

## **HOBART LAUNCH OF *LOFTY'S MISSION* by CBCA (Tasmania) President Judy Moss**

If you know Krista Bell like I do, you will understand it when I say that she is an animal fanatic. Just get her talking about her beloved dogs, Phantom and Storm, and you're in for the long haul! To me, it's not surprising that her latest book (her 22<sup>nd</sup>) focuses on another animal, in particular, a bird. In fact, this is her third published offering about a pigeon!

Back in 1997, Krista presented us with *Pidge*, illustrated by Ann James. This was a delightful, warm account of a boy's adoption of an orphaned pigeon and its eventual return to the wild.

And now, eleven years later, we have *Lofty's mission*. Krista, I believe that, in this book, you have raised the whole pigeon thing to a new, impressive, accomplished level.

This is not just a warm, engaging story; it has so much to offer on so many accounts. It is an amazing slice of little-known Australian wartime history, presented sincerely, authentically and sensitively.

Krista, I congratulate you, your illustrator David Miller, your publisher Hachette Children's Books, and everyone concerned, on bringing together this beautiful book.

Let's have a closer look.

On the first page of the book, Harley's Dad, Frank, sets off to deliver Harley's favourite baby homing pigeon, Squeaker #371 (Lofty) to the Australian Army.

The use of homing pigeons to carry messages during the Second World War in New Guinea was news to me, though I knew this had happened in war zones overseas. In fact, this led me to do some research of my own, and I discovered that,

*As the Australian Corps of Signals had the responsibility of supplying communications to the Army, it was decided to incorporate the Pigeon Service within this Corps. The new Service was known as the Australian Corps of Signals Pigeon Service.*

Krista mentions that

*between 1942 and 1943, home breeders like Charlie Morris from Braybrook, Victoria, donated more than 13,000 baby pigeons or squeakers to the Army for training.*

The use of animals in warfare is known to us all, but we tend to hear about dogs, for example, or something like Simpson's Donkey comes to mind.

In 1943, an English woman, Maria Dickin, instituted a Bravery Award named after her, for animals involved in war service. Lofty's story is truly heroic, and I suspect that it could be based on the following case, records of which are to be found at the Australian War Memorial:

*Blue chequer cock No. 879: Q Loft No. 5 of 1st Australian Pigeon Section, attached to the US forces, Manus Island. 5th April 1944. Awarded the Dickin Medal (also known as "the animals' VC") for gallantry, carrying a message through heavy fire, thereby bringing relief to a Patrol surrounded and attacked by the enemy without other means of communication.*

Krista's narrative is authentic and convincing; all the details about training procedures involved with pigeon husbandry are subtly included, and described and interwoven throughout the text. If you still don't understand, there is a fantastic glossary at the back of the book.

But there's another narrative thread which winds its way through the book: Harley contracts poliomyelitis. People of my age are very well aware of the historical significance of this within our own community, as some of us would have attended primary school with children in calipers as a result of infantile paralysis in the 1940s.

But I think the overwhelming impression of the book is that of relationships, such as the strong family ties between Harley and his parents – and text and illustrations work together beautifully to convey the strong family unit.

But most important is how Krista communicates that bond which defines and emphasises our humanity: the special bond and mutual dependence between human and animal, shared here between Harley and Lofty and expressed through Harley's pride and love of the bird. Krista is writing from the heart here!

The style of the text is straightforward and uncluttered, (Read extract)

Even more important in such a fine example of the picture book genre, the text is superbly enhanced and supported by David Miller's fabulous paper sculptures.

(Show favourite)

And look at these gorgeous end papers!

What a great combination of author and illustrator!

Krista, on behalf of us all here tonight, I wish you well with this book. I think that, within its pages, you have surely demonstrated your passion, your skill and your dedication as a writer. You have taught us about an important but little-known part of our country's history, and in doing this you have remained true to your aspirations of good writing and respect for the reader.

May **Lofty's Mission** have many, many readers!! Well done, girl.

Judy Moss

Speech to launch **Lofty's Mission** at Hobart Bookshop

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