

The Christmas Code

Ed J. Pinegar

Covenant Communications (Oct 2, 2014)

Softcover \$6.99 (96pp)

978-1-62108-848-6

A sweet hidden Christmas message highlights the difference people can make when they reach out to others with compassion, love, and understanding.

Ed J. Pinegar's novella, *The Christmas Code*, provides a heaping helping of the Christmas spirit with plenty of traditional values—love, joy, hope, community, and forgiveness. It offers a reminder of how the holiday, and the values it emphasizes, can draw people together and help heal hearts.

Every Thursday, the elderly and ailing Mr. G. feeds the birds in the park. Lately, he's also been sharing messages in secret code that are capturing people's attention, and gaining him a few friends. Now, as the holiday approaches, the message takes on added importance—as he knows he has few days left to live. When people begin to decipher the clue, it forges a chain of events that transforms hearts and lives. And as the secrets held by Mr. G. and his friends begin to surface, the importance of the coded message, not just for Christmas but year round, grows ever more clear.

The novella presents a short, sweet message to spark the Christmas spirit. This message, the hidden clue within the story, highlights the difference people can make when they reach out to others with compassion, love, and understanding. As Mr. G says, "It's what we need in order to live; it's hard to live without it."

It's couched in an unexpectedly compelling story with enjoyable characters, even if they have a slightly stock feel (the single mother, the parentless boy, the childless couple). Their growth feels so natural and reasonable that the impact of Mr. G.'s secret message is quietly demonstrated through their lives just as much as it is overtly revealed. The characters serve as practical examples of how even the reader could experience transformation. And Pinegar's writing is crisp, avoids preachiness, and sprinkles simple yet effective description throughout.

The story does, at times, add a little too much sugar to the dough. ("Because there will always be those who need my help, in a strange way, that means my life will always have hope and meaning," says one character.) And the surprise ending nears the edge of contrived and overly sentimental, almost leaving a saccharine aftertaste. Yet the plot itself builds at a comfortable pace, and its ebbs and flows keep pages turning as one character after another is changed by applying Mr. G.'s message to their everyday lives

As a holiday story intended to evoke warm feelings, the novella's missteps prove surprisingly forgivable. And, providing the right amount of high-quality vanilla, the biblical meaning of Christmas adds a traditional note for Christians, without being so heavy-handed as to put off those who aren't. The hint of mystery keeps each chapter tempting. Like classic Christmas cookies you can't stop eating, this novella is an enjoyable treat, even if one feels a slight sugar rush in the end. It is the holidays, after all.

DIANE GARDNER (November 5, 2014)

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