

## REVIEWS

# ***FAITH, FACT AND FICTION – 2 -***

## **A CHRISTMAS CALLING**

**Chris Cottee**

**Instant Apostle; £8.99, Pbk., 299p.,**

**ISBN 978-1909728707**

“*Christian fiction*” has come of age in recent years, with a number of memorable titles emanating from *Lion Fiction* and SPCK’s *Marylebone House*. *Instant Apostle*, a small grass-roots publisher run by Manoj Raithatha, who also works for the *Evangelical Alliance*, has now emerged as an additional publisher of good quality fiction, alongside other areas of publishing.

***A Christmas Calling*** is very loosely based on Charles Dickens’ classic ***A Christmas Carol*** and tells the story of David Sourbrook, a retired teacher of maths and physics, who finds spiritual and emotional salvation in the few days leading up to Christmas. Unlike Dickens’ character, Sourbrook’s journey is inspired, in part, by Christians from a local church rather than an assortment of ghosts.

David Sourbrook does not have Ebenezer Scrooge’s aversion to the Christmas season, but he lives an isolated life with few obvious friends and a certain disdain for the wider human race. His life begins to change after a “*chance*” meeting with a public-spirited woman Angela (“*was she a friend or was she an angel*”) who persuades him to join her in clearing up litter from the streets and in delivering church newsletters to a tough housing estate. Later David is introduced to friends from Angela’s (very middle class) church and begins a journey towards Christian conversion and a recognition of a long buried traumatic experience that has blighted his life since childhood.

The novel also touches on issues of social deprivation when David and Angela encounter a group of teenage delinquents from the housing estate.

Part love story, part psychological exploration, part conversion story, ***A Christmas Calling*** makes enjoyable reading in the weeks leading up to the Christmas celebrations. I will look forward to reading future offerings from this writer.

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

**A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE: TWELVE MEN AND  
WOMEN WHOSE FAITH HELPED CHANGE THE WORLD**

**Bob Hartman**

**Illustrated by Anna-Marie Clover**

**CWR, 2017, £5.99, Pbk., 91p., ISBN 9781782597643**

I volunteered to review this new children's book on behalf of CLIS. I was then invited to the book launch, but, sadly, was unable to attend. The book is aimed at individual children and families, but also at libraries and schools, being a project conceived and brought about by and for the *Christian Book Promotion Trust*, sponsors of the *Speaking Volumes* scheme. This organisation partners with churches to place good Christian books in public and school libraries. I have recently benefited from a grant of books to the school library that I work in, including the Bear Grylls biographies and graphic novel versions of the Bible which will all be popular with some of the pupils.

Many children have not been brought up going to Sunday School to learn of God's love for them and others, or of God's standards for

society. Through ***A world of difference*** a new generation can discover how many social reforms and societal values (that they take for granted as secular ones) were actually brought about through the Christian conviction of humble servants of God. I would also imagine that many parents, school teachers and librarians would be unaware of the positive history re-told in the book.

The first page did not dive straight into one of the life stories, but rather appealed to the imagination of the reader to picture themselves in the scene. This sounds like a great starter and in theory could be useful, especially for teachers or parents reading to children. The reason I would question this opener is that it paints an extreme picture for the child to imagine themselves part of: homeless, wet and cold, starving, penniless, sick and finally dying alone. Had the book been targeted at teenagers this may have been more appropriate but the cover design, the large font and the other work of the author indicates that this is aimed at upper primary school children.

The opener introduces Mother Teresa as the first person of faith and works. A broad range of people and issues are included in the following chapters, including Michael Faraday, Elizabeth Fry and Corrie Ten Boom (with whom I have a personal connection as my paternal grandmother gave her life to Christ having heard her speak). A small quibble is that the slavery triangle is explained in the section on William Wilberforce which comes *after* the chapter on Harriet Tubman and could have been better placed before. There were also sections which could have been better edited, being unnecessarily wordy and so taking away from the point.

I felt it would have been more inviting and winsome to introduce the children to the personalities and their faithful, loving, sacrificial lives and later to invite the reader to imagine being in need (as a slave, or prisoner or homeless orphan) and having that need met by those who had made such a difference to the world around them. However, the back of the book credits the many people who oversaw the age appropriateness of the language etc. and the book

was trialled with lower primary aged children so perhaps my concerns are unfounded.

I asked a number of work colleagues, family and others (some adults, some children) to look over and dip into the book to gain their thoughts too. Most were very positive about the book, including the initial few pages that I queried, but a couple were put off by that too. One was surprised at the inclusion of Martin Luther King Jr. as there are moral questions about his womanising which of course are not relevant to mention in a book for children. Others might question the prominent inclusion of Mother Teresa (as a Catholic - the piece on her includes her becoming a 'saint') but the book is no doubt determined to be inclusive and gain a wide audience in doing so. My conclusion is that it is an important book and I hope it will be widely read to and by children and young people.

**Karen Hans**, *BSc, MA, FCLIP*, is School Librarian of the *Forest Hill School* and Prayer Secretary for *Christians in Library and Information Services*

## **THE ROBOTS ARE COMING: US, THEM AND GOD**

**Nigel Cameron**

**CARE, 2017, £9.99, Pbk., 148p., ISBN 978-0905195230**

This unusual Christian book concerns the rapid development of machines which are doing tasks which we have traditionally done ourselves. These are not necessarily the clunky robots which have appeared in science fiction for years, but they can be (for example) driverless cars, carers, or on-line medical advisers.

These developments stem from the breathtaking acceleration of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The benefits of AI are enormous. But a fault, or hacking, could result in unacceptable damage to humans or the environment. Such is the concern that an open letter warning that these developments should be strictly controlled was signed in 2015 by (among others) Bill Gates and Stephen Hawking.

There is also the possibility that machines or robots could eventually become more intelligent than humans. Already computers have beaten chess grand masters. The author emphasises (pp.14-16; 106-107; 116-122) that human beings were created in the image of God. This means that (unlike the most sophisticated robots) we have free will, we repent, we are creative, we have been given dominion over the earth, and we relate to each other (Gen.1.27-28; Ps.8.3-8; Heb.2.7-8).

That does not mean however that we should not utilise the technology which AI brings us, as long as we can control it. For example, parents should be in control of what the new interactively chatting Barbie says to their child. Barbie does this by using wi-fi and speech recognition (pp.62-64).

A big theme in this excellent and readable short book is the increasing redundancy of a wide range of jobs, even the professions. This has already been happening, as robots can be programmed to perform ever more complex tasks as well as (or better than) humans can. The author considers (pp.78-86; 100-101) the sort of lifestyle that very large numbers of unemployed humans may face in the not too distant future.

**Gordon Harris**, *BSocSc, MPhil, FCLIP, DipKM*, is a Life Vice-President of *Christians in Library and Information Services*.

**FALLEN WARRIORS: BELIEVE IN MIRACLES**  
**Mark Anderson-Smith**  
**The Author, £9.99, Pbk., 400p.; ISBN 978-0992988388**

This is not perhaps the easiest of books to read because of the subject matter of a planned terrorist attack on York and there being numerous different strands which do come together in various ways. It is, however, a gripping story which keeps you turning the pages.

It is sadly very relevant with the terrorist attacks in Manchester and London this summer. The gang in the group are much larger than those believed to have been responsible for those attacks and managed to acquire a large amount of weapons and hatch an audacious plan. I won't say more as I don't want to spoil the ending.

There is a Christian theme throughout from the death of a young nurse Emma who falls from the city walls and is brought back to life by a strange man lying on her and praying, she later meets him and befriends him. Emma struggles to make sense of what has happened to her but is befriended by an elderly Christian lady, Mary, and she comes to believe in God. Mary also befriends a young Muslim girl, Najwa.

A detective, Danny Martin, also features throughout and becomes involved with most of the characters and ironically agrees to a posting with the anti-terrorism branch. He has a crucial role to play especially at the end.

The final chapters are very fast paced and leave you wanting to know more about how things finally turned out. All of the characters are very believable and easy to empathise with.

It is a very thought provoking book and makes you wonder if such an attack would be possible, it also makes you question the

strength of your own faith and whether you would be able to talk to strangers about it in the way depicted in the book.

**Anne MacRitchie**, BSc, serves on the executive committee of *Christians in Library and Information Services* as Scottish Secretary. **Mark Anderson-Smith** is the nephew of long standing CLIS member **Myrtle Anderson-Smith** and can be contacted at [mark@dragonlake.co.uk](mailto:mark@dragonlake.co.uk)

## **THE SPIRITUALITY OF JANE AUSTEN**

**Paula Hollingsworth**

**Lion, 2017, £9.99, Pbk., 210p., ISBN 978-0745968605**

This book points out that Jane Austen lived in a time when Anglicanism, with its focus on natural theology, was the predominant religion in Britain. Living in the countryside she would have had little exposure to other religions and her spirituality needs to be viewed in this context. At this time John Wesley and George Whitfield were preaching and their followers, the Methodists, were known for their fervour and called '*evangelical*'. Many, including Jane, were wary of '*evangelicals*'.

The book discusses the wide range of influences that affected Jane's thinking. She was born in December 1775 to a clergyman, George Austen, in the small village of Steventon, near Basingstoke, and she was taught at home with her brothers and sister until they went off to school. Jane started reading at an early age and she had uncensored access to her father's library including La

Fontaine's *Fables Choisies*. She would, as a clergyman's daughter have been very familiar with the *King James Bible* and is known to have liked reading published sermons. Her knowledge of theology would, therefore, have been extensive. At this time Circulating Libraries were springing up and so Jane had access to a wide range of literature. The romantic sentimental novels such as *Pamela* and Gothic novels such as the *Castle of Otranto* were at the height of their popularity.

This well researched book explores the effects of Jane Austen's Christian faith on her life and writings. The writings include letters, prayers, poems and Juvenilia as well as the six better known published novels and the unfinished works: *Lady Susan* and *Sanditon*. Her sister, Cassandra remained a close companion throughout her life and their correspondence provides great insight into Jane's personal views. Jane started writing at the age of twelve and her Juvenilia shows her close observation of people and her talent for parody.

At first glance it might be thought that Jane Austen's novels deal with parochial matters of small communities and do not contain any spiritual themes, but this book examines the overarching stories and the morals which can be drawn from them. The novels reflect the country life with which she was familiar and which she loved and this gives the novels a timeless appeal. She loved to explore personal relationships and the effects of class prejudice, constancy and faithfulness.

The book is divided into five main sections: Her early years, Her Early Writings, Her Time in Bath, Her Later Writings, and Her Legacy. It looks at the way her experiences and the changes in her family circumstances are reflected in her writings. For instance, *Northanger Abbey* was obviously written as a reaction to the appetite for Gothic novels. While living in Bath her novel writing was suspended, but the frustrations of that period may be reflected in deeper, more serious novels produced when she moved to Chawton. The author believes that *Mansfield Park*, written at



Chawton, is a reflection of Jane's society and the way the virtues of the Christian faith enables the heroine to triumph.

**Doris Humphrey** is a church librarian and retired Civil Servant.



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