

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Ruth Eastham, *The Messenger Bird* (Scholastic, 2012).

Many of us will probably remember, as school students, the subject History as one of the most boring one has studied. As children, we probably had no interest in what the textbooks contained. However, it is simply not accurate to say that youngsters are not interested at all in what happened before their time; they just need something entertaining to focus their attention. Schoolchildren who moan or doze off at the pages of their textbooks, might ask for more when their grandparents tell them similar stories in their own voices. Maths is another boring chore, but children will take the numbers enthusiastically when it is needed to crack codes or write hidden messages. Ruth Eastham is certainly aware of this, as she demonstrated with the cryptic clues and historical background in *The Messenger Bird*.

Eastham's book has several good points that will make it a popular book among younger readers. I believe that a good story is one that easily allows the reader to step into the shoes of the protagonist and the setting of the story. This effect begins on the cover: in the foreground is an image of a young boy; the intended readers know this is a story that is centred on a protagonist they can relate to. The dull-coloured background, with silhouettes of World War II planes, clues readers that this story will have something to do with history. The designer also added an amazing touch: at the right side are alphabets that can only be seen under the light at certain angles. This effectively ties into the secret codes and messages theme, and provides readers with a proper start to an adventure. Within the story itself, readers follow the characters to various historical places in search for clues. They also have to learn about the backstory of those places and certain historical events, such as the use of the Enigma Machine. With these, Eastham has managed to write a story that satisfies the readers' imaginations and adventurous spirits, whilst providing educational information at the same time.

We have seen it many times, on screens and literary pages, where youngsters who are aware of threats or dangers are ignored by adults because of their age. These stories mostly end with the younger characters solving the plot by themselves without the help from any 'useless' adults. In real life, young teenagers do not like being treated as if they are children, or being left out of events important to them. These factors are considered as readers follow thirteen-year-old Nathan Vane into the story. Eastham not only gives her targeted readers an outlet where they can fulfil their fantasies and imagination, she also presents with them realistic troubles so the readers can connect with Nathan emotionally.

Nathan witnessed his father, Leon, being arrested on the night he and his family were supposed to celebrate his birthday and their housewarming. However, just before he was taken away, Leon left his son some clues, so that Nathan can help prove his innocence. Such an important trust between an adult and a young teen, or even between parent and child, is probably what many young teenagers wish to achieve. Nathan's older sister Hannah, was also present, yet Nathan was the one given the heavy task. This is probably a way to show that age does not necessary indicates one's abilities, despite what some readers might think. The first chapter also taps into some of our worst fears: that someone we love is taken away from us, possibly forever, on a day that was supposed to be happy. Therefore, instead of monsters in the attic, readers experience a very realistic threat: the disappearance of a beloved family member. Such a danger also allows a truly worthwhile goal – to reunite one's own family.

As I have said, many stories aimed at younger audience portray adults in positions of authority as stupid, ignorant, and of no help at all. In *The Messenger Bird*, adult characters

Book reviews: *The Messenger Bird* by Ruth Eastham. Chiam Chuang Chao.
Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

are unable to help Nathan in his quest to prove his father's innocence; however, Eastham manages to provide ample justifications. Nathan's mother tries her best to appear strong and keep the family together, even though she is clearly on the verge of breaking down, as any wife would be when told that her husband could be imprisoned for life. The other authority figure, the family friend and lawyer Mr Edwards, is also unable to help, apart from giving Nathan a small but vital warning. This is due to the antagonists having approached him before the plot started, thus limiting his options. With these portrayals, readers are shown that, sometimes, adults are helpless not because they choose to be, but because they truly do not know what to do. At the end of the story, some adults do actually provide some help.

Nathan initially intends to save his father alone, but he eventually enlists his two friends in his quest. This can be read as a way to allow Nathan, and by proxy the young readers, the feeling of independence. Instead of having answers and instructions given by an adult figure to solve a problem by another adult, Nathan has to give it all in his efforts to crack the secret code. Being independent does not mean that one does not require help from others, nor does it mean simply receiving orders from another and then taking action. One first has to do everything one can within one's own ability before seeking aid from another.

As realistic as Eastham manages to make it, this is still a book intended for younger readers. The main antagonist is Rose, a traitor who frames Leon. Rose is a civil servant who is part of a group involved with selling state secrets. It is established that soldiers have been killed because of this, and Rose displays no regrets about this. Yet this heartless character took her time to get rid of the children after they did what she wanted them to. If this story was set in a more mature setting, I believe that Rose would have shot the protagonists from behind, instead of pointing the gun at them and confessing what she had done. In the end, Rose survives being crushed under a falling building. In an adult novel, she would probably have ended up being burnt to death, instead of surviving with broken limbs.

Overall, *The Messenger Bird* was a very entertaining read., , It is essentially a young teen's answer to *Da Vinci Code*, minus all the religious imagery and controversy. Or, a young British reader's literary equivalent of the United States' film *National Treasure*.

Chiam Chuang Chao