

'Man at Sea', by Liam Bell

Review by Lauren Murray



encrypt (verb): to hide information or important messages from enemy spies, using the locked room underneath the parish church.

Man at Sea by Liam Bell is a tense, intriguing thriller that explores the secrets and betrayals of war, and whether revenge is still worthwhile when everyone else has long gone home.

Malta, 1941: Eleven-year-old Joe Zarb spends his days running around the sun-drenched island of Malta, racing his friends, helping his nanna, and concocting theories about Italian spies. His father, Victor, is in the Royal Navy, but Joe is otherwise largely untouched by the war going on around them, until one day a telegram arrives with news that will change his life forever, catapulting him into a world of secrecy and lies.

We are first introduced to Joe as, full of life and enchanted by the excitement of playing soldier, he abandons a race with his friend to investigate the suspicious messenger who is delivering a telegram to his nonna. He is too far away to hear the message, and his nonna won't give him any information when he asks. To

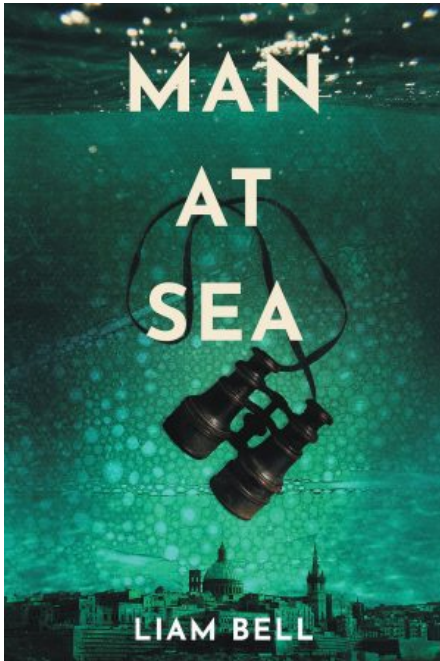
begin, Joe's innocent acceptance of this refusal is contrasted with the reader's distrust, but soon Joe begins to question everything. Has Joe's father been killed at sea? And if so, why is no one telling him? Then there is the suspicious Sultana family who have sought refuge from the war with Joe and his nonna, but where do they come from, and why is nothing known about Mr Sultana?

The opening chapters of *Man at Sea* masterfully create an environment in which distrust is rife and neither the protagonist nor the reader knows who to believe. However, before we get any firm answers, we are whisked into the future to meet Beth and Stuart, who have decided to finally make the journey to Malta after the events that changed their lives there twenty years before. Beth has avoided meeting her stepson since the death of her new husband in the war all those years ago, but it's now time to face her past. For Stuart, it is the site of a traumatic crash that left him with life-changing injuries. Everyone else thinks the crash was an accident, but he knows the plane was sabotaged, and he's determined to track down the man who did it and get his revenge.

Liam Bell has recreated the experience and feel of wartime Malta in painstaking detail through his language and description. The claustrophobic air-raid shelter that Joe and his nonna hide in smells 'of the sea when there was no stirring, no breeze. When you can smell everything, living and dead, beneath the surface' and they listen to the terrifying 'tuck-tuck-tuck' of the bombers flying by above, frozen in place as they wait to see if they will be hit. When Stuart takes a drag of a cigarette, he 'heard too much of the crackle of the paper as he inhaled' and he remembers the pain of his wounds as though 'his bones were expanding and trying to force their way out through his skin'.

Even the relationship between Joe and Victor is steeped in an appreciation of language. The two are working on a shared dictionary while Victor is serving in the navy. An entry from the list of words is given at the start of every chapter. Often humorous and clever, these glimpses into the light, loving bond between father and son give an insight into a more carefree time and are carefully juxtaposed with the increasing tension as the tragedy and horror of the war seeps into the peaceful, simple life Joe leads on his island. Soon, it will threaten everything he loves.

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