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# The Story of Brexit: Nostalgia in Parody Children's BrexLit

Michelle Witen

This essay examines the children's literature parodies *Five on Brexit Island* (by Bruno Vincent, 2016), *Five Escape Brexit Island* (by the same, 2017), *Alice in Brexitland* (by Leavis Carroll, 2017), and the Ladybird spoof *The Story of Brexit* (by Jason A. Hazeley and Joel P. Morris, 2018) through the lens of 'BrexLit,' focusing on the politicization of these texts whose originals each capture an idealized British past. Beginning with a juxtaposition of the pastiches with their original counterparts, this essay moves through the different facets of Enid Blyton's Britain as Brexit's Britain, and the subversion of Lewis Carroll's Wonderland into a delusional Brexitland, before focusing on *The Story of Brexit*. Paying particular attention to the publication and reception history of the Ladybird series, this essay engages intertextually with the parody's reproduced illustrations of the allegedly simpler life pictured in formative Ladybird books of the 1960s and 1970s and performs a close reading of the accompanying text. In each case, the parodies function as humorous coping mechanisms for a Brexit reality, but they also expose how the nostalgia associated with the charm of the originals becomes a political and social commentary for the 2016 Brexit campaigns.

Keywords: Brexit, nostalgia, Ladybird books, children's literature, BrexLit, parody

In his introduction to *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, Robert Eaglestone writes, "Brexit grew from cultural beliefs, real or

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imaginary, about Europe and the UK; the arguments before, during and after the referendum were – and are – arguments about culture” (1). Connecting this to a specifically literary culture that has emerged after Brexit, Kristian Shaw, in the same collection, addresses how Brexit “revealed the inherent divisions” within Britain (16), and questions “the purpose of ‘national’ literature in a divided cultural landscape” (18). For Shaw, “BrexLit” is post-2016 fiction that “engage[s] with emergent political realities” (16). In his words, it is a term that encompasses fictions that “directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain’s exit from the EU, or engage with subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain’s withdrawal” (18). While it is a commonplace to consider novels such as Ali Smith’s *Autumn* (2016), Anthony Cartwright’s *The Cut* (2017), Sarah Moss’s *Ghost Wall* (2018), Melissa Harrison’s *All Among the Barley* (2018), or the works of Bernard Cornwell as examples of BrexLit, there nevertheless exists another category of fiction that also engages with Britain’s new political reality, namely, the parodies of Enid Blyton’s *Famous Five*, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, and the Ladybird series. Although these humorous books tend to be dismissed critically because they are political spoofs, this essay considers *Five on Brexit Island*, *Alice in Brexitland*, and *The Story of Brexit* as BrexLit, first by differentiating them from other politically explanatory Brexit non-fiction, and then by examining each text in turn to show how these “quintessentially British” (Zeegen 7) children’s literatures reveal deep-seated elements of nostalgia that are then critiqued and dismantled. This essay pays particular attention to *The Story of Brexit* and its relationship to the relatively underexplored original Ladybird series, demonstrating how this pastiche BrexLit exposes the underlying issues that helped generate and propagate narratives and slogans such as ‘Take Back Control,’ the roots of which can be found in classic nostalgic images of the allegedly simpler life of the 1960s and 1970s pictured in formative Ladybird books.

Almost as soon as the referendum result to leave the EU was announced, the British public began trying to make sense of the EU, what leaving it meant, and what it was they had voted on in the first place. Amid this confusion, seemingly helpful ‘guides’ began to pop up, many of them parodies, humorous histories, and satires that fit seamlessly alongside more serious tomes. Some, in keeping with the many portmanteaux that emerged from the word ‘Brexit,’ provided historical ‘brexplanations’: what is the EU; why the vote happened; what trends can be detected, etc. Recent examples of these include Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson’s critique of the British post-empire mentality in

*Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire* (2019) and Kevin O'Rourke's *A Short History of Brexit: From Brentry to Backstop* (2019), where he explains the history of the EU and how it shaped British/European relations, with a particular emphasis on the Irish border as integral to the European project.

In addition to texts that try to locate Britain's changing place on the world stage, much Brexit-based non-fiction has been devoted to particular politicians who shaped the Remain and Leave campaigns: Steve Bell's *Corbyn the Resurrection* (2018), Channel 4's Dominic Cummings biopic *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (2019), and Tim Shipman's *All Out War: The Full Story of How Brexit Sank Britain's Political Class* (2016) come readily to mind. The latter, published within six months of the 2016 referendum, reconstructs the daily activities of the two campaigns with a focus on Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, George Osborne, Nigel Farage, and Dominic Cummings. Some politicians also took to writing self-help books in the wake of Brexit, ranging from George Walden's prescient *Exit from Brexit: Time to Emigrate* (written before Brexit and revised in 2016) to Nick Clegg's somewhat self-serving *How to Stop Brexit (and Make Britain Great Again)* (2017).

Amid these burgeoning genres, there also emerged four Brexit-based pastiches of well-loved British children's literature that can be seen as both a 'brexplanation' but also, arguably, as an example of 'BrexLit': namely, *Five on Brexit Island* (2016), its sequel *Five Escape Brexit Island* (2017), *Alice in Brexitland* (2017), and the Ladybird spoof *The Story of Brexit* (2018). Though similar in purpose to the above-mentioned non-fiction, these four texts nevertheless operate as reimaginations of classic children's literature, treading a fine line between fiction and fact. The first two of these are a reinterpretation of Enid Blyton's classic *Five on a Treasure Island* (part of the *Famous Five* series). The original story, strongly influenced by Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, concerns the adventures of Julian, Anne, Dick, and their tomboy cousin George (and, of course, Timmy the dog). After surviving a brutal storm on "George's Island" (officially known as Kirrin's Island), they are the first to uncover a box from a shipwreck revealed by the storm, which contains a treasure map of the island. When the discovery is made public, the island is invaded first by reporters, then by prospective real estate buyers, and finally by these same procurers, but this time as trespassers and thieves, before foreclosure of the property. The sale is blocked when the treasure is discovered; George's family becomes wealthy again; and ownership of George's Island is returned to her, later to be divided equally amongst her cousins.



First published in 1942, *Five on a Treasure Island* led to twenty-one more books in the *Famous Five* series, all of them elevating the courage of the protagonists as well as extolling the value of exploring England and Wales. In the context of World War II (including “Operation Pied Piper”), this idealization of the British countryside, in the form of intrepid English schoolchildren and their adventures, encapsulates British insularity and moral rectitude. Many of the novels involve the investigation of suspicious persons and question notions of property and ownership, with the villains of the series being categorized as “‘gypsies,’ ‘tinkers,’ swarthy-looking strangers, people who work for the circus, people with non-RP accents, people who don’t speak English, [and] foreigners in general” (Risbridger). However, the xenophobic Othering of the villains aside, Blyton also captures an idyllic Britain that matches the slogan of the Leave campaign. As Eleanor Risbridger puts it:

Brexit Blighty is Blyton’s Blighty. It’s white socks, rock cakes, church bells. It’s cricket pitches, jolly hockey sticks, high tea and home for the holidays. It’s Victoria sponge, cucumber sandwiches, and four kinds of fork. It’s pounds, shillings and pence; it’s poles, perches and rods; it’s the boy stood on the burning deck whence all but he had fled; it’s thinking that the Empire wasn’t all bad, come on, what about the trains and the post office? [...] It’s about Britain – domestic, green, leafy little Britain – as the centre of the universe. That’s what people want when they say “give us our country back”: they want to take it back to Blyton’s Britain.

Given this snapshot of ‘Blyton’s Britain,’ it is no wonder that in 2017, one year after the Brexit vote, the Great Western Railway (GWR) chose to repurpose the Famous Five as emblems of adventure, exploration, and Britishness in their marketing campaign, “Five go on a Great Western Adventure.” Featuring the GWR as the fastest and most efficient way to travel, the TV spots show the unsupervised Famous Five witnessing stunning views of South West England and Wales while pursuing a swarthy villain, an unruly Timmy, and madcap inventor, Uncle Quentin.

In another unexpected afterlife, Enid Blyton’s Famous Five grow up and continue to have more adventures, this time negotiating the perils of modern-day living by “giving up the booze,” “going Gluten-free,” getting “beach body ready,” and, apparently, joining in the Brexit debate. Picking up on the earlier issues of property, ownership, and borders in *Five on a Treasure Island*, *Five on Brexit Island* presents George and Julian going head-to-head in “another referendum” (21) to decide the ownership and independence of Kirrin’s Island in the wake of Brexit

and its ultimate fate to become a haven for shell companies. In this first of the classic British children's literature parodies, both sides of the political debate are represented, and it is arguably less partisan as compared to its sequel, *Five Escape Brexit Island*, where the intrepid bunch are trying to escape Cousin Rupert's independent island to reach mainland Europe. Presenting a full parody of the Leave and Remain campaigns, the text stays true to the "didactic Blyton texts that have 'edified' generations of child readers" (Berberich 156), providing a fictional outlet for factual content that adds an element of humour absent both in Blyton's original and in the two campaigns. If 'Brexit Blighty' is 'Blyton's Blighty,' then this pastiche serves the purpose of holding up a humorous, but non-partisan, mirror to the British idealization of an imaginary past.

By contrast, Leavis Carroll's *Alice in Brexitland* is much more overtly partisan. Following the original storyline of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the spoof begins with a tired, bored, modern-day (yet still somehow explicitly Victorian) Alice sitting with her sister and finding the non-picture books unappealing: "[W]hat is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?" both Lewis and Leavis Carroll ask (Carroll 7; Leavis Carroll 1). Alice is then distracted from her imaginings by a white rabbit named David Camerrabbit, who is muttering about being late, but this time, his lateness is linked to 23 June. In following the Camerrabbit, Alice thus begins her adventures "[d]own the Brexit-hole" (Leavis Carroll 5). The fantasies of consumption – "DRINK ME" and "EAT ME" (Lewis Carroll 10, 12) – are subverted into the consumerist "READ ME" with reference to the *Daily Murdoch* (Leavis Carroll 7), a clear parody of the *Sun*, known for propagating fear and Euromyths. As she reads, Alice's fury makes her grow; and she only returns to her normal size by reading the *Gordian* (aka the *Guardian*), though it too is criticized for its "tiny" print and "smug" tone (11-12).

In her adventures, she encounters various topsy-turvy, nonsensical, yet recognizable political figures, including the hookah-smoking "Corbyn-pillar"; the "Cheshire Twat" (Farage), who, along with his smile, disappears after the referendum; "Tweedleboz" and "Tweedlegove" (Johnson and Gove); "The Queen of Heartlessness" (Theresa May); and three playing cards in judges' periwigs – meant to represent Lord Chief Justice Baron Thomas of Cwmgiedd, Head of Civil Justice Sir Terence Etherton, and Lord Justice of Appeal Sir Philip Sales – blocking the road to Article 50. She is also literally cat-apulted by the Cheshire Twat over the Atlantic Ocean, where she meets "Trumpty-Dumpty" on his golden wall and his mad Tea Party supporters, wearing their "Make

America Great Again” baseball caps (until they don KKK headdresses). Even the caucus race occurs in the form of a bizarre conversation with forest animals – with the exotic animals of John Tenniel’s illustrations and the original text conspicuously replaced by animals indigenous to Britain, such as the cock, the hedgehog, the fox, and the duck – where Alice is accused of being an illegal immigrant who has swum to their forest and is now “on benefits” (18). As in the original, *Brexitland*’s Alice attempts to anchor herself in her knowledge by trying to recite basic rhymes and failing, and by continually asking other characters the way.

Within its Victorian context, Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland is a magical, nonsensical realm that also encapsulates a kind of Britishness in its representation of tea-drinking, imperialism, class-values, and childhood education – albeit in a disordered way. As Gillian Avery writes, “[h]owever far Alice wanders through Wonderland or Looking-Glass Country, she is constantly reminded of things she has learned, but always in a gloriously muddled way, which makes the real subjects seem equally nonsensical” (325). In so doing, imagination makes the inconceivable conceivable, but there is no lesson to be learned from waking up. However, in the case of its parody, while real subjects remain nonsensical, imagination in the form of delusion is the cure, making *Alice in Brexitland* a moral tale in a way that the original is not. Upon awakening, Alice now seeks to educate herself, asking her sister: “May I read your book? [...] The one about the EU? At first I thought it looked horribly dull, for it had no pictures or conversations, but now I realise I should like to understand the subject” (99).

There is an even further departure in Leavis Carroll’s text, because Alice’s delusions are presented as realities when she awakens. Rousing herself with a yell, Alice returns to her own sensible world, where Remain has prevailed at 99% of the vote; Hillary Clinton is President; and neither Prince, Alan Rickman, nor David Bowie has died (98-99). Alice realizes “she had been wrong to wish away facts and figures, for [...] [t]hat road led to Brexitland, and [...] to live there permanently would be a nightmare” (99). However, as she wanders away, Alice sees the smiling Cheshire Cat in her alleged reality, leaving Alice to wonder: “Am I in a sane world dreaming of madness, or a mad world dreaming of sanity?” (100). This conclusion presents a bleak contrast to the charming original, where Alice’s sister half dreams herself in Wonderland while gazing at the sleeping Alice – “[s]o she sat on with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again and all would change to dull reality” (Lewis Carroll 98) – since Alice’s dreams in *Brexitland* were clearly a nightmare, and “dull

reality” is, in fact, topsy-turvy. In Lewis Carroll, there is a clear line drawn between the fictional wonderland and the adult world; however, Leavis Carroll represents this madness and Alice’s helplessness as a Leaving reality that is disorienting for adult and child alike. In this sense, he subverts the nostalgia for childhood – “for little Alice and all her wonderful Adventures” (Lewis Carroll 98) – and dismantles it into a delusion, a “struggle to engage,” and “impoten[ce]” (Leavis Carroll 101).

Just as *Alice in Brexitland* and the Brexit version of the *Famous Five* represent parodies of two different types of British literary mythologies, so too does *The Story of Brexit* appeal to a very particular audience because of the special place occupied by the Ladybird series within the British psyche. Of the three, the Ladybird series is likely the least well-known outside of Britain, so the following paragraphs will address the publication and reception history of the original series in order to bring the parody into sharper relief.

Lawrence Zeegen – author of *Ladybird by Design*, one of only two monographs on the Ladybird phenomenon and a respected expert in the field – describes the special place attributed to the Ladybird books by the British reading public:

Now undeniably considered a national treasure, Ladybird Books have a place in the nation’s psyche; our collective memories hold dear the influence of these charming books. A Ladybird book evokes strong feelings; deep-rooted memories of a time and a place when a simply designed and cheaply produced book could resonate across generations of readers. (8-11)

The “simply designed” Ladybird book is a well-known trademark, and the Ladybird parodies take full advantage of the nostalgia associated with its familiar format. Measuring 11.5 cm by 8 cm, the 52-56-page hardcover book features a colour illustration on the recto and, on the verso, text in a sans-serif font that closely resembles very neat handwritten (non-cursive) print. This typeface is particularly fitting, considering the Ladybird’s publication and reception history, where the *Key Words Reading Scheme* series (colloquially known as the “Peter and Jane books”) were even used as elementary school primers in the 1960s.

Although the first book in the series was a Beatrix Potter-esque story called *Bunnikin’s Picnic Party* (1940), the Ladybird books had their heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, with series titles such as “Historical Figures,” “How it Works,” “People at Work,” “Keywords,” “The Ladybird Book of,” and “The Story of.” The books were, and still are, a staple in British and Commonwealth households and are often “credited with [having] introduc[ed] reading skills to millions of children worldwide” (Duthie).

In fact, by the time Wills & Hepworth, the original Loughborough-based publishers of the series, was sold in 1972 to Penguin Random House, “about 500 different Ladybirds had been published, observing everyday life in postwar Britain and demystifying it with words and pictures that anyone could understand. In 1946, annual sales were 24,000; by 1971 they had reached 20m” (Day, “How Ladybird”).

The aforementioned “deep-rooted memories” of “time and place” (Zeegen 8-11) are also firmly entrenched in nostalgia and represent the deeply ideological nature of the series. As Malcolm Clark writes, “[f]or anyone under the age of 50, a glance at an old Ladybird book is a peek into a lost age of innocence” (40). However, for those who lived during the peak popularity of the Ladybird books, they also voiced what Zeegen refers to as an “overtly British view of the world” based on its status as an empire:

At a time when the British empire had yet to decline and the combined colonies still represented one-fifth of the world’s population, Ladybird’s overtly British view of the world was one that reflected a nation growing in confidence and prosperity following the end of the Second World War. If a Ladybird book were to have had a voice, it would most likely have sounded like a radio or TV Presenter from the 1950s or 1960s, with every syllable articulated precisely, every expression nuanced perfectly and every sentence grammatically impeccable. (Zeegen 216)

Given that the time after the Second World War is often seen as the death knell of the British Empire, Zeegen’s categorization of this time as its zenith is confusing for a non-British reader. However, further nationalistic statements about their status as a symbol of British prosperity pepper Zeegen’s complete history of the imprint in *Ladybird by Design* as well as his interviews with Britain’s leading newspapers. Some striking examples of Zeegen’s nationalism include his description of the tone of the books as “that of a friendly teacher, an older guiding brother or sister, a knowledgeable uncle or aunt: never patronizing, always optimistic and forever British” (216); the declaration that the “editorial approach” of the books “reflected the views that the nation had of itself: proud to be British, and proud to entertain and educate children” (217); or his description of the “quintessentially British” tone of the books:

The Ladybird tone of voice was authoritative, but never condescending. Ladybird language was open and honest, nurturing and caring, down-to-earth, yet also aspirational. Quintessentially British, but with truly global ap-



peal, Ladybird was a trusted British brand akin to the BBC, Rolls-Royce and Marks & Spencer. (7)

A large part of the overall image attached to the Ladybird books which made it such a “British brand” was the use of artwork from “the top commercial artists and illustrators of their day” (42). For example, Harry Wingfield, who was the artist behind the Peter and Jane series, was known for having created the “distinctive look” of the series: “bright primary colours, blue skies, cotton-wool clouds and children running around, limbs akimbo, when they weren’t trying to mend kites or conduct wide-eyed experiments on miniature pulleys” (Clark 40). These images have grown to encapsulate this readership’s nostalgic image of a simpler time.

As for the subject matter of the Ladybird books, the project was intended to spark the curiosity of a young reader and inspire them to pursue easily digestible knowledge in literary form. As Clark phrases it:

[O]nce you had learned to read, you could move on to a panoply of different subjects, each featured in its own dedicated little tome, from the lives of biographical figures such as Captain Scott or Robert the Bruce, to significant moments in history, such as the civil war. (41)

Importantly, these significant moments are firmly rooted in British history and, more specifically, in the glorification of Britain. Looking at the Ladybird history of *Captain Cook*, for example, in the treatment of the indigenous peoples, the text accompanying a picture of ‘peace-loving’ Captain Cook and his men brutally shooting and killing the Maoris reads:

Unfortunately, [the Maoris] were also hostile when Cook went ashore, and the first landing resulted in a skirmish. Cook tried again, with a similar result. When he had himself rowed round the bay to look for a place where they could land unopposed, they were attacked by warriors in canoes and had to open fire in self defence. (Humphris 29)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This 1980 version of *Captain Cook* is a revision – both in text and in illustration – of the 1958 version, which pictures an even more violent altercation, and the caption reads: “Here he [Captain Cook] was attacked by some of the natives, called Maoris, and was obliged to fire on them in self defence. Cook always treated natives well, and it was unfortunate that he was on this occasion forced to take such action” (qtd. in Orestano 15-16).

This is the second of three images of indigenous peoples being fired upon: earlier in the book, Cook and the British also kill First Nation Canadians (15) and again the shooting that led to Cook's death in Hawaii is pictured (50). The other representation of the relations between the British and indigenous peoples is shown in Cook's reception in Maui as an accidental god (49), which is also featured as the first page's titular image of the book (1). In terms of tone – alleged to be “authoritative, but never condescending [...] open and honest, nurturing and caring, down-to-earth, yet also aspirational” (Zeegen 7) – these violent conflicts are watered down to diminishing descriptors such as “skirmish” (Humphris 29) and “scuffle” (50).

Critics such as Caroline Lowbridge have acknowledged some of these problems in the Ladybird books for a twenty-first-century readership, which persist even though the images were updated in the 1970s in view of their noticeable sexism:<sup>2</sup> as Lowbridge states, one would think that “women do all the housework”; “men do the important work”; “only Britain shaped the world”; “everyone in Britain is white”; British children played pretty dangerously; “mini computers are the size of a room”; Richard III was unilaterally a villain; nuclear power and oil are definitely good things (published pre Chernobyl); and, as seen from the “Travel Adventure” series, “the USA is full of ‘Cowboys and Indians’” (Lowbridge). Clark also gestures to the fashion of seeing Wingfield's Peter and Jane as “politically suspect”: “Supposedly, their passion for exercise as well as school uniforms has a little too much of the Teutonic, if you get my drift. Jane, smiling till her face ached, with a thatch of blonde (yes blonde) hair, is supposed to be nothing less than Riefenstahl for infants” (40). Zeegen counters these critiques with the *zeitgeist* defence:

Ladybird's portrayal of the wider world up until the 1970s was one that chimed with the views and thoughts of most people in Britain at the time.

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<sup>2</sup> Despite its status as a “national treasure,” the Ladybird series has received little critical attention. Aside from Zeegen's *Ladybird by Design*, there is only one other monograph on the series, Lorraine Johnson and Brian Alderson's *The Ladybird Story: Children's Book for Everyone*, which focuses primarily on the “rise, decline, and fall” of Wills & Hepworth Publishing (x). Outside of this, there are entries in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (“Easy Readers,” “Ladybird Books”) and some cultural critiques in newspapers and blogs (see Clark; Armistead; Lowbridge; Day). Other engagements are primarily labours of love devoted to curating collections and historical background (i.e., Helen Day's *Ladybird Fly Away Home* blog and Facebook pages), cataloguing the series (i.e., Nicole Else's *List of Standard-Sized Ladybird Books*), and particular artists (i.e., Frank Hampson and Martin Aitchison).



Whilst with the benefit of hindsight we might be tempted to re-enter Ladybird's world and critique the values of the day through the lens of the 21st century, it is worth remembering that just a few decades ago information on and empathy towards different cultures was not widely known [...] Britain's understanding of the world in the early 1960s was still resolutely based upon the notion of the British Empire. (173)

As Lowbridge also bluntly points out, "it's fair to say that if you only learnt your history through Ladybird books, you had a very British view of the world that pretty much said that Britain shaped it."

Like the Famous Five, the Ladybird series has also experienced a comic afterlife in the form of the "Ladybird Books for Grown Ups." The series pokes fun at aspects of adult life – such as *The Ladybird Book of the Hangover*, *Dating*, *The Hipster*, and *Mindfulness* – and are very clearly satires, with *The Story of Brexit* falling under this umbrella, despite its intention of functioning as a "stand-alone title" (Fox-Leonard). Also similar to *Five on Brexit Island*, the latter diverges from the subject matter of its other parodies (i.e., as opposed to *Five Give up the Booze*) by focusing on a political event rather than lifestyle choices. Adopting the original Ladybird tone of trying "to make the world easy-to-understand and unshocking" (Armistead), *The Story of Brexit* treads the fine line between escapist mockery and a genuine attempt, through humour and irony, to make sense of and come to terms with Brexit. This ambiguity is encapsulated by the juxtaposition of satirical text with original Ladybird artwork from the pictorial archive, to which the TV comedy writers Jason Hazeley and Joel Morris had full access. These latter-day images become their own instrument of pastiche: the acerbic content that matches the images make the pictures speak in a way that is completely other from their original context, while also highlighting the irony of the explanations: "The once cutting-edge illustrations ha[ve] become a gift for pastiche [...]. The fun of the series lies in the relationship of mid-20th-century iconography aimed at children to 21st-century comedy for adults" (Armistead).

While there is much fun to be had in reading texts like *The Story of Brexit* – and there are certainly points where the little volume is laugh-out-loud hilarious – the remainder of this essay is devoted to a close reading of this parody in light of its publication and cultural history. At the risk of dissecting the humour and moving away from the authors' stated intention of "just want[ing] people to have a giggle" (Fox-Leonard), I will examine the illustrations – the seemingly generic images

of everyday life from the 1960s and 1970s that idealize Britain,<sup>3</sup> which are still relevant when providing a political and social commentary of the 2016 campaign in *The Story of Brexit* – both in their original contexts and alongside Hazeley and Morris’ text, showing that the nostalgia that has made these books bestsellers can also reveal the roots of the ‘Take Back Control’ nostalgia that led to the Leave vote.

Despite Hazeley’s insistence that “it’s actually not that political” (Fox-Leonard), *The Story of Brexit* presents the stereotypes of the Brexit Leave campaign, using a deceptively simple tone that could either be seen as stark criticism or as a further propagation of the types of statements that infused the Leave campaign, depending on the reader. The first page of the “story” begins by assuring us that “Britain is a proud island. For centuries we stood alone. Now we stand alone again. Other countries, like Croatia and Spain, need to be part of Europe, because they are clearly cowards. But our country is special [...]. This is the future” (6). The second half of this statement is blatantly disingenuous, yet the ‘Britain stands alone’ and ‘being part of the EU indicates weakness’ mentality was omnipresent in the Leave campaign. Read alongside the archival illustrations, however, the irony becomes clearer: pictured next to this as a vision of the ‘future’ is an image of a sparsely populated early modern village, replete with thatch-roofed cottages, a steepled church, verdant fields dotted with sheep, and a horse-drawn carriage. By foregrounding their rootedness in a romanticized idyllic past, this image problematizes statements about the future and demonstrates the incongruity of envisioning the future as the past.

The apposition of the more recent past (the 1960s) with the realities of 2016 can also be seen in the following statement: “The British are known all over the world for keeping calm and Carry On films” (10). While very popular in the 1960s and 1970s, the *Carry On* franchise would not be considered the primary cinematic export of Britain today, though harkening to them matches the heyday of the Ladybird books. The other reference is most certainly to the 1939 “Keep Calm and Carry On” motivational poster: although it was not actually used during World War II (Hughes), its (re)discovery in 2000 has led to an intense meme afterlife which, though separate from the original stiff upper lip in the face of the Blitz message, is nevertheless one about keeping calm in the face of adversity. After lauding the British “sense of humour” and its

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<sup>3</sup> For a perspective on how faded British imperialism in the 1960s and 1970s affected childhood education (i.e., the imperial pink of the map) and the attitude towards the commonwealth, see Sally Tomlinson’s *Education and Race: From Empire to Brexit*.

“common sense,” this segment of the book concludes with the following ambiguous line, “Brexit has been Britain at its best” (10). Read in the ironic tone that was intended, this is clearly a self-deprecating statement; however, as seen in the ‘The People Have Spoken’ post-referendum headlines, Leave voters genuinely claimed that Brexit was British democracy at its best. Nevertheless, to make the irony clearer, facing this passage and its conclusion is a seemingly non-sequitur image of an English bulldog – known for its stubbornness and selective deafness – which is also a well-known image for representing British nationalism.

Often, the Ladybird books in “The Story Of” series present particular modes of British achievement, as can be seen with titles such as *Our Land in the Making*, *Homes and Houses*, and *The Story of the Railways: A Ladybird ‘Achievements’ Book*. Thus, it is worth pointing out that the spoof *The Story of Brexit*, which appears as a parody continuation of this series, is missing the “Achievements” component (on the title page or anywhere else in the book – an omission which is itself a comment), and in fact, the alleged British achievements that are mentioned are hilariously diminished into, for example, statements about a singly-run, booming British jam industry:

Evelyn makes lots of jam. The jam is sold all over the world. British jam is very popular. Brexit has made Evelyn’s job much easier. She can put whatever she likes in her jam and sell it to whomever she pleases. Without Evelyn’s jam, the British economy would collapse. (30)

This statement about Evelyn’s jam as the backbone of the British economy recalls the misinformed argument that voting to leave the EU was a way of supporting small, local businesses and circumventing unreasonable regulations from Brussels. Likewise, “[s]he can put whatever she likes in her jam” also highlights the removal of the EU regulations regarding health and safety, which is a common concern of Remain rhetoric. However, the content becomes more overtly caustic when read alongside the image of “Evelyn” making a large pot of jam that will fill five bottles as her son and daughter gaze on with a hazy mixture of joy and trepidation. The original image comes from *Uncle Mac’s ABC* (1950), and its context is “J is for Jam. We like Jelly better” (McCulloch 22-23).<sup>4</sup> Jam is not even the preferred condiment in this

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Helen Day of ladybirdflyawayhome.com for identifying the original sources of the images from *The Story of Brexit* (here and elsewhere in this essay).

situation! The jam/jelly debate aside, these images of a simpler past are clearly incongruous and delusional relative to Britain's future.

Small businesses are not the only aspect of the Brexit Leave campaign and the proliferation of Euromyths addressed. In addition to the restrictions placed by EU regulations on consumer products, *The Story of Brexit* also mentions "freedom bananas" (12), "[p]roject fear" (16), buses as a way of communicating important and reliable information to the masses (48), the disconnected financial backers behind the Leave campaign (26), the voter demographic and their belief that "foreign workers" are taking away desirable jobs from British people (36), the EU's "red tape" (34), and the deceptively simple ballot phrasing: "Being in the European Union is terribly complicated. Leaving it is terribly complicated too. Luckily the choice on the ballot paper did not look very complicated at all" (12). The authors also comment on the short-term aftermath of Brexit: the stockpiling of water "in the weeks leading up to the Brexit deadline" (48), "the Prime Minister's shed" (20), the corporate and market response to Brexit (38), the disillusion of Remainers (24, 28, 50), Leaving packages (here jokingly called "Concrete Brexit" [42]), concerns about dual nationality (44), and all this being "the will of the people" (18).

The references to the campaign are fairly clear and the accompanying images either serve to disrupt the text or highlight ironies. As shown above, one does not necessarily need to know the original source of the illustrations – and perhaps the average reader would not be able to recognize the images on sight and might even assume that it is new artwork in the style of the original Ladybirds (Day, "How It Works") – in order to read the image as a commentary on the text. However, knowing the source of the pictures provides additional intertextual insights. For example, on one page, the authors blandly point out the issues with the ballot and the information provided by the media: the choice to remain or leave "was something about freedom and bananas" (12). The corresponding image is a newspaper and magazine kiosk featuring advertising boards for the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Express*, and the *Daily Mirror* as well as a man in a business suit reading *The Times*. The illustration can be traced to *The Story of Newspapers* (1969), and the accompanying text from within that story is the following: "As we have seen, different newspapers appeal to different types of reader. A popular paper appeals to the majority of people, while a quality paper appeals to a more specialised reader" (Siddle 30). This statement acts as a conclusion to the stereotypes surrounding the readership attracted to each type of paper: according to Ladybird,

[o]ur national papers fall into two groups. Papers like the “Daily Express” are popular papers. They present their news in a bright, lively fashion, with easy-to-read articles and many photographs. Papers like “The Times” and “The Daily Telegraph” are called “heavy” or quality, papers. They emphasise the more serious subjects, and print longer articles about them. (6)

The *Daily Mirror* was originally “a paper for gentlewomen, written by gentlewomen” but due to lack of success, “was changed to a popular one” with equal prominence given to photographs and the news, making it “the first illustrated, halfpenny, daily newspaper” (24). By contrast, *The Times* is “a national institution” (20). As “the oldest national paper in Britain,” it has garnered “a reputation for accurate, unbiased reporting of news, and for thoughtful, unsensational comments. It is world-renowned for its excellent news services, particularly of foreign news” and is therefore the newspaper of choice for “leaders of opinion and other influential people” (20). This division between “heavy” and “popular” newspapers and the type of news covered was very clear in the lead-up to Brexit, with blatant partisanship voiced in the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*. Given that the Euromyth regarding the curvature of bananas can be traced to “popular” newspaper, the *Sun*, and that Boris Johnson during his stint with the “heavy” *Daily Telegraph* was also responsible for propagating many Euromyths, the role of newspapers in the lines “it was something about freedom and bananas” (Hazeley 12) extends beyond Euromyths to the media itself (see Evans and Ferguson).

Likewise, the divide between “heavy” and “popular” newspapers was also at the root of representations of the EU to the British voting public, with most of the Leave-leaning newspapers such as the *Sun* and *Daily Mail* appealing to “working class newspaper readers and those in casual or no employment” (Deacon et al.). Given that post-referendum coverage attributes the Leave victory to the unprecedented influence of the daily press and the misinformation contained therein (Martinson), the choice of an image from *The Story of Newspapers* enables a reading of the two texts alongside each other. This highlights that the problems of class readership and partisan politics long predate 2016, and can be traced all the way back to the advent of the newspaper. Thus, an analysis of the illustration from *The Story of Newspapers* reveals that the underlying Leave/Remain problems could even be more clearly discerned in the 1960s.

One of the many retractions that the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* had to publish was regarding the misrepresentation of European immigration



into the UK (Martinson). However, the issue of European workers taking away jobs from hard-working British citizens was one of the prejudices that informed the Leave campaign, and is reflected in *The Story of Brexit* as follows:

Vernon is not worried about foreign workers leaving. “British people can mop up in hospitals and supervise veterinary conditions in abattoirs and stand in fields picking beans,” he says. Vernon will not be doing those jobs himself, of course. He is 63. (Hazeley and Morris 36)

Supplemented by an image of a pipe-smoking man wearing a sports jacket and flat cap from *The Story of Cricket* (1965), we have a series of confused messages: the assumption that “foreign workers” in Britain only have unpalatable jobs like janitorial work, slaughterhouse inspection, or farm labouring; a contradictory narrative regarding the foreign workforce that is stealing supposedly ‘good jobs’ from British citizens; an odd understanding of the British economy; an account that is devoid of any mention of the EU; a statement on the voting demographic. On this one page alone, the volume addresses almost every issue at stake in a one-sided “story of Brexit.”

Another such example can be seen in the arrangement of a commentary about the “exciting new words” spawned by Brexit:

Brexit gave us lots of exciting new words, like brextremist, remoaner, bre-moaner, remaybe, breprehensible, remaintenance, brexorcist, remaidstone, brex-girlfriend, remange, brextortion, remayhem and bregret. The new words make it harder for foreigners to understand what we are saying. In a tough, new international business world, small advantages such as this can be crucial. (Hazeley and Morris 22)

To complement a series of words that were mostly *not* in fact Brexit neologisms, *The Story of Brexit* illustrates the above text with an image from the “Ladybird Keywords Reading Scheme Series,” 4C: *Say the Sound* (1965). The original purpose of the “Keywords Reading Scheme” was to introduce early readers to “commonly used words” in English, as is elaborated in the introduction to the keyword reader:

*Reading skill is accelerated if these important words are learned early and in a pleasant way.* The Ladybird Key Words Reading Scheme is based on these commonly used words. Those used most often in the English language are introduced first – with other words of popular appeal to children. All the Key Words list is covered in the early books, and the later titles use further word lists to develop full reading fluency. The total number of different words

which will be learned in the complete reading scheme is over one thousand. The gradual introduction of these words, frequent repetition and complete ‘carry-over’ from book to book will ensure rapid learning. (Murray 2-3)

The Peter and Jane illustrations that match these keywords are intended “to create a desirable attitude towards learning – by making every child *eager* to read each title” (3). Thus, in contrast to the stated purpose of easing children into reading with commonly used keywords that become the building blocks of communication, which is also one of the more recognizable uses of the original Ladybird books, *The Story of Brexit* showcases the absurdity and alienation of Brexit and its language.

Echoing the first page of the book’s “Britain is a proud island. For centuries we stood alone. Now we stand alone again” (6), *The Story of Brexit* ends with the same discourse of ‘Britain stands alone,’ as taken within the context of World War II, but this time, in contradistinction to its previous confidence, the story ends with a question:

When the Nazis flew over the white cliffs of Dover, Britain fought back bravely, with nobody to help except lots of pilots from Eastern Europe, Canada, Africa, the USA and the Caribbean. When we cracked the secrets of the Nazi Enigma code machine, we needed nothing but British ingenuity and a Nazi Enigma machine stolen for us by some Polish spies. We stood alone before. We can do it again – can’t we? (52)

The text draws upon archetypal images of empire by mentioning current and former colonies, the geopolitical borders of the white cliffs of Dover, and revealing the hypocrisy behind declarations of singlehanded wartime victories. These same inconsistencies are also present in the 1968 Ladybird *Kings and Queens, Book 2* – from which the adjacent image is taken – in the write-up on George VI taking the throne after Edward VIII’s abdication and therefore Britain’s role in World War II. The passage reads:

During [George VI’s] reign, the evil dictator of Germany, Adolph [sic] Hitler, broke all the promises which Germany made after the First World War, and treacherously invaded Poland. Germany had been secretly training an army and air force, and soon Hitler had conquered all western Europe. A British army was forced to retreat, and return to England from Dunkirk.

For a year Britain, inspired by one of the greatest men in our history, Winston Churchill, fought alone against Hitler’s Germany. London and many cities in England were heavily bombed. [...] Later, Russia became involved in the war against Germany, and also the United States of America



came in on our side – and so final victory was certain, though not without great suffering to many millions of people. (Du Garde Peach 48)

This idea of standing alone against oppression during World War II is often yoked to the British nostalgia which fuelled the Leave campaign:

From the phrase “take back control” to UKIP’s adoption of the Trumpesque “make Britain great again,” the call for Britain to leave the EU has been saturated with nostalgia. These slogans invoke a sense of our past so familiar that it seems to need no dates or references: they bring to mind the late-Victorian/Edwardian period, when most of the atlas was pink; they celebrate Britain’s courage and fortitude in the Second World War and its alliance with the US and USSR – the “other” superpowers at the time. In this story, membership of the EU emasculates Britain by rendering it equal to the European nations it liberated and defeated, affronting its hard-won status as a global power. (Newbigin)

*The Story of Brexit* revises the notion that the British army stood alone by also including members of the Commonwealth and Eastern Europe in its accounting. The writers seem to be aware that

this view of Britain’s past is a fantasy, not history. Brexiteers are nostalgic for something that never existed: a time when Britain was both a wartime hero and a powerful global force. The reality, however, is that Britain’s contribution to the allied war effort came at the price of its empire. (Newbigin)

Thus, this history, this achievement, is revealed to be a story of many fictions, with a very clear narrative slant. On the one hand, there is the Remain accusation that the Leave campaign pushed a nostalgic agenda “where passports were blue, faces were white and the map was coloured imperial pink” (Barber, quoting Vince Cable), while those who voted Leave argue that “what motivated Brexit voters was the belief that ‘we have watched our sovereignty systematically eroded in virtually every area of our national life,’ especially since the EU’s 1992 Maastricht treaty” (Barber, quoting Ian Moody). Both stories are represented in *The Story of Brexit*, and the parody of Ladybirds and the repurposing of archival illustrations dismantles generational assumptions about British national identity. Ending with this particular event ultimately hints at a view of British history and life that is devoid of achievement, where the people are presented as petty, bewildered, divided, and uncertain.

The authors of *The Story of Brexit* claim that their pastiches are “a love letter to the Ladybird books of our childhood, which might seem a strange thing to say when you’re writing about hangovers and mid-life

crises, but it works because, visually, it's a very colourful, happy, simplistic version of life" (Fox-Leonard). However, this simplicity encapsulates the disjunct between the nostalgic Britain of the Ladybird classics of the 1960s and 1970s, and the realities of 2016 highlighted by the juxtaposition of text and image. By examining the Ladybird series as a cultural phenomenon that is explicitly rooted in the British psyche as a 'national treasure,' or even a collective memory of a non-existent time, one can see ways in which the Leave campaign exploited this sense of nostalgia. As Dominic Cummings's character in *The Uncivil War* says: "So much of our understanding of who we are comes from this nostalgic view we have of our past. These stories, these myths we tell each other [...] the idea that we want to return to a time when we knew our place, when things made sense, fictional or not" (51:19-38). While they represent very different segments of reading for children, very different times, brows, and trajectories, the hypotexts of each of these Brexit parodies offer specific loci for this romanticized past: in *Alice in Wonderland*, published at the height of British imperialism; in *Five on a Treasure Island*'s function as an escapist fiction of a pre-Blitz Britain; and in the cotton-candy 1960s "notion of the [allegedly still-thriving] British Empire" (Zeegen 173) of the original Ladybird books. By identifying the source of nostalgia in childhood fantasy, and thus collapsing individual nostalgia into collective memory, these very different texts allow Brexit parodies to get at the visceral, affective level, on which many people made their referendum decision. By satirizing these texts and having them engage with "emergent political realities" (Shaw 16), they cross over into BrexLit and demonstrate how "the arguments before, during and after the referendum were – and are – arguments about culture" (Eaglestone 1). Thus, while *Five on Brexit Island*, *Alice in Brexitland*, and *The Story of Brexit* use humour to cope with the results of the 2016 referendum, they also demonstrate the ways in which nostalgia for an idealized past, as seen in the intertextual relationship of each of the parodies to their originals, gave rise to, and sustained, "the stories" and "the myths" of the Leave campaign.

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