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Irish Society for the Study of Children's Literature (ISSCL) Symposium: “The Key to Joy: Rediscovering the Magic of Children’s Literature”

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Finding Joy in Wartime Archives

Thank you for the introduction, and for inviting me to talk today. I’d like to start this paper with a question. Can we say that researching wartime archives is joyful? Up until now, the majority of my archival research has focused on the Second World War and the Holocaust. I have looked at children’s lived experiences of displacement, negotiating access to, at times, highly sensitive material in the UK, Germany, France and the US. Some of this material is both traumatic and traumatising. During my PhD, I worked very intensely with the Alfred Kerr Archive in Berlin, which contains letters by and to children’s author-illustrator Judith Kerr. These letters are jumbled, linguistically and chronologically, switching between German, French and English, and jumping between Kerr’s earliest years in Berlin before the family were forced to flee Nazi Germany in 1933, the years of the family’s refuge in Switzerland, France and England, and the years that immediately followed the Second World War in Britain and Germany. The letters are between family members, and they tell a story of exile and survival that is, at times, darker than that in the *Out of the Hitler Time* trilogy, and that contained in the brightly coloured childhood drawings and illustrated manuscripts held in

the Judith Kerr Collection at Seven Stories in Newcastle. Being in Berlin helped me contextualize many of Kerr's writings, but it was also overwhelming. I found myself immersed in and disorientated by multiple histories in and outside of the archive, due to the visual material of the city itself – Holocaust memorials, physical 'battle scars' on the buildings and the Kerrs' former neighbourhood. Such experiences can create a particular and productive 'affective space' for reading archival material (Tamboukou 81), but it can also take a huge toll on the researcher. The emotional toll of archival research is something that is now being more and more acknowledged, but at the time it wasn't so much. I hadn't expected to be so affected, and I had to take a period of formal leave from my PhD to recover.

Yet, as my colleagues and students here today all know, I love archival research. I find it both magical and joyful. Since starting work at DCU last September, I have successfully managed to infect all my students (I think) with archive fever. We started with looking at examples of Kerr's juvenilia, discussed and visited – both personally and virtually – other children's authors' archives, and next week we will be looking at a different and quite unique collection – the living collection of Children's Books Ireland books here at DCU.

But what can possibly be magical or joyful about researching archives about children's lives being turned upside down? How is it that when I look back on my PhD, that I think of those years with such fondness, when I was dealing with such a dark chapter of history, that, for a while, totally sucked me in?

I was traumatised, because I felt so close to my subjects on the page. I was very lucky to know some of my subjects in real life, too. I had the complete privilege of meeting Judith Kerr on a number of occasions, of interviewing her, and gaining her trust in dealing with writings and drawings from her early life. This is what I find most meaningful – joyful even – about archival research. The opportunity to connect with remarkable people and to learn from them.

Judith Kerr, as I'm sure many of you will know, was nothing short of remarkable. While she was always quick to remind you that the challenges she and her family in the Hitler years were nothing in comparison to so many others, and that she was one of the lucky ones, it nonetheless was a difficult time. Yet Kerr found a way to live a good, happy and long life – "That's one in the eye for Hitler" she said when she was awarded the Oldie of the Year Award at the age of 95 in 2019, just a few months before her final book was published before she passed away.

I was very fortunate to share in one of the celebrations of Kerr's life and works, and I was invited to her 95th birthday party at The Savoy in London. This is something that I normally wouldn't talk about at our symposium or conference, but given that we're here today in cause of celebration, I feel that I can. But don't worry, it does tie in with my research, to some degree, so we won't be leaving that behind completely.

One spring day in 2018, I received an envelope in the post from HarperCollins, Judith Kerr's publisher. Inside, it contained a bright pink card with gold lettering (I'm afraid I don't have a photo of it), inviting me to Judith Kerr's 95th birthday party at The Savoy in London. The dress code was "cocktail glamour". I was so excited! And so impressed and pleased that Judith Kerr was having such a stylish party. I wrote to my supervisors, and they shared my excitement. Take a day off to get a new dress, they said. But what ever would I do for a present? I wanted it to have some connection to Judith Kerr's childhood archive, as way of expressing my gratitude for her time and trust. I looked back over the material. Was there something there that provided some clue – was there something that she had wanted as a girl but couldn't have, due to the family's reduced financial circumstances, and constantly being on the move? I knew that children had already given her a pink rabbit, to make up for the one she lost. I knew that she had always wanted a cat as a girl, but it was impossible for the

family to have pets when they were having to move about so much. And she had had many cats as an adult, the latest being Katinka. There was a tortoise that showed up in many of her stories. How about a tortoise? Not a real one, but perhaps a brooch. Judith Kerr often wore brooches. I searched online for a tortoise brooch, and I found one, but I wasn't entirely convinced.

But then I had another idea. A seal! It had to be a seal. A seal spoke to Judith Kerr's childhood, but also her father, and his own published writings in German, which were very important to Kerr, and which are not as well known as she would have liked them to be.

For any of you familiar with Judith Kerr's illustrated novel, *Mister Cleghorn's Seal*, you will know about the seal pup from Judith Kerr's childhood. As Kerr explains at the end of this story, there used to be a stuffed seal pup in her father's study in Berlin. She used to like to sit on the pup. The seal had come from the coast of Normandy, where Alfred Kerr was once on holiday. Alfred Kerr had found a seal pup that had been abandoned by its mother. He was told that nothing could be done, that the seal could not be saved, and that they just had to leave it. Alfred Kerr wouldn't hear of it. He decided he would take the seal pup back to Berlin with him and find a home for him. So, he took the seal pup back with him on the train and to his Berlin apartment, where, thankfully he had a bath for it. He then worked tirelessly trying to find a home for this seal, but no zoo or similar would take it. Having run out of options completely, he went to the vet, and was told that there was no option but to have the seal put down. The seal was then stuffed and sat in his study. It was along the family's belongings that had to be left behind when they fled Germany in 1933. And it was then soon afterwards seized by the Nazis.

This story features in a collection of animal stories Alfred Kerr had written that were then later republished after the Second World War. Judith Kerr rewrote this story, giving the

seal an alternative, and happy story. I won't say what it is, in case any of you haven't read it yet.

So, going back to my preparations for Judith Kerr's 95th birthday party, I was absolutely thrilled when I came across this little seal. I thought it was perfect, and I ordered it. However, not long after, disaster struck. When the seal arrived in the post, the little ball had been smashed. I was devastated. The seller only had had one seal, so I couldn't ask for another one, and a refund wouldn't help. Judith Kerr had to have this seal. Living near Cambridge at the time, I carefully wrapped up the little seal and cycled into town with it. I took it to one of the jewellers there and asked if they could mend it. The jeweller refused. He didn't have time or care for costume jewellery. Please, I begged. But he wouldn't budge. But it's for Judith Kerr, I explained, and told him about the seal. He listened, patiently, and perhaps he was even moved. For, when I reached the end of the story, and explained how and why I wanted to give Judith Kerr this seal for her 95th birthday, he relented. He said that his children knew and liked her books, and that he would make an exception. But he could make no promises. It would be a very delicate operation and take a few days. I went home and anxiously awaited his call. The operation had been successful, and the dear little seal, now again had a little pearl balancing on the tip of his nose. But I couldn't have a box from the jeweller. The jeweller could be known to be associated with a piece of costume jewellery. So, carefully, I picked up the little seal and went on my way. We went to the nearby department store, and there, a kind shop assistant helped us pick out an appropriate box for the little seal and a cushion of tissue paper. I went home and wrapped the box, put on my new dress, and took the train to London, hoping against hope that there would be no further incident, and that I would get this seal safely to The Savoy, and Judith Kerr. As we sat together on the train, I couldn't help but reflect on that journey that the seal had taken … the very terrifying journeys that could have led to the Kerrs' capture, but thankfully did not.

Reached The Savoy safely. Party was in the River Room, which I felt was rather apt. The party was not without its mishaps, however. It was a very warm June day. Coming from Australia, I didn't know that it could be hot in England. HarperCollins had wanted to bring together all of the creatures and humans close to Judith Kerr, including, of course, Mog, and the Tiger. It being so hot, however, the poor tiger fainted. The caterers had gone to great length for the food to be themed. The petits fours had little printed tiger faces sitting on top of them, but they melted and slid onto the floor. Judith Kerr, however, the star of the show, looked remarkable and was not the least bit phased by the falling tigers. She gave a heartfelt speech, what ended up being one of her very last, and we all sang happy birthday.

Although standing there in the present, it was impossible not to think back to one text from the juvenilia, an illustrated story and accompanying speech that Judith Kerr had written on occasion of her grandmother's sixiety birthday. Judith Kerr would have been twelve or thirteen years old at the time, and separated from her grandmother in exile, she wrote about a hypothetical celebration, what it might have been like, had they been together. The speech is accompanied by a beautiful watercolour, of Judith and her brother being blown across the English Channel, and landing on a giant chocolate cake.

In the first volume of Kerr's fictionalised autobiography, *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, her *alter ego*, Anna, also reflects on a missed birthday, but this time her own. Having recently arrived in Switzerland, Anna is utterly miserable on her tenth birthday, on which she has to accompany her family to the outing of the Zurich Literary Society, to which her father had been invited:

> There was nothing for Anna to do. There were no other children to play with and after lunch it was even worse because there were speeches. Mama had not told her about the speeches. She should have warned her. They went on for what

> seemed like hours and Anna sat through them miserably in the heat, thinking of what she would have been doing if they had not had to leave Berlin.
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> Heimpi would have made a birthday cake with strawberries. She would have had a party with at least twenty children and each of them would have brought her a present. About now they would all be playing games in the garden. Then there would be tea, and candles round the cake … She could imagine it all so clearly that she hardly noticed when the speeches finally came to an end.

Conscious of the missed birthdays from Judith Kerr's childhood, it had been particularly important to me to do something meaningful and joyful for her. Now that she has passed away, I think it's more important than ever to remember her birthdays, those celebrated and missed, real and imagined, and to understand, too, what the two sets of texts, those in the childhood archive, and those published as an adult, reveal about the lived experience of displacement at different points in Kerr's life. But that is a story for another day. It's now time for me to end this speech, and for us to have, if not cake, at least tea and coffee.

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