

# The Safe House

a film by  
Lee Whitmore

A  
NATIONAL  
INTEREST  
PROGRAM



## Teachers Notes





## Synopsis

It's the summer of 1954 and seven-year-old Lee Whitmore and her friends are drifting through the holidays, exploring their quiet suburban neighbourhood where nothing ever seems to happen...until the day mysterious strangers move in with the old lady next door.

No one explains the odd comings and goings, the big black cars, the men in suits and hats, the overheard snippets of conversation. But that doesn't stop the children from imagining.

Lee makes sense of what she can, aided by half-understood scraps of radio news and blurry photographs on the front pages of the newspaper.

Only many years later did she learn that the strangers were Russian defectors in hiding from the KGB and in fear for their lives.

**The Safe House** is a half-hour animation based on a true story—a young girl's perspective of one of the most talked about moments in Australia's history—the real-life spy drama known as the Petrov Affair.

The film effortlessly evokes memories of childhood and a sense of a time passed as award-winning animator Lee Whitmore highlights the fragility of the safe little world she lived in—as innocent of the larger world as Australia itself seemed half a century ago.

## Curriculum links

Curriculum links for **The Safe House** include SOSE/HSIE, History, English and Media.

## After watching

What do you recall from viewing the program?

- Who is narrating the story?
- At the beginning of the film, why are the children's eyes 'glued to the tunnel'?
- List the four news items heard during the first radio broadcast presented in the film.
- Who is Leo Carter, and what is his profession?
- Describe the construction of the backyard swimming pool. Who constructed it?
- Why are some of the children afraid of entering the cave? Why do they all get a fright?
- Name Australia's prime minister, as mentioned in the film's second radio broadcast. What were the events on 3 April 1954 that he informed the House of Representatives about?
- Why is Lee crying, and how does Mrs Davis react to this?
- Why is Ted seen wearing a suit?
- What is the name of the on-the-spot reporter at Mascot Airport, and what, in your own words, is he describing?

- Soon after the situation at Mascot Airport, who are the men arriving at Mrs Warby's house, and why have they arrived?
- Why is Mrs Petrov so distressed in Mrs Warby's backyard and garage?
- What is the game the children play in Lee's bedroom, and what is its connection to the visitor next door?
- How does Mrs Davis interpret Mrs Warby's car accident? Arising from this accident, what is her attitude towards Leo, Mrs Warby's son-in-law?
- Where was Bonny Carter's postcard sent from, and why?
- What is the nickname Ted and Mrs Warby have for Evdokia Petrov, and why?
- Why did firemen knock on the Whitmores' door?
- Why were the Whitmores the first family to leave the street?
- When the Petrovs disappeared from Mrs Warby's home, where did they go?
- What impression do you have of the Petrovs from the closing scene?

## What happened in 1954?

Although **The Safe House** takes place in a very specific, suburban setting during a brief time in 1954, it constantly draws upon a background of genuine national and international events, often obliquely heard on a radio or seen in the on-screen pages of a newspaper or magazine. With the exception of what came to be known as the Petrov Affair, which we will look at later, perhaps we should build up a picture of what else was happening during that year both in Australia and around the world. (Note: History teachers in particular could choose to undertake this as part of a decade study.)

- In pairs, select for research one of the following events that took place during 1954. Prepare and present a poster display about the topic, incorporating it into a brief, informative talk to the class. Be prepared for a question and answer discussion to follow your pair's presentation.

**January** The United States Navy launches the first nuclear-powered submarine, the *Nautilus*.

**February** Jonas Salk's polio vaccine first used on children.

**March** 1200 children arrive at the Melbourne Cricket Ground to greet Queen Elizabeth during her first tour of Australia.

United States explodes hydrogen bomb at Bikini Atoll—Japanese fishermen burnt.

**April** Bill Haley's *Rock Around the Clock* released.

**May** Communist China granted entry to the 1956 Olympic Games; Nationalist China walks out.

French defeated at battle of Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam.

Roger Bannister breaks four-minute mile barrier.

**July** First jet air passenger flight for Boeing 707.

'Gelignite Jack' wins Redex trial.

Elvis Presley records his first single.

**August** Indonesia and Holland sever political ties.

Part One of *Lord of the Rings*, by J.R.R. Tolkien, published.

**September** Australia's first uranium treatment plant opens.

**December** British Petroleum Company (BP) is formed, owning part of Iran's oil supplies.

- Selecting either the topic you have researched, or one of the others listed above, write a short fiction story, drawing from the topic in any way you wish, and in any style of presentation (e.g. standard first- or third-person narrator, diary, journal, log book, report or letter etc). You may wish to add illustrations for presentation in a magazine or on a website.

## The Cold War

The events depicted in **The Safe House** about Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov took place during an era of international politics now known as the Cold War. The Cold War began about two years after World War Two finished in 1945, and continued until the collapse of communism in the Russian-controlled Soviet Union (or USSR) during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

For much of this time the entire world lived under the threat of open warfare between the two opposing ways of life, or ideologies, of Soviet Russia and the United States of America, and their respective allies. It was a time of mass paranoia, government and news media propaganda, mutual suspicion, fear of invasion, covert spying on each other, the proliferation and testing of nuclear weapons, and the consequent terror of the spread of airborne nuclear fallout contributing to genetic deformities of plants, animals and human life over much of the planet. As we see in **The Safe House**, Australia, a strong ally of America, became caught up in this Cold War mentality, and fearful of the spread of communism even into this 'safe' corner of the world.

- Research the Cold War from the 1940s to the early 1990s in order to draw a timeline of important events. Include the Petrov Affair and nuclear testing in Australia. You may also need to provide additional explanatory notes on some details such as the building and eventual removal of the Berlin Wall, and the Cuban missile crisis.

- Research and write an informative essay-style article about Australia's role in providing Great Britain and the United States with nuclear testing and military satellite communications facilities during the Cold War era. (See Film/TV Resources: *Fortress Australia* and *Welcome to Woomera*.)

- There are many fiction films that either deal directly with the Cold War (e.g. *Dr Strangelove*, *Fail Safe*) or indirectly, through metaphor (e.g. science fiction titles such as *The Thing From Another Planet* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). Find a range of titles that deal directly with the Cold War. As a class, select and view one of these films, then discuss the ways in which it looks at Cold War issues and events. Include discussion on whether you would regard the film as presenting a 'propaganda' viewpoint and message to the audience (see website reference for propaganda).

- Following on from the previous activity, choose one film that deals indirectly, through metaphor, with the Cold War. Imagining you are writing for a popular magazine for teenagers, draft your own review of the film, discussing the ways in which you'd consider it a Cold War story.

- Taking into account the concept, from previous activities, of 'Cold War mentality', discuss in class the possibilities for fiction story plots, characters, settings and genre, then write your own Cold War paranoia short story. It may be presented in any genre (e.g. military, spy thriller, science fiction, horror), and it may draw directly on historical events or be presented as a metaphor.

## The Petrov Affair

It may have seemed to the Australian public to be a sudden international event—as presented in **The Safe House**—but behind the scenes ASIO spies had for some time been urging Vladimir Petrov to defect from the Soviet Embassy in Canberra, and to bring with him documents about Australian citizens who had allegedly been supplying the Soviets with sensitive national secrets. In an era of paranoia and suspicion, the political, social and even Christian sectarian fallout in Australia was considerable long after the Petrovs faded from view. As the film suggests, for years the Petrovs went from one 'safe house' to another in an effort to evade being tracked down by Soviet operatives.

- Draw up an annotated timeline after researching the history of the Petrov defection case and its long-term aftermath. Include reference to the 1954 federal general election, the royal commission to investigate evidence of espionage in Australia, the split in the Australian Labor Party and the formation of the Democratic Labor Party, and the role played in Australia by clergy and high-ranking lay members of the Roman Catholic church.

- Working in pairs, research and prepare either a set of web pages or display posters about the roles played by the Australian prime minister, Robert Menzies, and the Leader of the Opposition, Dr H.V. Evatt, during the Petrov Affair. This should include information about important statements made by both politicians in Parliament, and an appraisal as to whether the affair influenced or affected their later careers.
- Examine the powers, purpose and activities of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and how its members are recruited and trained, then discuss in class its relevance and role in contemporary Australian society.
- The Petrov Affair was one chapter in the world-wide Cold War, where spies operating in one country, often under the guise of being diplomats or journalists, were busy collecting secrets about that country and its political allies, and passing them back to their own governments. In turn, these foreign agents were spied upon by local spies! It was all very murky. Write a short story, or a script for a radio play, about an ASIO agent operating within Australia. It may be set during the time of the Petrov spy affair, or at a later time.
- Listen again to Gary O'Callaghan's vivid on-the-spot radio report of Mrs Petrov being taken by Soviet couriers to a plane at Mascot Airport in Sydney, and view photographs or film of the scene. Draft a reconstruction of the same scene through the immediate thoughts and feelings, in stream-of-consciousness style, of one of the couriers. This will require imagining the drama of the events depicted from an entirely different point of view. Using additional crowd sound effects as background, record your dramatic 'private' narration for playback. You may wish to discuss in class whether you found it easy or not to create sympathy for the courier's viewpoint.
- Examine the final scene of **The Safe House** again, and judge for yourself Evdokia Petrov's feelings and thoughts as she disappears into history. Using this as a starting point, imagine you are Mrs Petrov, moving from house to house through the Australian suburbs. Write one or more letters back home to family and friends, knowing that all the time you'll probably never see them again, and that, in any case, the letters will never be posted.

## Film, storytelling, memory and imagining the past

The Safe House raises questions not only about the use of film animation to represent important events in history, but of the ways in which the past may be documented, understood and interpreted through a mix of fact, archival media records, personal imagination, memory and viewpoint. We may also ask questions about the extent of 'artistic licence', or creative freedom, taken by the filmmaker in recreating this vision in story format.

- An introductory caption in **The Safe House** announces that it is 'a true story'. Can an animated film present a 'true' story? How much of the film can we accept to be 'true' or accurate without us having to research the past? Discuss these questions in class.
- According to Lee it took her four years from beginning to end to make **The Safe House**. Using specific scenes as examples, draw up a chart of both the advantages and disadvantages of making **The Safe House** as an animated rather than a live-action film using real actors and locations.
- Discuss in class the changes to scripting or presentation that might be necessary if **The Safe House** were produced as a live-action film. Choose and write a summary of one scene in the animated film, and a description of the changes you would make if it were presented as live action. Are there any scenes you would regard as impossible or at least extremely difficult to present live?
- Write your opinions as to the purpose served, and the effect achieved, by converting the famous archival newsreel film of Mrs Petrov at Mascot Airport into an animation sequence of digitised illustrations.
- Whose viewpoint do we experience in **The Safe House**? Is the point of view 'objective' or 'subjective', seen from the emotional perspective of an uninvolved, outside spectator or from a more personal angle? Discuss in small groups then write an informative analysis of the following, drawing attention to specific examples:
  - The role played by the unseen voice-over narrator, the adult version of Lee Whitmore, in contrast to her on-screen presentation.
  - Visual viewpoint—the use of high and low perspective to create both a child's and an adult's viewpoint.
  - The purpose and effect of the soundtrack music on the viewing audience.
- Discuss then write your own responses about the purpose of the following scenes of narrative imagery regarding the children in **The Safe House**, and their relevance to the story of the Petrovs and/or the Cold War:
  - The incident in the cave.
  - The incident of Lee's shoe.
  - The incident of the child locked in the cupboard.
  - The incident of the fire.
- In pairs plan and write a 30-second radio promotion for a TV screening of **The Safe House**. With other students, and the use of background music and sound effects if necessary, record the promotion as a sound file for a website or a CD, or on audio cassette for playback.



- Create an animation flip book, or, if you have the means, an animated computer GIF file, based on any scene or incident in **The Safe House**—for example, a child’s-eye view of ‘the mysterious man’ suddenly appearing full-frame in the cave. You may also wish to create a reaction shot showing a reverse point of view.
- Imagine you have been asked to write a general film review of **The Safe House**, of about 350–400 words, for either a magazine aimed at teenagers, or a youth-oriented arts website. Write your review, give it a star rating, and present your results in either of these two media formats.
- Plan a script for a short animation scene based on your memories of an incident from your own childhood, and create a storyboard of simple illustrations for camera shots.

## References and further resources

Please note this listing is not exhaustive.

### Books

*Chronicle of the 20th Century*, Chronicle Australia, Ringwood, Victoria, 1990

Ursula Dubosarsky, *The Red Shoe*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 2006

Nance Lui Fyson, *The 1950s*, B.T. Batsford Ltd, London, 1990

Derek Heater, *The Cold War*, Wayland, 1989

Kit Laybourne, *The Animation Book: A Complete Guide to Animated Filmmaking—From Flip Books to Sound Cartoons to 3-D Animation*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 1998

Stella Lees and June Senyard, *The 1950s: How Australia Became a Modern Society, and Everyone Got a House and Car*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1987

Michelle Lonsdale, *Liberating Women: The Changing Lives of Australian Women Since the 1950s*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997

Robert Manne, *The Petrov Affair*, Text Publishing, 2004

David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film*, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999

Michael Thwaites, *Truth Will Out: ASIO and the Petrovs*, Collins, 1980

### Film/TV

Peter Butt (director), *Fortress Australia*, Film Australia, 2002

Stanley Hawes (director), *The Queen in Australia*, Film Australia, 1954

Phillip Noyce (director), *Newsfront*, Roadshow, 1978

Steve Thomas (director), *Welcome to Woomera*, Film Australia, 2004

### Websites

Make an animation flip book:

[www.abc.net.au/creaturefeatures/make/flipbook.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/creaturefeatures/make/flipbook.htm)

Animated GIFs:

[www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/how-to-make-an-animated-gif/](http://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/how-to-make-an-animated-gif/)

Storyboards:

[www.public.iastate.edu/~nielandj/SCM/anatomySB.html](http://www.public.iastate.edu/~nielandj/SCM/anatomySB.html)

Propaganda—what is it?:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Propaganda>

The Cold War—definitions and links:

<http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/cold-war-history>

Cold War films and fiction:

<http://alphahistory.com/coldwar/cold-war-propaganda/>

Films of the Cold War 1948–1990: [http://research.umbc.edu/~london/Local\\_Information\\_Files/Films%20of%20the%20Cold%20War.htm](http://research.umbc.edu/~london/Local_Information_Files/Films%20of%20the%20Cold%20War.htm)

Filmsite—science fiction films:

[www.filmsite.org/sci-films.html](http://www.filmsite.org/sci-films.html)

Lee Whitmore—director’s interview in **The Safe**

**House** press kit: [www.filmaust.com.au/programs/default.asp?](http://www.filmaust.com.au/programs/default.asp?content=program_display&sn=8637)

[content=program\\_display&sn=8637](http://www.filmaust.com.au/programs/default.asp?content=program_display&sn=8637)

### Nuclear, missile and rocket testing in Australia

Woomera on the web:

<http://homepage.powerup.com.au/~woomera>

Australian Nuclear Veterans Association:

[http://anva.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=55&catid=34](http://anva.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=55&catid=34)

### The Petrov Affair

ozhistorybytes—Issue Eight, ‘Mrs. Petrov’s Shoes’ by Peter Cochrane (access article via National Centre for History Education): [www.hyperhistory.org](http://www.hyperhistory.org)

Old Parliament House—The Petrov Affair Online (includes webquest ‘A Nation in Fear?’):

<http://petrov.moadoph.gov.au/>

## The Safe House

A Film Australia National Interest Program.

Produced in association with SBS Independent.

Writer/Director: Lee Whitmore

Producer: Denise Haslem

Executive Producer: Anna Grieve

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For information about Film Australia Collection programs contact:

**National Film and Sound Archive of Australia**

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