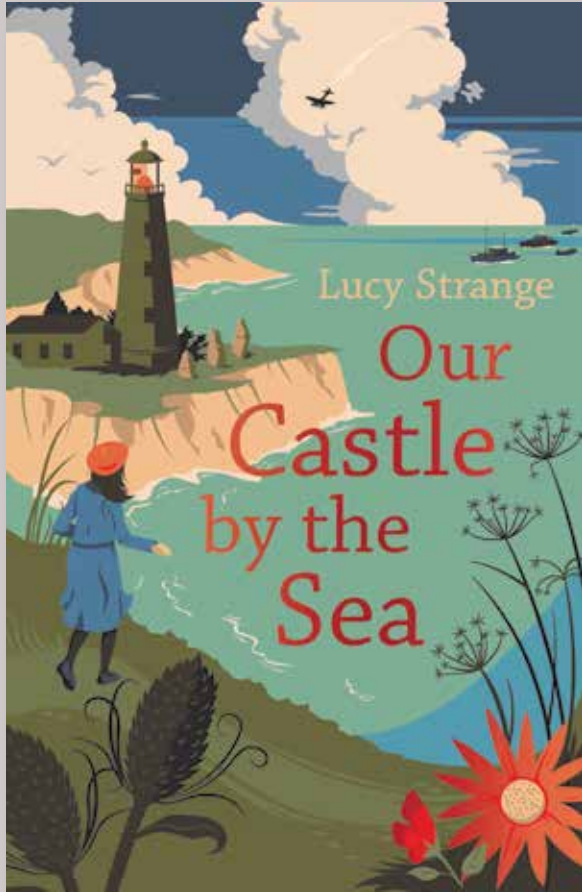
Twelve-year-old Petra lives with her German mother, English father and older sister Magda in a lighthouse on the cliffs of Dover. It's 1939, and England has gone to war with Germany - making Pet and Mags's German heritage a talking point at school.

Pet has grown up listening to her father's tales of the Four Daughters, whom legend says would stand on the clifftop waiting for their fathers to return from sea. In exchange for the safe return of the men, the girls' souls were taken and they were turned to stones - which still sit outside Pet's lighthouse.


One day, Pet and Magda are out crabbing when Mags claims she can see something big under the water, scaring Pet, who falls in. Later, their friend Michael speculates that it was an enemy U-boat. Soon after there's an arson attack in the village nearby, quickly followed by the police station's phone lines being cut. It looks like there's a saboteur in their midst.

The government announces that all German citizens in England must undergo a tribunal to assess whether they are deemed a risk to security. Pet's mother attends a tribunal - the family and community thinking it'll be a straightforward case, and she can go home to the lighthouse immediately - but instead, the court presents a series of diagrams and maps which were intercepted on the way to Germany. The court believes that Pet's mother drew them, and she is taken away to an internment camp. A detective is assigned to investigate the case.

Pet and Mags resolve to prove their mother's innocence. Their number one suspect is Spooky Joe, who had antagonised their mother and lives



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alone. The girls spy on him one morning, and Magda steals some paper from him showing a list of handwritten numbers.

The government decrees a new Treachery Act, in which anyone found to be aiding the enemy will be hanged. Pet and Mags read a letter from their mother in which she says she will confess to being guilty – but Pet overhears a conversation in which her father confesses to the detective to being the one who sent the information to Germany. Pet doesn't understand – her father isn't on the side of the Nazis, so why would he do it?

Magda and her father argue over Magda going to Dunkirk to help rescue English troops. She's a skilled sailor and wants to help, and as a compromise her father decides he'll be the one to go instead – but Mags sneaks away anyway, leaving Pet a note. All night, Pet night waits for her sister and father to come home – but eventually, when Mags comes back, she's alone. She was separated from her father after their boat hit a mine, and though she searched for him all night, she was forced to leave without him. The two sisters mourn their father at a memorial service.

Soon after, Pet sees a German bomber incoming. It's quickly shot down by a Spitfire, and she sees a German soldier eject from the aircraft. She runs down to the beach to see Spooky Joe pulling him to the shore, and the soldier mutters something about a signal in the cliffs.

Pet and Magda find out they are to be evacuated separately, led by the kind Mrs Baron, and so decide to hide out in a nearby cave. When Pet sneaks back to the lighthouse to lock the door, she spots their friend Michael – Mrs Baron's son – cutting the telephone lines on a telegraph pole. She tells the police, but they don't believe her – so Pet confronts him herself. She finds out Michael's father was a supporter of Hitler, and Michael is trying to help the invasion come about – but just when Michael tries to throw Pet over the side of the cliff, a bomb hits and the cliff crumbles.

Pet wakes up with Spooky Joe at her side, who reveals he is their grandfather. Michael's body hasn't been found, and to her dismay Pet realises she can no longer use her legs. Mrs Baron is bereft at the loss of her son, as is Mags, whom Pet realises was in love with Michael. Pet resolves not to tell anyone about Michael's sabotage.

One night – while Grandpa Joe is away for the day and Mags is out – Pet hears planes and gunfire, as well as somebody breaking into the lighthouse. It's Mrs Baron – here to finish the work Michael started, by using the lighthouse to signal to the German boats. She tries to incapacitate Pet with chloroform, but the detective manages to apprehend her. Pet uses the lighthouse to tell the German boats to abandon the landing.



Pet finds out Michael is still alive, and has been hiding in the caves – aided by Mags, who didn't realise what he was doing. The sisters find out that Grandpa Joe had had his own suspicions about the Barons, and the list they stole from him were records of her movements, which the police are able to use as evidence against her. It turns out that Mrs Baron blackmailed Pet and Magda's father into sending the information to the Germans.

The novel ends with Pet drawing her mother coming home, leaving it up to the reader to decide whether this is real or imagined.

WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

'In this thrilling wartime novel, a family lives in a lighthouse on the English coast, surrounded by the threat of invasion. Hidden truths, twists and revelations kept me gripped and guessing all the way through – but eventually our heroes have to face up to what seems like an impossible choice: family or country? (Which would you choose?) But there's more. Mystical forces are at work, guiding their destinies ... This is a world of fate, family, myth and adventure – are you brave enough to enter?' BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Lucy Strange worked as an actor, singer and storyteller before becoming a secondary school English teacher. She lives in the Kent countryside with her partner James, their baby boy and a tortoiseshell cat known as the Moo. *Our Castle by the Sea* is Lucy's second novel for Chicken House, following her critically acclaimed debut, *The Secret of Nightingale Wood*.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'Our Castle by the Sea began with a painting – a very beautiful watercolour of the view from the lantern room of the Belle Tout lighthouse, by Eric Ravillious. When I first saw this painting I was captivated by the unique perspective – the shape of the room, the windows, and the glorious feeling of air, light, sea and sky beyond. I knew straight away that I wanted to write a story told from this viewpoint.



Our Castle by the Sea was always a Second World War story, and, as I played with different ideas, the characters gradually emerged from my imagination: our narrator – Petra Zimmerman Smith, her sister Magda, their English father (the lighthouse keeper), and their artistic German mother. I wanted to explore what happens to people – to a family, and the wider community – when they are under the immense and cruel pressure of war. Through the events in the story, themes such as nationalism, xenophobia and prejudice are raised. I think it is very important for us to address and discuss issues such as these in today’s world.

Once I began researching the Second World War, I found out about lots of things that went on to become important parts of the story, such as the categorisation of enemy aliens, internment camps, and the evacuation of Dunkirk. Just as history can spark ideas for a writer, geography can too: the dreaded Wyrms in the story is inspired by Goodwin Sands near Dover – a sandbank which has indeed sunk and swallowed up hundreds of ships over the centuries.

I have also taken inspiration from folklore: the myth of the Daughters of Stone was inspired by real megaliths such as the Merry Maidens in Cornwall, and Long Meg and her Daughters in Cumbria. According to legend, The Merry Maidens were girls who were cursed and turned to stone for dancing on a Sunday, and Long Meg was said to be a witch! It was important to me that the Daughters of Stone were noble, heroic characters, though – after all, our protagonist, Petra, knows deep down in her bones that she will – some day, somehow – become one of them ...’ **LUCY STRANGE**

THEMES

- Myths and legends
- Loss and grief
- Historical and wartime fiction
- Secrets, truth and trust
- Morality and responsibility
- Prejudice and patriotism
- Courage and heroism



WRITING STYLE

Our Castle by the Sea is a classic-feeling adventure novel, set in Dover during the beginning of the Second World War. It is written in first person past tense, and the narrative unfolds in an exciting and perfectly-paced linear arc. There is peril aplenty as Pet and Mags uncover the mystery of the saboteur in their midst, intertwined with real historical events such as the Dunkirk evacuation. The novel is split into three parts, each depicting a different season, and ends on an epilogue. **49 chapters, 321 pages, ages 9+**

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. *From fact to fiction*

In *Our Castle by the Sea*, Lucy Strange places Pet and Mags, fictional characters, into true history. This is a method commonly used by historical fiction writers, to help the reader connect to a time which might seem very far away from what they know.

As a class, discuss: which historical events from the last 100 years do you think have had the most significant impact on our world today? Why do you think this? What impact have they had? Between you, try to come up with five that you think have left an important lasting impression on the world today.

2. *The Dunkirk Evacuation*

The Dunkirk evacuation was a real-life event which happened during the Second World War, in which British soldiers were rescued from the beaches and harbour of the French town of Dunkirk. In the novel, Mags and her father use their boats to help the rescue effort, and are caught up right in the middle of the action.

In small groups, research the events of the Dunkirk evacuation. When did it happen? How did the British soldiers come to be on the beach? How many soldiers were rescued? How long did it take to evacuate them all?



Create a comic strip depicting all the major events of the Dunkirk evacuation. You may like to create a new character, through whose eyes we see events unfold – or perhaps you'd like to show what happened from Mags, her father or Kipper's perspectives.

3. *Painting a Picture*

'Everything has a song, Pet,' Mutti said softly. 'If you listen carefully to the song of something as you are drawing, it will help you capture its soul.' (Page 87)

Pet has inherited her Mutti's talent for drawing and painting. The author uses this to great effect, creating a wonderfully evocative and emotional epilogue through depicting Pet's drawing. Pet finds comfort in drawing in her sketchbook, and often sketches the views she can see from the lighthouse. After Mutti tells her to listen for a song while she is drawing, she listens to the sound of the sea while she sketches it.

As a class, look through the first part of the novel and collate any descriptions of Pet and Magda's surroundings. What do we know of the setting? How do you visualise it – is your interpretation the same as your classmates?

Now, ask your teacher to find a recording of coastal sounds – this might be the sound of waves or seagull cries. Listen to it as you use the author's descriptions to draw Pet and Magda's surroundings. You might choose to draw a view from the lighthouse, or a map, or a scene from the novel with Pet and Mags in it – whichever image the sounds evoke. You can do this with pencil, paint, or create a collage. When you are finished, create a class display of your art.

4. *Cracking the Code*

In the novel, Grandpa Joe creates a code to keep track of Mrs Baron's movements. When Mags steals it, though they make lots of guesses the sisters aren't able to decipher it – and are only able to understand what the letters mean once Grandpa Joe explains it to them.

Codes and codebreakers were used extensively throughout the Second World War. In fact, there were



whole teams of people attempting to crack codes. You may have heard of Alan Turing, who worked for the British government during WW2, and managed to break the secret code that Germany used to communicate – which they did through machine called Enigma. In small groups, research this – what was the Enigma code, and what impact did it have? Make a PowerPoint presentation on your findings.

WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *I will keep his terrible secret all by myself and I will never let it go – it is my secret to keep for the rest of my life.*

(Page 190)

After Pet initially finds out about Michael's betrayal and believes him dead, she opts not to tell Mags about his true nature. She does the same after their father dies, and she believes him to be a traitor. Why do you think she kept these secrets to herself? Do you think she did the right thing? What would you do, if you were Pet?

2. *Spring, 1941 ...*

Why do you think the author chose to include an epilogue? How did you interpret the novel's ending? Do you think it really happened? If not, why not?

3. *'Hello, Spooky Joe,' I said.*

He smiled. 'That's Grandpa Joe to you, young lady.' (Page 260)

Pet and Mags only find out that Spooky Joe is their grandfather in the second half of the novel, even though he lives very close to them. Why do you think their mother and father didn't tell them? Why do you think Joe never said anything himself? If you were in Pet and Mags' shoes, would you want to know?

4. *'I spent so long hating what I thought was the enemy,' he whispered hoarsely, 'but it turns out that time is the greatest enemy of all.'* (Page 263)



In the second half of the novel, Pet and Mags find out that Spooky Joe is actually a very kind and gentle man. Why do you think, therefore, he acted the way he did towards their mutti at the beginning of the novel? Do you think war has the ability to change people? If so, how do you think it changed Grandpa Joe? Do you think the two wars he lived through had a different effect on him? Do you think he regrets his actions?

5. *'It's because of me,' said Mags from the window seat. She sat up, holding her head. 'It's all my fault.'* (Page 296)

At the novel's climax, we discover that Mags has been helping Michael hide out in the cave. Why do you think she helped him do this? Do you think she really believed what he was telling her? If not, why do you think she went along with it? Do you think love can sometimes blind us to what someone is really like? What do you think it is that makes her finally see his true nature?

6. *I thought about the faces of the people who had turned against Mutti in the courtroom - people who needed her to be the enemy so that they could do something with all that anger and hate they had inside.* (Page 114)

It is evident that not all Germans agree with the actions of Germany - Mutti left Germany for this very reason. However, she's suspected to be the traitor. Do you think her trial is done fairly? If not, why not? Do you think she should have been on trial in the first place? Why do you think the townspeople begin to turn on non-English residents, even though they've known them their whole lives?

IF YOU LIKED OUR CASTLE BY THE SEA, WHY NOT TRY ...

- *The Secret of Nightingale Wood* by Lucy Strange
- *Rose in the Blitz* by Rebecca Stevens
- *The Island at the End of Everything* by Kiran Millwood Hargrave

