Sylvia narrates the background and events of the Children’s Crusade of 1212. Bryce Courtenay describes this as ‘perhaps the strangest true event to have taken place in European history’ as thousands of children trekked towards Jerusalem inspired by mystical visions. He draws on the few scattered Latin and Arabic texts about the crusade, and gives insights into religion and society of medieval times.

Courtenay’s imaginative recreation revolves around Sylvia Honeyeater, born around 1196, and her quest for identity, learning, friendship and compassion. At times she is exposed to wanton cruelty, church corruption, questionable doctrine, self-righteous clergy and political bishops. But she also meets loyal friends, Godly churchmen and wise mentors. At times tragic and dark in its themes, the book is a delightful read of a young girl finding her womanhood and a sense of vocation. While others seem too quick to see miracles in her musical abilities and her way with animals, she delights in how God does seem to use her – in compassion to street children, in challenging superstition with reasoned logic and in confronting abuses of power.

I particularly appreciated watching Sylvia develop in her persistent love of learning. She learns from a wondering musician, a Jewish businesswoman and her multilingual husband, prostitute friends and religious scholars. Rather than accepting rote-learning and dogma she learns ‘argument is the pathway to truth and in discussion lies the seeds of the resolution to most human problems’ (p.188). Talking to Jews, for example, led her to question the anti-semitic assumptions of her childhood, and she questions other sacredly-held assumptions of her time including the basis for ‘miracles’, crusades and the absolution of sins.

Typical of Bryce Courtenay’s down-to-earth writing, Sylvia does not gloss over the darkness of medieval times but neither does it deny the presence of courage and God at work in mysterious ways. Thus Sylvia offers both insightful background to the tragedy of the children’s crusade and inspiring characterisation of an intriguing and intelligent young woman of faith.