

REVIEWS

FACT, FAITH AND FICTION

VIRTUALLY HUMAN: FLOURISHING IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Ed Brooks and Pete Nicholas

Inter-Varsity Press, 2015, Pbk, 173p.; £8.99, ISBN 978-1783593897

As someone who is neither a *'technophile'* nor a *'technophobe'* I appreciated this wide ranging survey of the digital media and some of the issues that new technology raises for Christians.

The writers look at the Internet and social media and acknowledge many of the benefits that have come with the *World Wide Web* and on-line services such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. However, they raise concerns that technological progress has given rise to what C.S. Lewis called "*chronological snobbery*", an assumption that anything that is new and up-to-date must be superior to what has gone before. Christians need to view new technology in the light of the story unfolded in the Scriptures. Mankind is created in the image of God, and given dominion over the created order, but mankind is also fallen. Technology is not neutral, but shaped by a variety of cultural, political and economic factors and we need to be willing to say both *'yes'* and *'no'* to technological developments.

The "*chronological snobbery*" identified by the writers can be most clearly seen in changing attitudes to sexuality which assume that current ideas about sex are an improvement on the moralities of the past. The book includes a chapter on "*Virtual Sex*" and looks at such topics as Internet dating sites, on-line pornography and the disturbing practice of "*sexting*" explicit images.

Social media, play a valuable role in helping people to communicate with friends and family, but the authors suggest that these media sometimes

provide “*connectivity*” at the expense of true community and deeper relationships.

As a librarian I was particularly interested in the chapter on information and knowledge. This documents the problem of “*information overload*” in current society, suggests some possible future developments, and emphasises the need for wisdom as well as mere information.

Despite their reservations about certain aspects of the digital media, the authors are enthusiastic about the benefits that these media can bring. Their book is essential reading for Christians living in a digital environment (and, in the contemporary world, that surely includes most of us.)

Reviewed by: Graham Hedges.

THE FRAGMENT

Davis Bunn

Marylebone House, 2016, £8.99, Pbk., 167p., ISBN 978-1910674383

“*Christian fiction*” has made something of a comeback in the British publishing scene during the past couple of years with *Lion Fiction* and SPCK’s *Marylebone House* emerging as leaders in the field.

Davis Bunn is a novelist who is said to have sold over seven million copies of his books. His latest novel takes us back to 1923 to a troubled Europe in the days following the First World War. His central character is Muriel Ross, a young woman who works as a researcher into antiquities at the *Smithsonian Institution* in Washington, and is also a gifted photographer.

Muriel, a committed Christian, is rescued from a fairly humdrum life by a United States senator who invites her to accompany him on a visit to Europe. The object of the visit is to find a fragment of wood believed to be part of the Cross of Christ. The early chapters set in Paris are followed by a journey on the Orient Express, and episodes in Constantinople, once the leading city of the fallen Ottoman Empire but now torn apart by civil strife.

The author displays a detailed knowledge of the politics of the period and also of the history and legends of the True Cross, said to have been discovered by Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, during a visit to Jerusalem.

This is a short novel of only one hundred and sixty-seven pages but I found the early chapters rather slow, and difficult to get into. The pace picks up in the final chapters, however, when the characters find the fragment of the Cross and have to flee for their lives from an unsuspected enemy.

Bookshop and library shelves are still groaning under the weight of religious conspiracy novels such as *The Da Vinci Code*. *The Fragment* may have a similar appeal and deserves to be widely read.

Reviewed by: Graham Hedges.

BEN-HUR: A TALE OF THE CHRIST

Carol Wallace

Lion Fiction, 2016, £8.99, Pbk., 408p., ISBN 978-1782642244

Ben-Hur returned to the silver screen this autumn in a \$90 million re-make of the classic story of the embittered Jewish nobleman who learns to forgive the Romans after encounters with Jesus of Nazareth. Charlton Heston's 1959 epic was itself a re-make of earlier films and there have been radio, television and theatrical adaptations also.

Lew Wallace's 1880 novel was, for many years, America's best-selling novel, but it is probably less widely read today. Coinciding with the release of the film, his great-great grand-daughter has written a new version of the story for twenty-first century readers.

The new book retains all of the classic features including a sea battle, a shipwreck, and the famous chariot race. However the author has dropped the archaic language, the overlong descriptive passages, and the stilted

nineteenth century style to make the narrative more accessible to a present day readership.

Carol Wallace follows her ancestor's original storyline, and some of the twists and turns of the plot will surprise readers who are only familiar with the screen versions. Consumed by a desire for vengeance, the central character, Judah Ben-Hur, retreats to the desert to recruit a zealot army to rise up against the Romans and await the coming of the Messiah.

When Jesus commences his ministry he fails to conform to popular messianic expectations and Judah is confused by a healer and teacher who preaches mercy and redemption rather than political rebellion. The story takes its familiar course – Palm Sunday, Gethsemane, Golgotha, Resurrection – and Ben-Hur finally understands the mission of Jesus when he witnesses the crucifixion and meets the Risen Lord.

The new film deserved to be one of the cinematic events of the year, but the novel also deserves a large readership and I hope it will be widely stocked in bookshops and libraries.

Graham Hedges, *Hon. FCLIP, MCLIP*, is Secretary of *Christians in Library and Information Services*.

A (VERY) PUBLIC SCHOOL MURDER: AN ABBOT PETER MYSTERY

Simon Parke

Marylebone House, 2016, £8.99, 282p., Pbk, ISBN 978-1910674345

This is the fourth in the *Abbot Peter* series, set in a seaside town on the south coast of England. I haven't read any of the earlier books, but enjoy other murder mysteries such as by Dorothy Sayers and Lindsey Davis. However Parke's writing is in an unusual style for this genre, being largely dialogue, so I found the story quite difficult to follow. There are also frustrating points where the chapter ends just as evidence is revealed to the

detectives but not to the reader! Abbot Peter seems to me out of place in the small town setting, though he clearly has a Poirot-like ability to analyse characters and motives; this is where the author's background as a psychologist comes through. There is considerable emphasis on the moral issues involved in the case at the Christian-founded public school – everyone has “sins” they want to hide, including those said to be Christians, who appear to be troubled and ineffective. The book is a good read for anyone who enjoys psychological mysteries.

Janice Paine, *MCLIP*, serves on the executive committee of *Christians in Library and Information Services* as Membership Secretary.

THE SECRET CHORD

Geraldine Brooks

Abacus, 2016, £8.99, Pbk., ISBN 978-0349139357

Geraldine Brooks has taken on the story of David, one of the most interesting and important characters in the Old Testament. She tells the story through the eyes and ears of Nathan the prophet, who is to be the court biographer. Brooks in her ‘*Afterword*’ says that David is the first man in literature whose story is told in detail from early childhood to extreme old age. After reading the book and then the story in the Bible I am surprised there isn't a movie being made somewhere. There are all the elements needed for an amazing movie, if treated respectfully.

Nathan's first task is to visit David's mother and write down what she says about his childhood, how he was tormented by his brothers, hated by his father who thought he was a bastard child and, according to his mother, sent very young, about six years old, out in the wild to mind the sheep. That back story doesn't appear in the Bible, but it could be true. Mother's favourite, badly treated by jealous brothers, it happens. And Nathan faithfully

writes the whole story through the wars, the temper tantrums, treatment of wives, the rape and Tamar, and so on.

Brooks has skilfully, and I think respectfully, filled in the gaps that are in the Bible record. Where the Bible is silent she has imagined what might have happened and respectfully but not holding back on blood and guts, violence, sexual references, and deceit.

Anyway I am not going to tell the whole story, we all know it. What I found interesting was the way that Brooks made me really feel and see the way the people lived their daily lives and how they died. There are beautiful descriptions of the houses and the countryside; where emotions are mentioned Brooks has realised the scene and made it live in our minds. I found it gripping and real and now I understand and remember a lot more about David's story than I did before.

Liz Shelton is the editor of *Off the Shelf*, the quarterly newsletter of the *Australian Church Library Association*. This review first appeared in the Autumn 2016 edition and is reprinted by kind permission.

THE ONE O'CLOCK MIRACLE: A TRUE STORY ABOUT TRUSTING THE WORDS OF JESUS

Alison Mitchell; Illustrated by Catalina Echeveri

Good Book Company, 2015, £8.99, Hardback, 32p., ISBN 978-1910307434

This book won the *Speaking Volumes* Children's Book of the Year 2016. Both the illustrations and the text are quite quirky, with certain words capitalised for emphasis. I read it with my nieces, aged eight, six and four, who enjoyed it and were able to follow the story – the six year old was able

to re-read it for herself, the favourite part for the four year old was '*when the boy was healed*'.

The eight year old commented that the words and animations made it easy to understand the story, which she said was a '*Jesus story*' about a man whose son was ill so he walked a long way to see Jesus. She followed the idea that the man at first was upset when Jesus just said to him "*Go!*" but then He completed the sentence "*your son will live*". The idea of the man walking a long way with his legs aching had an impact and the reason for the title of the book was effectively conveyed.

Extra details are thrown in that adults might enjoy such as a wooden '*sun-dial*' type of wrist watch (which helps to make the point that at the exact time Jesus said the boy would be healed is when he was actually healed). The author takes also artistic license with the story and has the dad walking many miles through bad weather as well as over rocky terrain (the latter based on the actual topography of the land between Cana and Capernaum). It looks like this is or will be part of a series of "*Tales that tell the truth*" as that is the heading on the final page, which points us to the biblical reference and also gives a general explanation of how the miracles of Jesus recorded in the Bible help to show us who Jesus is "*God's promised Rescuer King (the Christ)*".

Karen Hans, *BScHons, MA, FCLIP*, is a School Librarian and serves on the executive committee of *Christians in Library and Information Services* as Prayer Secretary.

THE SHED THAT FED A MILLION CHILDREN: THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF MARY'S MEALS

Magnus Macfarlane-Barrow

William Collins, £8.99, Pbk., 320p., ISBN 978-0007578313.

The Shed That Fed A Million Children is the winning title in the adult category of this year's *Speaking Volumes* UK Christian Book Awards.

This biennial award celebrates good Christian literature that will appeal particularly to people of little or no faith. This book with its catchy title, colourful cover and story of personal engagement with the ever growing refugee crisis, ably meets these criteria.

So many comments from recent refugees share their common ambition of enough food and education. But what makes this story very different is that this solution is not organisational. It is how one person's vision in a small shed in Scotland to give a simple meal, through schools to hungry children spreads from country to country world- wide to give over a million meals. It is a story of how one person moved by God can change the world.

It began in 1992 when Magnus asked his Dad if he could borrow his dilapidated corrugated shed on a windy hillside in Scotland, to store donations of aid for Bosnia. And even though Mary's Meals became a global organisation with larger administrative needs, Magnus chose to stay there. The shed for him is a powerful reminder of the families helped, who come from much more basic accommodation.

This is a compelling story, told in vivid and direct language. Magnus' story is one of miracles of answered prayer from small local needs, to support through donations which met the exact amount needed; from homes for Romanian orphans to a way into each subsequent country. Chapter by chapter we see the work spread from Eastern Europe to Liberia, Africa, India and across the globe. In spite of political and local obstacles God provides in each individual circumstance.

It's a good story which carries its reader along, and one which has a wider appeal than many more overtly Christian books, yet makes it very clear how God is at work in our world today. And as the award suggests, here is a book which can appeal to anyone interested in such a topical issue, and also wants a good read

Margaret Keeling, BA, MA, MCLIP, PhD, is a Life Vice President of *Christians in Library and Information Services*.

TAKING MY GOD FOR A WALK

Tony Collins

Monarch, 2016, £8.99, Pbk., 249P., ISBN 978-0857217738

Tony Collins will be well known to many CLIS readers as a leading figure in Christian publishing and as our guest lecturer in Bedford in 2014.

This is an inspiring and thought provoking book which keeps you gripped and entertained to the end and leaves you full of admiration for the pilgrimage Tony undertook. Four hundred and ninety miles of the Camino from the French border to Santiago de Compostela in fifty-five days.

Much of the route was arduous and tested him physically and the weather wasn't always kind and sometimes it was very wet.

The people he met on the way were always interesting and certainly made his journey more bearable. He formed bonds with several of his fellow pilgrims hearing something of their life stories. There were times of solitude too when the title comes to life as Tony had some intense spiritual encounters and past errors came under scrutiny.

The way was a challenge for him both physically and spiritually. The accommodation was usually basic though he always found somewhere to sleep and managed with having very little Spanish.

There was the opportunity to see some wonderful historic towns, some almost deserted ones and some industrial ones. The scenery was beautiful at times too.

Tony learnt the value of non-attachment to possessions and the Way spoke to him changing the way he saw himself. When he reached Santiago de Compostela and prayed in the low vault of the cathedral he felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. Such a pilgrimage may not be for all of us but I felt a tremendous admiration for Tony and perhaps we should all at least step back and assess our lives at important times such as retirement.

One thing I would have liked is a better map so you could follow his progress more easily. The Coda and the prayer of the Pilgrims are both good inclusions at the end.

On a practical note alpaca socks are great – he suffered few blisters but a large poncho is a mixed blessing – a good rain jacket is better!

Anne MacRitchie, BSc, is the Scottish Secretary of *Christians in Library and Information Services*.



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