

Secret Agent Bland: A Review of *Tamar*.
By Elizabeth

Tamar, the Carnegie Award-winning Young Adult novel by Mal Peet, was a book that I had reservations about from the beginning. I regret to say that, despite my best efforts at focusing on its good qualities, actually reading *Tamar* only served to reinforce those previously unfounded reservations.

Tamar tells the story of two spies, code-named Dart and Tamar, working for the Dutch Resistance in Germany during the Second World War. The action shifts between an account of the spies' adventures, and flash-forwards to the present day, where the grand-daughter of one of the spies – who has been christened Tamar, in honor of her grandfather's code-name – tries to explore and piece together the mysteries and unspoken truths of her grandfather's past.

To begin with, when I heard that this was a 'spy novel', alarm bells started ringing in my head. I could not believe that *Tamar* would be a genuinely literary novel, but I hoped that it would at least offer thrills, suspense and intrigue. However, as I waded through the story, I realized that I didn't feel anything at all as I read it – which is the worst thing for a reader to feel.

There seem to be countless characters in the story – far more than necessary – but none of them, not even the central protagonists come into focus, or feel like anything more than characters for the plot. Admittedly, some degree of this phenomenon occurs in nearly all plot-driven novels, but even the plot of *Tamar* failed to move me. Mal Peet tries to deal with a great many dark, moving concepts – the horrors of war in the 'past' segments of the book, the heartbreak of aging in the 'present' segments – but none of it resonates. Peet succeeds in getting only one emotion across to the audience – a continual low-grade anxiety over whether Dart and Tamar will survive – but one emotional 'key' played constantly is almost as bad as none at all.

Everything in the book – characters, settings, scenarios – is curiously generic. Perhaps the most generic of all, fatally, is the character of the younger Tamar, the grand-daughter of Tamar the spy. Her segments are narrated in the first person, but what do we learn about her? We learn that she's fifteen, that she does well in school except for math, until her sainted grandfather taught her to look at it as 'P.E for the brain,' that she loved her grandfather but never asked questions about his past until he died and it was too late. Who is Tamar? What is her purpose? I have the suspicion that she serves no other function than to be a generic teenage-girl character out of Central Casting, someone the book's intended audience can relate to. Only fitfully, when we see her trading quips with her loopy cousin 'Yoyo' Johanssen, does Tamar come flickeringly to life.

It seems as though Mal Peet felt that *Tamar* wouldn't work as a young-adult novel unless a young-adult character was added, but the character of the young Tamar, and the flash-forwards that she necessitates, strike me as almost completely unnecessary. The book would have been much more concise, smoother and more intelligible without them.

This major flaw sums up *Tamar* completely: it is at once overambitious and almost completely negligible.

