

BOOK REVIEW in Buzz Words, April 2008

Picture book

Lofty's Mission by Krista Bell Illus. by David Miller
(Lothian Children's Books/Hachette)

HB \$28.99 Ages: 5 +

Reviewed by Hilary Smillie

Lofty's Mission is the unusual story of a homing pigeon sent as a baby bird (squeaker) to be trained to carry secret messages for the Australian army during the Second World War.

Harley, Lofty's breeder, is heartbroken when he has to give up Lofty, his best squeaker for the war effort. The boy's dreams of Lofty becoming a champion racer are dashed. Instead, Lofty's identity is changed to Number 371. He is sent up to North Queensland to be trained, using peas as a reward, to return to the safety of his mobile pigeon loft.

His training over, Lofty is sent to New Guinea where he saves an ambushed platoon by flying with a message through enemy gunfire. Wounded, he presses on to complete his mission.

Meanwhile, Harley has succumbed to polio and after hospitalisation, returns to recover at home. A parcel containing a medal arrives. Lofty has been awarded a medal for gallantry. Harley thinks Lofty has died, but his Dad is quick to assure him that this is not true. Lofty is alive but unable to fly and will be discharged from the army.

When Lofty returns, Harley uses him as a stock bird and the story ends with Lofty's progeny, Nifty, fulfilling Harley's dream of owning a champion racing pigeon.

David Miller's amazing paper sculptures support this lovely story. At first glance I felt the illustrations lacked movement, but once I understood they were actually sculpted from paper, with intricate creases and finely executed detail, I quickly appreciated the talent of the artist. Couldn't help wondering, though, if Dad's pants on the last page are slung too low for the 'forties period. I recall men's trousers were belted around the middle or even higher! Nevertheless, the illustrations and storyline beautifully complement each other, lending a feeling of more simple and genuine times.

This picture book will expose primary age children to a little known aspect of Australian Army history well worth revealing. A glossary at the end of the story supplies further interesting details about homing pigeons and how they were used in the war. This is a very appealing read.