

## **Review of *The Messenger Bird* by Dr Philip Payton**

I read *The Messenger Bird* over the Christmas/New Year break, and I want to congratulate you on a first-class 'read' - it has to be your best yet! I hugely enjoyed it (as Emma Bennett says, the best books for young people also appeal to adults too), and I was greatly impressed by how you structured the book and handled the story. The underlying 'event', Trystan's death in a car crash, is topical and timely and calculated to catch the attention of youthful (and older!) readers. Having grabbed that attention, there is no going back - we want to know what happens next. And you treat your youthful characters with an insight and authenticity that rings true - dialogue, motives, thoughts, preoccupations (including a hint of sex interest, without being prurient) are all absolutely convincing. There are some 'Australialianisms' that are a nice touch - 'arvo', 'ocker' and so on - which add atmosphere, and if they puzzle non-Australian readers will spur them to do a little research. I also, of course, enjoyed the Kapunda setting - and again, those who don't know the South Australian context (historical or contemporary) will be intrigued to find out more.

I thought the 'three voice' device to develop the plot worked beautifully - Tamar/Tamara, Gavin, and Nathaniel's time - allowing each to take centre stage in turn, and allowing vivid links between the three, the medium being Tamar/Tamara, of course. The ever present Cornish theme is well done but not overdone - it was an inspirational touch to give Tamar Asian as well as Cornish heritage, indicating the complexity of contemporary Australian multicultural diversity and avoiding any whiff of ethnic exclusivity. The deployment of Cornish folklore was also extremely well done, infusing the story with a mysticism that continues to intrigue until the final denouement - and so too the juxtaposition with Aboriginal/Australian lore. There's much else that is attractive - the way Bobby is 'stitched up' after Emily's death, for example, is a window for young people today into the mistreatment and misunderstanding of the Aboriginal population. And the character of Phillip, as well as playing an important role in allowing the story to develop, posits disability as an everyday and normal part of life, with the strong message that disabled people have as much to contribute as anyone else. We also learn about depression, family relationships and much else.

Thanks again for a lovely book.

### **Dr Philip Payton**

Philip Payton is Professor of Cornish and Australian Studies at the University of Exeter and Director of the Institute of Cornish Studies; his recent books published by University of Exeter Press include *John Betjeman and Cornwall: 'The Celebrated Cornish Nationalist'* (2012) and *Regional Australia and the Great War: 'The Boys from Old Kio'* (2012).

Note: Dr Payton is now living in SA and lectures at Flinders University

