

## Love on the Rocks: Lighthouses in Literature as Gendered Geographies of Love

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### ABSTRACT

The lighthouse has long been a familiar setting for stories of love, conflict, and epiphany. That isolated tower on the clifftop brims with symbolic possibility and sometimes cliché, positioning it as a site of gendered love, with popular fiction titles embedding the trope of the contained world revolving, like the lit lamp, around the male authority. But the lighthouse also has an explicit historical situatedness. The nineteenth century British lighthouses, in particular, were seen as outposts of empire. They are immovable inscriptions of the outlines of islands, the edges of continents – the imprint of colonisation on country. And they are often seen as male domains. In the popular imagination, a lighthouse is much more than its function. Does recent historical fiction perpetuate or subvert what we think we know about lighthouses and the people who populated them? How does it portray the officially gendered roles and intense relationships of women characters? How might historical novels set in settler colonies recognise the specific meaning of the lighthouse as a marker of imperial authority? And how do we read the lighthouse and its place in the imagination as a geography of gender and love?

**Keywords:** gender, storytelling, literature, historical fiction, lighthouses

### INTRODUCTION

The lighthouse has long been a favourite setting for fiction, and not just any fiction: there seems to be endless interest in historical novels in which a gendered story of love and conflict plays out in a storm-battered tower on a remote and desolate headland. It is a trope familiar to many readers: stories plotted around a remote and desolate man, usually damaged by war or heartbreak, battling the elements in a remote and desolate place with the women and children revolving around him, the light, and his remote and desolate heart. A more recent feature is the inclusion of the rebellious daughter or wife – an extremely popular gendered character type in historical fiction. In this article, I will examine the enduring fascination with lighthouses and lighthouse-keepers, outline key character types prevalent in historical novels set in lighthouses, and ask what radical possibilities might these fictions hold for considerations of the ways in which gender and love interact in portrayals of confined and isolated environments, particularly in colonised places.

Many commercial titles aimed at women or young readers embed this hierarchy deeply in the narrative, including *The Lightkeeper's Wife* (Viggers, 2011; Johnson, 2014), *The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter* (Olsen and Wentworth, 1970; Gaynor, 2018) and *The Lightkeeper's Daughters* (Pendziwol, 2018) – even *The Lighthouse Keeper's Cat* (Armitage and Armitage, 2014). Such works feature the familiar lighthouses populated in our imaginations by lonely men thrown together in the service of the maritime industry and pitted against sea and sky and storm, with women and children as their orbiting satellites. The phenomenon is not new. One of my favourite childhood stories is also one of the most poignant: Paul Gallico's novella *The Snow Goose* (1941/1961), in which the artist Philip Rhayader moves into a deserted lighthouse in the Great Marsh of Essex in England and sets about rescuing creatures that have been hurt or lost, like the snow goose, a parallel to his own wayward and wild nature, and that of local girl Fritha. The story does not stand up to adult scrutiny with its depiction of Philip's disabilities as 'grotesque' and 'ugly' (1941/1961: 9) but its depiction of his care for the many damaged wild things and dramatic death during the evacuation of Dunkirk still pulls – the depiction pulls at the heart – indeed, it was derided by a contemporary critic as 'the most sentimental story' (Wins, 1976). In this tale the reader finds all the elements of the classic Gothic-inspired lighthouse narrative, although the Aelder light itself is no longer lit: isolation both

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geographical and metaphorical; transgressive characters and a hint of transgressive possibility between them; a reserved man whose life is tormented by memory and disappointment but regulated by duty; the child-like woman whose world circles the man; and high above it all, the tower, the weather.

So, what might readers see, in that tower? The idea of the lighthouse has an explicit historical situatedness: political, economic and cultural, particularly for readers familiar with British literature and its lighthouses. From the Pharos of Alexandria (built in 300 BCE) onward, the lighthouse's ancient functions are associated with place and with power, marking borders and preserving trade routes (Della Dora, 2022). It is immovable. It is steadfast. But it is also lightness – often a symbol of sanctuary and clarity, with all the Biblical connotations of the light on the hill (Matthew 5:14, 15). In her novel *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), Jeanette Winterson explains:

(...) on the coasts and outcrops of this *treacherous* ocean, a string of lights was built over 300 years.

Look at this one. Made of granite, as hard and unchanging as the sea is fluid and volatile. The sea moves constantly, the lighthouse, never. There is no sway, no rocking, none of the motion of ships and ocean. (2004a: 17)

In the popular imagination, a lighthouse is much more than its function. It holds meaning – or many meanings and possibilities – in cultural knowledge. It is emotive, too, evoking nostalgia in the modern reader's mind which makes it a perfect setting for historical fiction, alongside expectations of hardship and loneliness in those cultures in which solitude is seen as a form of melancholy (Wood, 2018). The lighthouse continues to serve as setting and inspiration for creative works in many media, from photographic calendars to seaside village souvenirs, films such as the recent horror film *The Lighthouse* (Eggs, 2019), and fiction for readers of all ages and in many genres.

The lighthouse is a figure for the art objects itself, emerging in a place mysteriously between the material and the imaginary, a covert category that changes and redefines the relations and perspectives of everything around it. Beginning at sea level with the journey to the lighthouse, the horizon splits the screen, depicting only sea and sky. Air replaces water, and the lighthouse emerges framed against the sky, appearing untethered, floating, more like a space station than a lighthouse. Thus, beyond the abundance of historic representations, lighthouses continue to inspire new creative responses. (Waugh, 2018: 210)

Next, I will explore the richness of those connections in that space between air and water, land and sky, light and dark, safety and fear, life and death, material and imaginary, solid and liquid, solitude and community, freedom and hierarchy, official function and situated knowledges. I describe the ways in which lighthouses are continuously generative foci of imagination and narrative, and examine the ways in which lighthouses in stories, especially historical fictions, become gendered sites of particular narratives of love.

## THE LIGHTHOUSE AS BEACON

A lighthouse, by definition, is an impossible place in-between: a structure on an edge, where nothing else can be built. It is an attempt to define a border, or a hazard, where water meets rock or ocean meets land, beyond which is only horizon, and it marks that place by projecting light into night. The lighthouse, says Winterson, 'is a known point in darkness' (2004a: 38), so it is both light and knowledge: it marks the line on a maritime chart between sea and shore, and it is built in recognition that sailors need some solidity in that wild, shifting place. But as Donna Haraway reminds us:

Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; 'objects' do not pre-exist as such. Objects as boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is risky practice.' (Haraway, 1988: 595)

It is even riskier to try to draw boundaries around water – or sand. Philip Rhayader's lighthouse in *The Snow Goose* once 'abutted on the sea and was a beacon on the Essex coast. Time shifted land and water, and its usefulness came to an end' (Gallico, 1941/1961: 9) and the saltmarsh and birds reclaimed the land around it. Fictional and real lighthouses tend to be built in inhospitable places – high headlands, rocky islands, dangerous shallows or windswept cliffs above the ocean, lake or river – where the painted tower and the blinking light demarcate and demand attention, but even then their boundaries are blurred by fog or sea mist, by surging waves, by sunrise and sunset, and particularly by darkness.

It is not surprising, then, that lighthouses should be such popular settings for recent neo-Victorian fictions, influenced as they are by the Gothic tradition and especially in what Katherine Cooper calls 'third wave gothic'

with its preoccupation with the ‘complexities and (...) changes in women’s experiences and in gender politics particular to the twenty-first century’ (2012: 154). While we might now ‘read’ a lighthouse through several different cultural lenses, including the Gothic, and it is possible that these overlap and influence each other, they may not reflect the builders’ original goals. Lauren Christian suggests a useful framework for considering this:

The *function* of a lighthouse, the action for which it is specifically designed, is to serve as a landmark for mariners (...) Its *purpose*, the intention for which the lighthouse exists, is more complex because it acts as an icon to represent the values of the organization that funds and supports it. (Christian, 2017: 2, my italics)

I draw a distinction between the ways in which in western culture lighthouses are viewed as cultural artefacts and sites, and the original intention behind their construction, particularly in the nineteenth century, which was both instrumental and symbolic. As Marguerite Poland writes in her novel, *The Keeper*, ‘The lighthouse was not just a piece of masonry with a lantern housed in it. It was a beacon illuminating the dark, sentinel of shoals, guardian of men, saviour of ships. It was beyond individual significance; it exacted loyalty; it is palpable, beyond its engineering’ (Poland, 2014: 7). A lighthouse, then, is a complex cultural presence in a landscape or seascape, far from neutral in intent, however well-meaning in function. It has long been seen as a structure holding great symbolic power, and has often been viewed as such, too<sup>1</sup>. It marks Land’s End, beyond which may be sea monsters or great travail or a ‘New World’, but it also marks homecoming. Further, its very fabric may be a construction of political, social and moral objectives (Della Dora, 2022). As Christian has noted of a very specific example of this duality of function and symbolic purpose:

Lighthouses built after the establishment of the independent United States and, again, after the American Civil War were intended to act as representations of the strength and stability of the federal government (...) It was the long-held belief of the Light-House Board that [n]othing indicate[d] ‘the liberality, prosperity or intelligence of a nation more clearly than the facilities which it affords for the safe approach of the mariner to its shores.’ (U.S. Light-House Board 1868:4). Lighthouses were recognized by all the major powers in the 19th century as symbols of national prosperity and were a way to advertise that fortune to all other nations. (Christian, 2017: 27)

Like a railroad in a desert, or a seemingly impossible bridge span, the sheer presence of a lighthouse and the fact that it exists at all emits a clear signal, literally and metaphorically, of might, authority and intent. As Teresa Costa suggests:

The liminal space materialized by the border is normally a site and symbol of power display (...) the paramount significance of the border relies on the symbolic, invisible, affective and effective complexity that such spaces entail and generate as lines of division or encounter. (2012: 87)

In my country, Australia, and in many other places colonised by settlers from Europe, that ‘string of lights’ is no party decoration. Lighthouses marked the edges of empire – borders seen as immovable although, in truth, they often changed ownership as territories shifted or empires fell. The lighthouses appearing on the sacred places or favoured lookouts of colonised peoples were pale markers of alien invasion, of war and defeat, of loss and grief, of dispossession, of tyranny.

This, I suggest, is a fundamental but often overlooked truth about lighthouses. The nineteenth-century British lighthouses, in particular, were seen as physical and spiritual points of Victorian light in the far-flung ‘darkness’; as outposts of empire. They are inscriptions, in stone and glass, of the outlines of islands, the edges of continents – the imprint of colonisation on country. This makes their treatment in literature as sites of love more complex, and also more problematic. The keepers of the imagined past are not only taciturn and dutiful men: they too are representatives of empire, as are the dependents they bring with them to the light, and the power the keepers embody and wield is often present, but sometimes unrecognised, in the representations of their relationships in fiction.

## THE LIGHTHOUSE AS LIMINAL

The lighthouse, write Elisa Magnani and Filippo Pistocchi, ‘is often a metaphor for a security space, in a very insecure environment; it appears stable and firm in a fragile territory, continually threatened by the unknown’

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars such as Azevedo (2018) have discussed the Freudian significance of the lighthouse’s phallic shape.

(2017: 124), and that word ‘appears’ is critical here, for the stability of the lighthouse lies in our perception of it from different angles, in its many cultural purposes, as much as in its engineering and construction.

Indeed, often it is our own human perspective that renders the lighthouse in different lights, and projects onto it. ‘The lighthouse is always different, depending on the time and the position from which it’s viewed,’ writes Jazmina Barrera.

There is the lighthouse in the distance, a diminutive life preserver. The lighthouse close at hand, where its size is imposing, revealing its origins as a temple, a tower, and a house of illumination. The lighthouse at different times of day: In the mornings, we see it surrounded by seagulls; at midday the sun dots it like an *i*, but in the evening, as the sun declines, they separate in a form of ritual farewell. At night, the lighthouse is a second, terrestrial moon. There is the lighthouse standing calmly beside the sea, and the lighthouse in a storm, a titan that resists and, in the words of Michelet, returns ‘fire with fire to the lightning bolts of the heavens.’ And, finally, there is the lighthouse swathed in mist. (Barrera, 2020: para. 20)

I suggest that these views depend equally on the knowledge frameworks we bring to the lighthouse, and to the viewing. From the point of view of a ship on that stormy sea, we see hope; as a tourist we may gaze upwards in wonder or even climb the narrow stairs to take photos of the view; the artist, the ghost-hunter, the architect, the historian, the local Indigenous Elder, the park ranger, the angler, and the child on the beach all see the same place differently, and we each bring to it our own cultural knowledge of the lighthouse, as we do to novels set in them. Only the lighthouse keepers are allowed the view that matches the lighthouse’s function: inside, the close, round, mechanised core of light and mirrors; and beyond it, the tense lookout across the water to log the passage of vessels and weather. Who we are matters. So does the way we see, and the way we read.

That granite solidity exists in a liminal and generative space, then, as does the most famous lighthouse in English literature – Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927/1977) does not use the light, on the Isle of Skye off the coast of Scotland, itself as the setting for the novel. Instead, it is a distant promise, a mirage; the journey to it never quite captured in Lily Briscoe’s painting, and the arrival a moment that largely eludes the characters in Woolf’s pages. In her hands, the lighthouse is ‘a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, wateringly’ (1927/1977: 91) and throughout the novel light from many sources is ‘steady’, ‘pitiless’, and ‘remorseless’ (1927/1977: 62), but:

Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and this is what you see us by. (1927/1977: 60)

Later, for young James Ramsay:

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now –

James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks, the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry.

So that was the Lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse too. (1927/1977: 172)

In Woolf’s lighthouse, granite meets ocean, light and dark and weather and waves are as ephemeral as light, as fluid as cloud. The house and garden where the characters interact are fixed, and from here they look out towards the raking light and restless ocean, always moving, just as elements of the Edwardian world that appeared to be static shift and adapt to the modern. As Robert Shaw observes:

... where space is thought of as general, universal and abstract, place is presumed to be specific, particular and lived. Places are embodied and practised, tied into local cultures and ways of living. Thus, theories arguing in favour of ‘place’ have long been considered reactive and conservative, emphasising the parochial over the cosmopolitan and the learned. To be tied to place is, for certain theories of modernity, to be tied to tradition and to reject the global. (Shaw, 2018: 202)

But the lighthouse is able to be both, in Woolf’s novel and many others: it is part of a culture of movement, supporting global shipping and local mariners, and it is surrounded by or focused on everchanging water; but it is also an incredibly localised community of place, with its own rules, cultures, and sense of permanence. It represents past and present, tradition and modernity.

A (possibly apocryphal) idea of Woolf's captures yet another duality: 'Lighthouses are endlessly suggestive signifiers of both human isolation and our ultimate connectedness to each other' (Woolf, cited in Gendell 2020: 116). Each of her characters is isolated from people dear to them, but in different ways: each alone in their own imaginative worlds, they misunderstand, mistake, and even misrepresent each other, and each of them spends much of their time in solitude. Mrs Ramsay describes the prevailing view of the lighthouse keeper: a man cooped up in an isolated place, worried, preoccupied but also bored, and separated from his family (1927/1977: 10). Her husband is keeper-like: taciturn, obsessive, demanding and exacting, a scholar but also representative of his class and of Empire. The Ramsays are based on Woolf's parents (Froula, 2006), and indeed on the traditional, English Victorian family, but at a time of flux. Woolf counters the familiar centring of the narrative around the male figure by revolving the novel and its characters around Mrs Ramsay instead: she is the beacon on the rock to which they turn, 'for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like that light' (1927/1977: 61). The Ramsay's holiday house itself operates as a guiding light in the darkness, leading them all, one by one, to her side:

'It's almost too dark to see,' said Andrew, coming up from the beach.

'One can hardly tell which is the sea and which is the land,' said Prue.

'Do we leave that light burning?' asked Lily. (Woolf, 1927/1977: 117)

Just as Lily Briscoe's abstract painting represents a new way of seeing and representing the world, Woolf's own work rejected the didactic nineteenth century novel celebrating 'the glories of the British Empire' (Woolf, 1924: 9). Jane Marcus (1981; 1983), Christine Froula (2006) and other scholars have noted the ways in which Woolf critiques either or both gender expectations and imperialism, to blur boundaries, to engender a sense of liminality and develop her modernist aesthetic; for Woolf, Froula writes, 'what makes civilization impossible is the barbarous system of masculine domination and feminine sacrifice' (2006: 12): the very basis for any number of traditional lighthouse stories. Woolf, instead, allows us to see the Ramsays as both lighthouse and seafarers, perhaps lost at sea, or worse: her deconstruction – or, rather, abstraction – of Victorian gender expectations was one of her key contributions to the broader Bloomsbury effort to combine informed critique of power structures with an emerging aesthetic and activism in many forms, including writing and publishing. All three elements are present in *To the Lighthouse*. James F. Wurtz notes that Woolf has Mrs Ramsay pause near a portrait of Queen Victoria, reinforcing the role of British women as complicit in imperialism (1927/1977: 100), and suggests that Woolf's critique is entirely concerned with aesthetics, and is therefore ambivalent rather than 'convincingly' critical of empire (2010: 106). Similarly, Gabrielle McIntire claims that in *To the Lighthouse* the gendered relationships, there to be understood and critiqued, are traditional 'but the poetics are not' (2015: 83). As Woolf wrote in a later essay, she was simply not interested in replicating nineteenth-century literary technique or themes:

Those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us, those conventions are ruin, those tools are death. (Woolf 1924: 16)

In Woolf's lighthouse, empire encounters liminality as well as modernity. But many of the popular novels set in lighthouses revive the tools and gendered tropes that Woolf tried to abolish or interrogate, and in particular historical novels set in settler colonies such as Australia pay little or no attention to lighthouses as sites of dispossession – they may thereby continue the process of boundary marking and risk glorifying colonisation.

## IMAGINING GENDERED LOVE IN LIGHTHOUSES

Lighthouses were not only beacons of hope or outposts of empire, but they were often isolated communities, serviced by intermittent supply and mail boats, and reliant on vulnerable communication systems. They were also home to women and children, most famously the heroic lighthouse-keeper's daughter, Grace Darling, who lived with her family at the remote Longstone Lighthouse in the Farne Islands off the coast of Northumberland, England (Cunningham, 2007). It is the lives of young women such as Grace who inspire many of the recent novels set in lighthouses. Cultural representations of Grace's courage in spotting and rescuing shipwrecked crew and passengers of the *Forfarshire* one stormy night in 1838 were used to reinforce the British nationalist project in the Victorian era and again during the Second World War (Cunningham, 2007). When Huria Matenga rescued ten crew and passengers from the *Delaware* after it ran onto rocks in Whakapuaka Bay near Nelson in 1863, she was feted as 'New Zealand's Grace Darling' (Pickles and Wanhalla, 2010) and became a national hero. Ida Lewis, who started serving from the age of fifteen, is credited with saving at least eighteen lives during her many years at Lime Rock Lighthouse in Newport, Rhode Island. Lewis and Darling have been the inspiration for both biographical and biofictional representations: notably, in Lewis's case, although her father was incapacitated when she was

young and she kept the light for more than fifty years, she is still defined by one biography's title as *The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter* (Skomal, 2010), not the Lighthouse Keeper. These young women were seen as exceptional, bravely carrying out men's work in a man's world, as well as giving birth to one of the early character types found in lighthouse narratives – feisty young heroines who have become as much a part of our cultural view of lighthouse communities as their fathers or husbands.

It is perhaps not at all surprising, then, that these many varied and compelling cultural concepts of the meanings and mythologies of lighthouse life should become such a popular narrative setting, particularly for historical fiction, set in the days before automation when lighthouses were tiny, intense communities. Lighthouses are particularly useful as settings for historical fiction, offering readers a sense of place that is familiar from earlier stories, but also exotic and sometimes romanticised, their isolation throwing the living conditions of characters into sharp relief and adding layers of narrative tension and atmosphere, but also allowing for consideration of the ways in which the people in the stories operate in and are affected by place and the gender roles assigned to them. That tower, and the white-washed cottages clustered at its base, may appear stable and solid like its keeper, but it is also home to many real and imagined stories of instability, dissolution, treachery, and despair.

The challenges and vulnerabilities of these communities are familiar to readers: 'For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn?' asks Woolf's Mrs Ramsay (1927/1977: 10). We bring to our reading of novels set in a lighthouse the recognition of these hardships, but also a sense that they are unknown to us, almost exotic in their inaccessibility. This too is learned cultural knowledge and even lighthouse keepers bring their own frameworks to the job: Phil Wood points out that British and Scandinavian ideas about the keeper's life grew out of their own expectations of society and community: 'While the lonely and melancholic lighthouse keeper is a common trope in English-language literature, for his counterparts at Tungenes and elsewhere in Norway, the prospect of escaping the throng and making one's livelihood alone and in isolation may have been seen quite differently' (Wood, 2018: 199). For a reader in the English-language tradition, the melancholy and isolation are an inherent thread through the lighthouse story, and the reader also brings to the text the influence of the Gothic, and their foreknowledge of the generative possibilities of remote and liminal places as story sites.

Scholars such as Diana Wallace (2013) and Katherine Cooper (2012) have made clear the constant presence of the Gothic setting and familiar frameworks in historical fiction, particularly novels written by women and/or centred on women as characters through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Recurring Gothic themes evident in lighthouse stories include the isolated and unforgiving setting; the effective imprisonment of the women and children (stone lighthouses, after all, can appear as forbidding as the medieval towers or Tudor prisons so popular in historical fiction and Gothic-influenced fantasy novels); the past bleeding into the present, through memory, trauma, or supernatural forces often representing earlier generations; and an underlying sense of the uncanny. It is both a domestic interior and a male domain; a setting of vast scale and also minute detail and intimacy.

All of these elements are present in arguably the most popular lighthouse-set novel of recent years: *The Light Between Oceans*, M. L. Stedman's 2012 international best-seller, which was translated into forty languages and later became a film starring Michael Fassbender and Alicia Vikander (Cianfrance, 2016). It is emblematic of a traditional approach to the light as a gendered geography of love in historical fiction. The story revolves around Tom, a returned soldier marked by his experience in the Great War, who becomes a lighthouse keeper on the remote Janus Rock in Western Australia: 'The white stone tower rested against the slate sky like a stick of chalk. It stood a hundred and thirty feet high, near the cliff at the island's apex' (Stedman, 2012: 49), where, tellingly, 'the dip of the light meant that the island itself was always left in darkness. A lighthouse is for others; powerless to illuminate the space closest to it' (Stedman, 2012: 253). Tom marries Isobel, a local girl, and then finds a baby adrift in a rowing boat – with dire consequences for all. It is about duty, about love, and in terms of gender it is profoundly essentialist:

The simple fact was, sure as a graft will take and fuse on a rose bush, the rootstock of Isobel's motherhood – her every drive and instinct (...) grafted seamlessly to the scion, the baby which needed mothering. (Stedman, 2012: 145)

Tom is the authority, master of this granite and glass miracle of male engineering, while Isobel is irrational, driven by her womanly impulses. He tends to the light, dutiful and steadfast, continuing the tradition and the tasks of the men who came before him:

The logbook tells the tale of the keeper's life in the same steady pen. The exact minute the light was lit, the exact minute it was put out the following morning. The weather, the ships that passed. (Stedman, 2012: 125)

Isobel's actions, and indeed her very presence, disturb his equilibrium and threaten the stability of his service, and even the light. This idea, of the stable hero (or anti-hero, depending on the reader's viewpoint) and the unstable heroine, can be seen in many stories set in lighthouse communities: the woman shakes the steadfast keeper's life out of its routine, reminding us of the lighthouse's liminal nature and rendering its keeper helpless.

This triptych – the light, the keeper, the woman – is a version of a dynamic often seen in historical fiction published from the middle of the twentieth century onwards, in which the man involved in a relationship has a clear role in the world, often bound by duty (a knight, a detective, a king, a mentor) and the heroine of the story is placed in relation to him and his role (a wife, a daughter, a princess, an apprentice) and under his control – even when she is also positioned as a chosen one in historical fantasy. The direct or indirect influence of feminism on writers in the last few decades, however, has seen them pushing back against the traditional representations of women of the past. As Wallace notes:

Within mainstream history women have tended to feature only in certain roles – as queens, witches, nuns, spiritualists – or as femmes fatales like Vernon Lee's Medea da Carpi. Historical fiction has allowed women writers to reassess these figures, and to show how they are often 'hysterical' constructions, reflecting the anxieties and desires of male historians and otherwise disempowered women. (2013: 196)

This preoccupation has led to rediscovery of women's stories that had previously been overlooked or neglected in both fiction and nonfiction. But in fiction, the reimagining of those lives may express the concerns of readers and writers now rather than the reality of the past, and as Cooper and Short have written, 'That depictions of the female figure in historical fiction often reveal far more about present-day attitudes and ideologies than those of the period they seek to represent is particularly evident in terms of the way in which she is positioned in narratives regarding sexuality, marriage and romance' (2012: 9). This ongoing attempt at reclaiming or perhaps retrofitting power to women of the past has become a convention of the genre in recent decades (Wallace, 2005), leading to a proliferation of what are often described as 'strong female characters' including plucky heroines, rebellious wives, Bohemian femmes fatales, pirates, spies, nurses, and detectives; a refreshing flurry of heroines who rebel against the strictures of their roles. But in many cases, as in *The Light Between Oceans*, that mutiny does not shake the foundations of the social structure. The gendered positions of the main characters do not change: the princess marries her true love, rather than the man her father insisted she marry; the nurse goes to war in spite of her parents' opposition, and meets a handsome doctor (they clash at first, of course); the girl who wants to be a knight becomes a queen; the visitor to town solves the crime and stays on to work with the damaged but fascinating detective; and the lighthouse-keeper and his wife or daughter find some way to reconcile his duty with her needs. And therein lies the binary: he has a duty; she has needs. He is stalwart; she is unstable, perhaps even uncanny.

So while many scholars and authors see these developments in the genre as driven by an ongoing feminist project, one has to wonder how universal that progress is, and what readers make of the essentialist narrative that so regularly underlies it. As Lisa Fletcher has written of the historical romance genre, 'historical fictions of heterosexual love are performative to the extent that they participate in the establishment and maintenance of prevailing ideas about the links between sex, gender and sexuality' (2008: 15) and it is clear that at least some popular novels, such as *The Light Between Oceans*, leverage the trope of the rebellious woman in relation to the dutiful man while delivering a traditional outcome: he may feel threatened and she may appear to threaten his authority, but in the end she does not.

In this novel, too, the lighthouse is a traditional nationalist boundary, even on a rock where two oceans clash.

Anyone who's worked on the Offshore Lights can tell you about it – the isolation, and the spell it casts. Like sparks flung off the furnace that is Australia, these beacons dot around it, flickering on and off, some of them only ever seen by a handful of souls. But their isolation saves the whole continent from isolation – keeps the shipping lanes safe, as vessels steam the thousands of miles to bring machines and books and cloth, in return for wheat and wool, coal and gold; the fruits of ingenuity traded for the fruits of the earth. (Stedman, 2012: 154)

Unlike Winterson's string of lights, this is a narrative of globalisation – the lighthouse as the protector of commerce. It is an immutable fact of life, like motherhood and masculinity – like nationhood and territorial borders: a catalogue of nineteenth and twentieth century boundary-building and modernity. Here, the settler reaches land's end.

*The Light Between Oceans* does not include a single indigenous character, in spite of it being set on Wadandi country, the land of saltwater people. The novel replicates the nineteenth century settler narratives of an alien land, threatening and hostile, conquered by the tough but taciturn whitefella. But as Haraway reminds us 'Vision is always a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the vision implicit in our visualising practises. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?' (1988: 585). Indigenous writers have pointed out that country was not alien or hostile

to settlers – it was as it had been for tens of thousands of years, minding its own business (Donnelly, 2016). It was the settlers who were alien.

In many of these popular novels, then, the gendered love story reflects and perpetuates the imperial narrative of the rugged white man on the frontier, with women – wife or feisty daughter – placed only in relation to him. He is the border point, the rock, the lit lamp. The woman who loves him or the daughter who rebels against his authority are outsiders – they share his exile but never the light.

There are, however, recent novels which try to reimagine a lighthouse narrative, to negotiate and see around and through mapped boundaries, or to provide greater understanding of that ordered circular world, and here I briefly examine three: British author Jeanette Winterson's novel *Lighthousekeeping*, South African novelist Marguerite Poland's *The Keeper*, and Australian author Kate Milderhall's *Skylarking*. These offer quite different gendered geographies of love.

## THE 'POINT OF LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS'

*Lighthousekeeping* is narrated by Silver, an orphaned girl who finds a home in the Cape Wrath lighthouse, built by the legendary Stevensons on the northwest tip of Scotland (Bathurst, 1999). Winterson, as is her wont, subverts the traditional lighthouse story – here, the lighthouse keeper, Pew, is blind and represents light, while the nineteenth-century clergyman, Babel Dark, is the opposite – his name hammering home that symbolism.

Silver is lost, adrift, before she arrives at the lighthouse, and again after it is automated. She says:

There were two Atlantics; one outside the lighthouse, and one inside me.

The one inside me had no string of guiding lights. (Winterson, 2004a: 21)

Silver's world revolves around Pew, but he is not the reticent, heroic, remote keeper we see in many other stories: he is warm and articulate, and lights up Silver's life. Pew becomes her 'point of light in the darkness' and he teaches her that the lighthouse and storytelling are the same thing. Silver says to her readers:

The stories I want to tell you will light up part of my life, and leave the rest in darkness. You don't need to know everything. There is no everything. (Winterson, 2004a: 134)

Winterson has explored this idea previously in her novel *Sexing the Cherry*, which is in part a reflection on the ways in which past and present connect in life and in storytelling, and the imaginative uses of history in fiction. It ends:

The future and the past and the present exist only in our minds (...) And even the most solid of things and the most real, the best loved and the well-known, are only hand-shadows on the wall. Empty space and points of light. (1989: 144)

As Ansgar Nünning has noted, postmodernist fiction set in the past is itself a liminal territory: 'Being located on the border between historiography and literature, fact and fiction, postmodernist historical fiction shows a pronounced tendency to cross boundaries and to blur genre distinctions' (1997: 219), as well as asking how text might render or reimagine past and present. In *Lighthousekeeping*, Pew exists out of time, or perhaps can see through time, into the past, and into the tortured life of Babel Dark, who meets Darwin and Robert Louis Stevenson (scion of the Lighthouse Stevensons, possibly seeking inspiration to help write *Dr Jekyll and Mister Hyde*). The lighthouse here has both a strong physical presence on this harsh coastline, but is also described as almost ephemeral: 'The lighthouse looked like a living creature, standing upright on its base, like a seahorse, fragile, impossible, but triumphant in the waves' (Winterson, 2004a: 80). But the automated future comes to the old lighthouse, Pew is made redundant, and Silver's guiding light dims, leaving her to wander restless through an unsettling world, like Babel Dark, until she understands a story for herself and can return. In contrast to other relationships in lighthouse narratives, the adult Silver's later love story in *Lighthousekeeping* is ungendered. That is, the love object is only addressed as you, and their gender, if any, is not explicit. The reader may or may not project a gender onto the beloved – a salute to those used to reading queerness where it is not written, and possibly unsettling for others. The relationship doesn't take place in a lighthouse, but it begins on an island, in Greece, where 'the light was as intense as a love affair (...) Nobody needs this much sunlight' (Winterson, 2004a: 196-197), and then intensifies in an isolated cabin in the woods. The beloved is a lighthouse in Silver's stormy sea: 'You are the door at the end of the world. You are the door that opens onto a sea of stars' (Winterson, 2004: 219). The novel is a queer fairy tale, of sorts, about the possibility of storytelling and of love, in which the lighthouse and its keeper are the same thing:



There were days when he seemed to have evaporated into the spray that jetted the base of the lighthouse, and days when he was the lighthouse. It stood, Pew-shaped, Pew-still, hatted by cloud, blind-eyes, but the light to see by. (Winterson, 2004a: 95)

Further, Winterson writes in her Author's Note:

*Lighthousekeeping* is a story about telling stories. A story about what stories are, and how they affect us. Pew calls them 'Markers, guides, comfort and warning'. I believe that. I believe that storytelling is a way of navigating our lives, and that to read ourselves in fiction is much more liberating than to read ourselves as fact. ... If we read ourselves as narrative, we change the story that we are. If we read ourselves as literal and fixed, we find that we can change nothing. (2004b: 20)

This suggests that the parallel between story and lighthouse extends beyond the metaphors of navigation and light, and into the idea of story and the self as liminal spaces – an idea also explored by Marguerite Poland in her 2014 novel, *The Keeper*.

*The Keeper* is set in 1957 on a guano island off the Eastern Cape, the South African coast where Poland grew up and which is the setting for many of her novels (Eve and Mills, 2003: 39). Lighthouse keeper Hannes Harker suffers a fall in the tower while converting the light to an automated beacon. It's the lighthouse in which he has lived as a child and again as an adult; the island on which his father served and his mother died, and where he worked for many years – it's his light. As he recovers in hospital he shares his story with a nurse, Rika, who becomes the fascinated but always distant keeper of his secrets. The novel both replicates and subverts some of the tropes of lighthouse narratives, sometimes overtly:

'You see,' he says, 'unless you've been in an isolated lighthouse you can't begin to understand what living in one means. It sounds romantic. It is romantic. But, again, it's not. Most lights are pretty harsh.' (Poland, 2014: 38)

This novel, then, contains three interdependent stories of lighthouse-keeping: that of Hannes' authoritarian father, desperate mother, and his own childhood; his memories of his early married years and the wild, beloved wife, Aletta, who ran away; and the damaged man healing from both his fall and his past in the presence of a supportive woman listener (just as Silver is the audience for Pew's many stories in *Lighthousekeeping*). This pattern is reminiscent of what Wallace calls the 'uncanny repetition at the heart of the Female Gothic' (2013: 135) in which we often see the further doubling of the women's roles – first and second wives, for example, in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, and here, mother and wife, and a nurse who understands them both better than the man who loves them. Hannes does not see his mother's pain and misreads his wife's isolation: his focus is on the light, the ocean, the island. For Hannes and his colleagues, 'lighthouse' is an adjective applied only to those who work in and preferably also grew up in the service: a person is either lighthouse, and therefore trustworthy and knowing, or not. People who are not lighthouse must learn to live with those who are. The lives of these generations revolve around one concept: the keeper must never leave the light, and the light must never go out. Nothing else matters. Hannes tells Rika:

'The only certainty is a light. Some light. Somewhere. And relying on lighthouse people who move the same as you. They're the ones who really know you. The ones you can rely on (...) A lighthouse either defeats you or it owns you. There is nothing in between.' (Poland, 2014: 101)

Hannes, like his father, is owned by the lighthouse, but it is the reactions and perhaps defeats of his mother and later his wife, Aletta, that are the secrets driving this story:

Fleeting in his mind he saw the lantern – dark, unlit, as it was now. And beyond, the salted window of the chamber and the gathering storm building like volcanic smoke across the southern. That day his mother had stood stark and white motionless before the lanterns as if in defiance of a god.

His mother – so small, so gentle. And yet so defiant.

Something swept across him like a beam of the light, a clarity, a certainty. It was not fear that killed her. It was anger. (Poland, 2014: 49)

The always-formal structures of the lighthouse-keeping profession are deepened on this island where, under apartheid rule, the public servants in the tower and cottages are white and the Black guano diggers live crammed together in huts, and neither community can cross the line between them to approach the other – when the line is crossed, tragedy follows, but not in the way the authorities fear. In fact, it is the crossing of these lines, and later Aletta's inability to bend to the rules of lighthouse life, that are presented as human truth in the face of official

rigidity. Transgressions – against the rules, against one another, against social expectations – are threats to established order and to the lighthouse-keeping way and therefore Hannes’ understanding of the world and his life. But transgression lies at the heart of the Gothic story: as Donna Heiland notes, ‘Gothic fiction at its core is about transgressions of all sorts: across national boundaries, social boundaries, sexual boundaries, the boundaries of one’s own identity’ (2004: 3).

In *The Keeper*, as critic Karl van Wyk notes, ‘The lighthouse is given human characteristics, but not ones we’d expect. It’s described as “so exacting a mistress”. Instead of representing enlightenment, it is a symbol of darkness’ (2014: para. 8) and the weight of it, too, is oppressive, so that it is a surprise but not a shock that two of the central characters fall into darkness— one to her death, and one, Hannes, from losing his grip. It is Aletta who is the light, instead. She is described initially as a ‘Sea-child, thin-shanked, light as a sanderling. (...) It was an anguish to love her’ (Poland, 2014: 22) and a ‘seabird, blown off course. Wary, wild and angry’ (Poland, 2014: 38) but later, Hannes tells Rika, “she’s a keeper’s daughter. In a way I always thought she was the light.” And she was – until this island. Its misshapen tides, its hidden reefs’ (Poland, 2014: 39). He mistakes her anger for either adultery or despair, her story mingling with his mother’s in his mind, when in fact it is Aletta’s strength and discretion that leads her to leave the lighthouse. Aletta appears – in his mind, and initially in the novel – as that familiar unstable, uncanny lighthouse keeper’s wife. But Poland ensures that she is not.

In her weaving of generations of relationships, and the characters’ different responses to the light and its harsh island, Poland draws new outlines of a familiar emotional map in lighthouse narratives:

Isolation is very different from loneliness.

Loneliness does not arise from something lost as from a longing for something well remembered.

Isolation cares nothing for memory. (Poland, 2014: 67)

Kate Mildenhall’s 2016 young adult novel *Skylarking* revolves around two young women, rather than their lighthouse-keeper fathers. Kate, the narrator, and Harriet are best friends, perhaps more, growing up on the edge of the new Australian colonies. Their passionate, potentially transgressive friendship is disrupted by the arrival of another remote and taciturn man, McPhail, and that disruption ends in unexpected tragedy. But unlike other lighthouse narratives, the men are not centred in the story – in fact, they barely appear on the page, lightly sketched, while Kate and Harriet’s worlds revolve around each other. It is based on events that happened in 1887 at Cape St George lighthouse on Australia’s south eastern coast, inspired by the author’s happening upon the lonely grave of a young woman accidentally shot and killed by her best friend. Again, this lighthouse is built on a site far from the centre of power, but an indisputable part of the British Empire. To these young women, it is home:

They chose a good spot for our lighthouse. High on the layered stone of a cliff face that jutted out, decisively, into the ocean; it was the kind of location that seemed confident, arrogant enough for a lighthouse. The dusty scrub of the headland stood hardly high as the height of a man (...) From the edge of the cliff, or as close to the edge as I had ever dared to go there was only ocean and ocean and ocean, stretched out on the silky blue of a lady’s skirt, all the way to the horizon. (Mildenhall, 2016: 3)

The novel tells a familiar story of the lights: ‘There is honour in lighthouse keeping,’ says Kate, as she watches her father pore over the charts marking known and unknown, solid and fluid knowledge: ‘There were jagged lines that appeared to mark the space between land and water, and star-shaped compass points to tell the place on the globe’ (Mildenhall, 2016: 20). While Winterson and Poland imbue lighthouse-keeping with the mystical importance of storytelling, Mildenhall’s approach is more prosaic: Kate respects her father and his work, and goes to bed at night knowing that he is ‘watching over (...) the countless passengers, sailors, captains and fishermen who sailed past our little jut of coast, casting their eyes out into the dark for the steady beam, the signature of our light. Blink, flash, blink’ (Mildenhall, 2016: 18). Unlike Stedman’s *The Light Between Oceans*, the keeper’s focus here is on people, the vulnerable souls at sea – not the cargo, the ‘wool, coal and gold’, the empire.

Also, unlike Stedman, Mildenhall<sup>2</sup> reflects on the impact of the lighthouse on the dispossessed local Indigenous community. Kate meets a young Aboriginal woman in the bush, and they have a moment of connection. Mildenhall writes in her author’s note that ‘The stories of Aboriginal people are not mine to tell but are ones that I respectfully acknowledge’ (2016: 280), although her attempt at acknowledgement has been criticised as token (On, 2016; Riddle, 2016). The young Aboriginal woman has no name, her appearance at two critical moments seems slightly supernatural, and her role in the story is to help heal Kate’s wounded heart. Mildenhall’s recognition of dispossession and her attempt at including traditional owners of the country – successful or not – reads at least as a counter to the total erasure of Indigenous people in *The Light Between Oceans* and can, like the portrayal of the

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<sup>2</sup> I must disclose here that she is a friend of mine.

Black guano diggers' lives under Apartheid and the mention of passing slave ships in *The Keeper*, be read as acknowledgement of that uncomfortable truth at the heart of the lighthouse story set in a colony.

## CONCLUSION: TELLING STORIES OF LIGHT

In *Skylarking*, Harriet and Kate devour the books read by young women in the colonies at the time – adventure stories of children at the edges of empire, such as *The Coral Island* – and Kate's mind is full of the stories she loves and the heroines they feature. Aletta, in *The Keeper*, reads constantly, books and dancing her only solace on the island, as the Bible was for Hannes' mother. This is another uncanny echo of the Gothic: other books feature in all of these novels. 'The Female Gothic is always "going back";' writes Wallace, 'texts are haunted by their predecessors and, in turn, haunt their descendants' (2013: 132). Winterson's novel is more overtly intertextual, in an experiment towards a postmodern aesthetic and in part what Linda Hutcheon defined as historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon, 1989), calling to Woolf, Angela Carter, Homer and Robert Louis Stevenson, himself the son of lighthouse-building engineers. As Sonia Kotiah notes, in outlining these influences on Winterson, 'Postmodern storytelling art "pirates" from other narratives so as to create a new, liberated project' (Kotiah, 2015: 25), and Winterson has made this an acknowledged cornerstone of her work, particularly in the early novels. In an interview with Louise Tucker published in the paperback edition of *Lighthousekeeping*, she explains:

Books speak to other books; they are always in dialogue (...) you're aware you write within a continuum, that the books themselves suggest ideas to you which you would not otherwise have had (...) It's a way of rewriting what we know, but in the rewriting we find new angles, new possibilities, and the rewriting itself demands a fresh injection of material into what already exists, so the story itself changes. (2004b: 2)

*The Keeper*, *Skylarking* and *Lighthousekeeping* also offer very different approaches to storytelling, to the past, to fiction, and to lighthouses – Winterson's metafiction draws on Woolf's modernist masterpiece, while Mildenhall's historical fiction is more traditional in form, but focuses on the complex love between two young women. Poland's novel subverts the construct of the melancholy male figure with women revolving around him to humanise him, and his gendered relationships. All three novels acknowledge and provide an alternative view of the lighthouse and its stories and attempt to recognise the marginalised figures in this history. I suggest this is authentically part of a broader feminist project, as was Woolf's, destabilising traditional narratives of love, ideas of gender, and inscribing a sense of place and light into the imagined lives of women and children in these most hierarchical and utilitarian structures.

In their pages, lighthouses become sites of possibility – of queer love, of intimate storytelling, of liminality, of knowing. 'The stories themselves,' writes Winterson, 'make the meaning. (...) There is no continuous narrative, there are lit up moments and the rest is dark' (2004a: 134). These stories, the lighthouses, and the characters who live in them, become points of light in the darkness.

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