

# Suspecting strangers in coastal Suffolk

EMILY GREENE

Sarah Meyrick on  
Esther Freud's  
atmospheric novel  
*Mr Mac and Me*

THE centenary of the First World War has been commemorated over the past three years, and is due to culminate at Remembrance this year. I have no idea if Esther Freud wrote *Mr Mac and Me* (published 2014) with the centenary in mind, but the story she creates is a fascinating reminder of what a different world we inhabited a century ago.

For this is coastal Suffolk, the village of Walberswick (where the author has a house that she has written about before, in *The Sea House*). In 1914, it is a place where news arrives slowly, often by word of mouth, where there is never enough work to go round, and rarely enough to eat. Life is perilous: the story is narrated by 12-year-old Thomas Maggs, the son of the village publican. He is the only surviving son; in the churchyard lie the remains of his siblings and other older brothers — William, William, James, William, James, and another Thomas — who died as infants. This is a time when an infected cut or a childhood fever is life-threatening.

Thomas's life is shaped by the seasons: fishing, farming, and seasonal visitors. Every summer, a bevy of girls from Scotland arrive to help gut and pack the herring. One of them, Betty, catches his eye. Meanwhile, his father drinks too much, and is frequently violent. The family must tiptoe around his moods. Thomas longs to escape, and, in particular, to go to sea, something his father will not hear

of. He spends such spare time as he has sketching boats.

Two events crash into this narrow world. First, the arrival of a pair of strangers: an artist, who turns out to be the architect and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and his wife. "Mr Mac" and his wife befriend Thomas and encourage him to draw and paint. They lend him books, and give him art materials. Then, just as their tentative friendship begins to bloom, war with Germany is declared.

Britain feared invasion in 1914, and that invasion was thought most likely to arrive via the Suffolk coast. The summer visitors stop coming to Walberswick, to be replaced by regiments of soldiers on their way to Belgium. The young men of the village — including the sweetheart of Thomas's sister Ann — are soon on their way to the war. Mr Mac and his wife are strangers, of course: exotic in their dress and eccentric in their habits. Thomas first mistook the incomer for a detective because he bears a resemblance to Sherlock Holmes. Worse, they have books and letters in German.

The Defence of the Realm Act, or DORA, is issued. Everyone is instructed to "see everything, hear everything, say nothing". The Act restricts the opening hours of pubs, and bans people from buying rounds of drinks; contraventions are punishable by death. A whispering campaign grows. The rumour is that Mr Mac is a spy, and he is duly arrested and held on suspicion.

Much of the story is based on historical fact. Although now fêted, Mackintosh was indeed on his uppers at the outbreak of the war. He moved to Suffolk in an attempt to save money, subsisting on his wife's inheritance and sporadic sales of his botanical illustrations. He was, indeed, arrested — and was not the only artist to be arrested: Sir John Lavery and Philip de Laszlo also came under suspicion.

In this blending of fact and fiction, *Mr Mac and Me* reminds me of Helen Dunmore's *Zennor in*



Inherited talent: the author, Esther Freud, the daughter of the painter Lucian Freud

*Darkness*, which reimagined the time that the writer D. H. Lawrence and his German wife spent in Cornwall in an attempt to escape anti-German sentiment during the same period of history. In both cases, the arrival of mysterious strangers in a close-knit and isolated community leads to wariness and distrust.

There are all sorts of other interesting threads in the book, too. The other mentor in Thomas's life is George Allard, an elderly rope-maker who gives him his first job and begins to instruct him in the ancient art of teasing hemp into

twine. This is a moment in history where craftsmanship is under threat. Like Mr Mac, George is a craftsman who believes that "everything that's worth anything comes from God's own ground", and that the war has "turned men on to unnatural things".

Freud often tells her stories through the mind's eye of a child. What the young Thomas, just emerging into adolescence, sees but misunderstands adds an interesting layer of complexity to the novel. His inability to articulate his thoughts — to warn Mr Mac of his impending arrest, for example — is

both convincing and crucial to the plot. I am less convinced that his narrative descriptions are quite as convincing. But where the author is strongest is her evocation of place: descriptions are elegiac and atmospheric, and, as a reader, you can practically smell the salt and feel the chill wind coming off the sea.

Sarah Meyrick is a freelance writer and novelist.

*Mr Mac and Me* by Esther Freud is published by Bloomsbury at £8.99 (Church Times Bookshop £8.10); 978-1-4088-5721-2.

## MR MAC AND ME — SOME QUESTIONS

Charles Rennie Mackintosh is a historical figure, and some of the narrative is based on fact. How does this overlap between fiction and history affect your reading?

"Hertz, Rose, Dekorative, Rundschau". What do you make of Tommy's mumbled repetitions of the German words that thrill and scare him so much?

What do you make of the interplay between danger and escape in Freud's representation of the ocean?

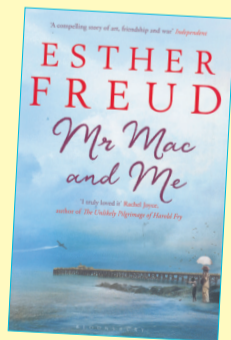
Tommy, an adolescent, often misinterprets events around him, but equally often appears to have a clearer view than many adults. Why might this be?

"He's a foreigner, for Christ's sake": in what ways does suspicion manifest itself in the novel?

The artists in Freud's novel are often represented as seeing things differently. What did you make of the relationship between beauty, art, and truth in the book?

Freud originally began this book as a ghost story. What part do ghosts play now? What do you make of the presence (in memory and imagination) of Tommy's brothers?

To what extent might Esther Freud's relationship with her father, the artist Lucian Freud, have influenced her writing in this book?



IN OUR next reading-groups page, to appear on 2 February, we will feature our next book: **Anatomy of a Soldier** by Harry Parker. It is published by Faber & Faber at £7.99 (Church Times Bookshop £7.20); 978-0-5713-2583-2.

### Book notes

The backdrop of *Anatomy of a Soldier* is an unspecified war-zone that bears a close resemblance to Afghanistan. At its centre is the story of Captain Tom Barnes, injured by an exploding IED, and that of the doctors and family members who help him in the months to come. Alongside this, however, are the parallel stories of an insurgent, of a father, and of teenage boys caught up in the violence of war. All this is sensitively told in a shifting series of narratives from the perspective of 45 inanimate objects: from a boot to a watch to a bag of fertiliser.

### Author notes

Born in 1983 to an army family, Harry Parker studied

at Falmouth College of Art and University College London before enlisting as an officer in the British Army. He completed a tour with the 4th Battalion the Rifles in Iraq (2007), and later in Afghanistan (2009), where he lost his lower left leg and a little finger after stepping on an IED while he was returning from a night patrol. His right leg was later amputated. After a stint as a civil servant, he now works as a writer and artist. *Anatomy of a Soldier* is his first book.

### Books for the next two months:

**March:** *The Old Wives' Tale* by Arnold Bennett.  
**April:** *Tregian's Ground* by Anne Cuneo.

