

Review: Little Brother



It's not often that I read a book that makes me smile and wince for all the right reasons.

Cory Doctorow's latest novel, *Little Brother*, has been available for some time now. I have had the Creative-Commons licensed on-line version for months but being handed a tree-ware copy gave me an excuse to read it.

Having read reviews, and having heard the cheers from the techno-geek rebel wannabes that clip on red-copycat-capes as they seed the blogosphere with attempts at profundity, I wasn't surprised at the story or the plot. In fact it is a rather a linear plot with some clumsy sequences and character introductions – but right on the money for the apparent mid-teen audience. (Note to the discerning parent: my classification would be an Australian M-Rated, adult themes, mild violence, drug use, nudity, sex scenes)

But it's not the literary weight of *Little Brother* that gives its value – it is its subject matter. Set in a very slightly futuristic San Francisco in the days and weeks following a significant terrorist bombing it explores the very topical and present issues of freedom and security. Questions are raised about the fundamentals of (American) political freedom – and the psychology behind giving up freedoms for the sake of security only to arrive at the reality of security *theatre* that masks an ever-growing bureaucratic control of society. As I was reading it I was constantly thinking about issues that Bruce Schneier often raises only to find that he had written

an afterword in the book itself!

Doctorow teases open issues of how the so-called War on Terror™ gets used for manipulation and places this within a generational and cultural milieu that draws from San Francisco hippiedom alway through to the technological ubiquity of the latest generation weaving the values of the hacker into the whole thing. Surveillance, privacy, civil rights, generational angst, and a little bit of Hollywood-esque action are thrown together in just the right way to make me smile and wince for all the right reasons.

This book is bit absolutist but deliberately so. I think that what it does best is point at the hypocrisies of Western societies and state clearly in the words of a seventeen year-old hacker "The Emperor has no clothes." It takes current thin wedge-ends and plays them out to an extreme. It is an excellent summary of the values, the angst, and the serious philosophy of a generation and sub-culture that riles at a protectionist-by-increment cancer creeping into our civilisation.

Even Doctorow's decision to release it through creative-commons – *giving* away his book in the face of old-style mercantile establishment who gasp at the audacity of such a business plan – is part of the message of this book. Although it does make me wonder if they'll ever be a movie.

From a Christian point of view: Well it's not exactly from the same crowd behind *Veggie Tales* and *Guitar Praise Hero* if you know what I mean. And it's certainly wouldn't be held up as wholesome by those who confuse American patriotism with Christian spirituality. But it does remind us that all government and nations rule only at God's pleasure. It paints a picture of what humans do to each other. I agree with much of its critique, then rest with gladness on the truth that God is in control and in him is safety, security, and sometimes the energy for counter-cultural proclamation.

Anyway. Download it. Pick it up. Enjoy it. And ponder.



Review: The Shack



I've just finished reading William P. Young's *The Shack*. I'm reading it because it seems to be flavour of the month in popular christendom at the moment – which says nothing about its value, but something about its influence.

Respected Christian authors and commentators either love it (Eugene Peterson is quoted on the front cover “This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* did for his. It’s that good!”) or hate it (Mark Driscoll decries its heresies on youtube). So what’s my take?

It’s a book that’s certainly well written. It evokes emotions and tells a story well. It is an allegory – or, perhaps more precisely, a narrative theology – as the main character, Mack, encounters personifications of a triune God. There are some gems in it, but in the end I would classify this book as *dangerous*.

It is an allegory – but an allegory of what? If the metaphor that Young spins is meant to be a word picture, a narrative that describes God-as-God-is then it is blatantly heretical. When God shows up at the end of the chapter 5 “he” shows up (in the midst of a straight-from-Narnia cliché of snow giving way to spring-time-flourishing grass) as three persons –

"Papa" who is an African American woman meant to be God the Father (towards the end "she" does change and is portrayed as an older man as Mack grows through parent issues and comes to a place where he can handle that portrayal); Jesus who is a Jewish man (of course); and Sarayu a complex enigmatic hard-to-grasp woman who is meant to be the Holy Spirit.

If that's the intended metaphor, it is not an accurate portrayal of trinitarian theology. For instance, Young runs straight into the error of *modalism* in which the diversity of the trinity is reduced to being a number of "modes" of one being. And so Young's "Papa," as well as Jesus, bears the mark of the cross (an error known technically as *patripassionism*). All three persons appear as human (although Jesus is acknowledged to be "more so"), there is little explanation of the differences between the three persons and when a fourth "personification" in the form of a woman named Sophia (representing wisdom) comes along there is nothing but a throw-away sentence to indicate that she is any different to the three other persons. One of the inherent problems with modalism is that there is no need to have "three in one" but simply "multi-expressions-of-one" and the danger of portraying it the way Young does allows people to appeal to whatever image of God suits them (from an African-American woman who likes to cook, through to shimmering dancing spiritual gardener). Young mishandles the *diversity* of the Trinity.

Furthermore, it is dangerous ground to go beyond "God reveals himself as..." to "this is what God looks like..." It borders on presumption. Even though the divine persons in this narrative state that they are self-limiting themselves in order to interact with Mack, and therefore provide theological wriggle room for the author, Young also mishandles the *unity* of the Trinity.

Because in reality when you see see Jesus you see the Father, and the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of the One who raised Christ from the dead. If you are going to put

God into a story (and many have) then God can only have one face – the face of Christ. In God there is no unChristlikeness at all, as they say. If Young simply had Mack meet Jesus at the Shack then he would be on safer ground, because it's through Christ that Mack (and we) can meet the Father by the Spirit. Never separated – such as when Mack talks to Papa while Jesus is off woodworking – but all life emanating by the Father in the Son reaching forward as empowering Spirit.

So Young mishandles the Trinity. It may seem like I'm being a theological pedant – nitpicking. But there are very good reasons as to why precision in this area is necessary. If you get this wrong, and walk along the erroneous road, you end up not with gospel and life, but death. If Jesus does not reveal the fullness of God then Jesus is not "God with us" and we are stuck in our sins and griefs and God has just pretended. If we come to the Jesus of this book we keep looking behind him to find the nice pretty dancing Spirit-girl or the homely Papa-woman, he is not enough for us. Ironically, even though Mack is constantly surprised and challenged by "God" in the narrative, this book gives permission for us to demand that God appear to us in times of need the way we think we need him to be ("submitted to" us and "self-limited" and thus conforming to us in some way) rather than as he is and as he came to us.

There are some "gems" and snippets that are intriguing and perhaps helpful. Some of the issues of theodicy (how can a just God be both all-powerful and good in an evil world) are dealt with well. But the problems are difficult to wade past. The *Lordship* of Christ is underplayed as is a sense of God's *justice* and *judgement*. The metaphor, like all metaphors, extends into error and the boundaries are not strong enough to prevent the unwary from going there. It is a dangerous book.

If there is value, if we are to be generous, then we could state that Young is not spinning an allegory of God-as-God-is but a narrative describing the healing of someone from a

painful loss. If the back cover is to be believed – “William P. Young... suffered great loss as a child and young adult...” – then we are simply seeing a presentation, maybe, of Young’s own experience of healing and forgiveness. So perhaps the best way to read it is as an allegorised biography rather than an allegorised theology. There is some joy in seeing this story as something akin to a grown-up story about Wemmicks (a metaphorical world for children from Max Lucado – that, by the way, is not also without its dangers).

But in the end – it seems people *are* taking this book as theology. And they are building their spirituality around this book. That may not have been Young’s intention – but it makes this book dangerous nonetheless.

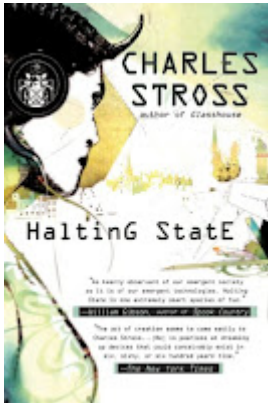
Eventually, when it comes to assessing these sorts of novels I have to ask the question “Having read it, have I been encouraged to seek God for myself in his Word by his Spirit.” And the answer for this book is “No.” There is little reference to the Bible in the narrative and when it is included it is as an illustration about (wrong) “preconceived ideas” not as words of life. Where then do I turn after reading this book?

Sadly, the message is this – “We invite you to continue your experience with The Shack at our website, theshackbook.com” – where it’s not about being encouraged to turn to God or the local church or come to Jesus in some way but rather simply to “share how you feel,” “share your insights,” “communicate with the author” and “purchase additional copies.” And of course you can contribute to “The Missy Project” to help spread this book (not the Bible, or the gospel) further and wider and fund a possible movie version.

And so popular christendom gets caught up into another merchandising extravaganza and looks to the pantheon of WWJD and “The Prayer of Jabez” which now includes “The Shack.” Invest in other pursuits rather than this book.



Review: Halting State



A friend recently lent me Charles Stross' novel *Halting State* to read. What a fantastic little book. I fell in love with its world.

Being set in the year 2017 and involving lots of technology many would say that this book would best placed on the “sci-fi” shelves. Really, though, the plot genre for this book would best be described as “whodunnit.” It’s a story that involves a computer programmer, a forensic accountant, a police sergeant, spies, criminals, money laundering, espionage, murder and intrigue. You get carried along on intertwining storylines slowly twisting, turning, interacting and opening up with false leads and deadends until its all finally collapsed in the last chapter.

But the plot isn’t the value of this book. The value of this book lies in the world that it envisions. Set only ten years in the future the use of technology and its sociological implications is nothing if not *feasible* but sufficiently “wow” to stir the imagination. Recently I’ve been working with some others on some scenario planning – imagining the world in twenty years time. This book does a better job of that sort of thing than our feeble attempts.

In this world the basic premise of technology is “augmented reality.” I don’t mean *virtual* reality (like what you see in

The Matrix or *Neuromancer*) although there is a bit of that. Rather imagine an amalgamation of Next-G mobile phones, publicly accessible free mobile networking, and wearing glasses that “overlays” things over what you can see. Right now, in 2008, I can go to my mobile phone and it will give me a map of my current location and directions to where I want to go. In 2017 Stross imagines my phone telling my glasses to augment my reality so that arrows and markers appear “magically” on the actual landscape in front of me to assist me with my navigation. Information stores are placed, almost literally, into the real world in front of you. Googling interacts with real life. Imagine a world where when you meet someone again after an initial introduction that next to their face appears, “magically,” their name and perhaps something akin to their facebook profile. Imagine a world where virtual hairstyles and clothes etc. are overlaid on top of real people and online games take place as sidebars to life.

In the book, one of these augmented reality overlays is called “CopSpace” and is an information overlaid on reality for police purposes only. I’ll give you a sneak preview:

“CopSpace sheds some light on matters, of course. Blink and it descends in its full glory. Here’s the spiralling red diamond of a couple of ASBO cases on the footpath (orange jackets, blue probation service tags saying they’re collecting litter). There’s the green tree of signs sprouting over the doorway of number thirty-nine, each tag naming the legal tenants of a different flat. Get your dispatcher to drop you a ticket, and the signs open up to give you their full police and social services case files, where applicable. There’s a snowy blizzard of number plates sliding up and down Bruntsfield Place behind you, and the odd flashing green alert tag in the side roads. This is the twenty-first century, and all the terabytes of CopSpace have exploded out of the dusty manila files and into the real world, sprayed across it in a Technicolor mass of officious labelling and

crime notices. If labelling the iniquities of the real world for all to see was enough to put an end to them, you could open CopSpace up as a public overlay and crime would vanish like a hang-over. (If only half the tags weren't out-of-date, and the other half was free of errors...)" (p82)

Stross' writing style is a bit quirky at times. The use of the second-person narrative throughout gets a bit of getting used to but it seems to be used as an ode to computer game plot-line scripts and works well, even when you find yourself having to constantly place yourself in a different character's shoes. A good example of the second-person style is this – just note that the “he” in this snippet will be the “you” in a few pages time:

“There's doubt in his voice, and suddenly you can see what's going through his mind: lying awake at night, next to your sleeping form, thinking morbid thoughts about the future, self-doubt gnawing at him – it's the mirror image of your own uncertainty, only he's externalizing it, projecting it on the big picture rather than worrying about his own prospects. So you swallow your cutting response and instead nod at him, encouraging. Maybe you can salvage something more than memories if you help him get this out of his system first.” (p272)

And then there's the occasional gem of geek-worthy word play that I simply admire:

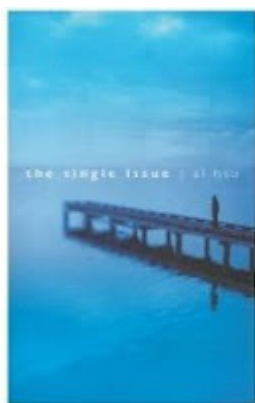
“‘Come on, let's get you patched up,’ she says, taking a step backwards, and breaking whatever information transfer it was that was going on via some kind of sub-verbal mammalian protocol layer.” (p190)

My friend said that in five years time this book will be out of date because the world will have proceeded along a path

from which this world could never spring. I agree with him. Right now it portrays a world of the tantalising plausible impossible. It's enjoyable, light, easy, fun and left a smile on my face.



Review: The Single Issue



Al Hsu's *The Single Issue* should have been called "The Person Issue." It is a book that is meant to be about singleness – it certainly is that – but it so well-handles the issue that it provides an excellent insight into life itself, the place of relationships, community, marriage, celibacy and God-given identity. Without realising it, I think Al Hsu's has provided an excellent work on the spiritual disciplines of life – no matter what your marital status.

I was lent the book by a friend of mine as a means of preparing for our current sermon series on "Money, Sex, Power." There is plenty of material on sex and sexuality (consider my previous review of the book *Sacred Sex*) and its expression in married life. What material out there affirms both sex and singleness without seeing them as uncomfortable guests in an awkward conversation? A lot of writers are condescending at best and deluded at worst when it comes to commentary on sexuality and singleness. Al Hsu brings a contribution that is biblical, meaningful, applicable, and delightful.

Hsu recognises that there is an overemphasis on married life in the church and a misplaced ideal. The church's response to

the sexual liberation of the 20th century has meant an idealisation of the nuclear family – and the Christian single person comes under a significant amount of pressure and expectation to marry and fit into that ideal. But Hsu asks:

“Is there an alternative to all this? Can Christian singles find a positive view of singleness that moves beyond traditional expectations and stereotypes? However one might classify or categorize today’s singles, several things are clear. One is that singleness itself does not determine a particular lifestyle... More significant is our attitude towards being single and how we choose to live as singles.

“To that end, singles are asking many questions. ‘Am I to be single for ever, or will I eventually marry?’ ‘What is God’s will for my life as a single person?’ ‘How do I satisfy my needs for companionship and relationship?’ ‘What is my identity in a world of married couples?’” (p28-29)

And so Hsu does a fantastic job of unpacking singleness – it’s history (chapter 2) and biblical expression – and the many misconceptions concerning it. For instance, “the significance of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19 is that it affirms that *single persons are no less whole people for lack of marriage*, in contrast to Jewish thought.” (p35) Later on he uncovers the incorrect Greek mythology of “soul partner” that lies behind the prevalent thought in Western culture that “each one of us is an incomplete half searching for the perfect other half who will make us whole. This belief runs completely counter to biblical teaching.” (p76)

He also does well to unpack the issue of God’s will when it comes to marriage – not just the general will of God but the particular will that causes people to perhaps even blame God for the lack of a partner. In this regard he gives an excellent exegetical exposition of the concept of the “gift of singleness.”

"... the 'gift of singleness' is not something that must be spiritually discerned or subjectively felt. Singles do not need to search their hearts to see if they are truly able to live as contented singles. It is not some supernatural empowerment for some function of ministry. Rather, the gift is a description of an objective status. If you are single, then you have the gift of singleness. If you are married, you don't. If you marry, you exchange the gift of singleness for the gift of marriedness. Both are good. Simple as that."
(p61)

He then affirms how singleness is indeed a gift – providing freedoms and opportunities that are not available to the married person. And I love how he demonstrates how holy singleness expresses God's love just as much as holy matrimony:

"By not having a spouse, a single person is free to build many relationships with many people. In this way, the single adult is an example of the fact that God loves all people, not just a few. While married Christians emulate God's exclusive love, single Christians demonstrate God's non-exclusive love." (p98)

The two chapters of the book that have the most broad applicability are the chapters entitle "From loneliness to solitude" and "From aloneness to community." These are chapters that unpack and help us not just with our marital status but with our *humanity*. There is much depth to these chapters and a constant drawing of a person to live their life for God in the *kairos* (time/opportunity) of the present. A summary seems trite, but it gives the broad idea – "Fellowship with God is the solution for loneliness. Companionship with fellow Christians is the cure for aloneness." (p138)

Finally Hsu touches on the issue of sex and sexuality. He does not waiver from the biblical view of marriage being the only

place for sexual intercourse. But he is never negative. Here we have pure sweetness of beautiful, counter-cultural truths. "Sex is a drive, not a need," (p173) he asserts. "It is no higher calling for singles to be celibate than for married couples to be monogamous." (p177) Celibacy is not a denying of sexuality, rather celibate people are "fully aware of themselves as sexual beings but who express their sexuality in a celibate way." (p178)

Even here the application is not just for singles – but for all those who struggle to express sexuality in a godly way. The world cries out for us to express our every whim – whatever comes "naturally." But as Hsu asserts:

"The answer to this point of view is to recognize that the Christian life is rarely 'natural.' Far from it. It is not natural to love your neighbour, or to turn the other cheek, or to forgive someone who has wronged you. In the same way, resisting sexual temptation – or any kind of temptation – is not the 'natural' thing to do."(p183)

And applies:

"Instead of fighting an endless and losing battles against sexual temptations, a more constructive approach for Christian singles [and I would add married people as well] is to come to view sexual temptations as an affirmation of our identity as sexual beings – and also as a reminder of our dependence on God." (p180)

This is an excellent book. I have a couple of small quibbles - I think he overemphasises advice for people to wait for a while before they get married – I can see his point, yet I cheer for young people in their early twenties (even late teens) who are willing to step up to the plate of commitment – for that is also counter-cultural. But this book is a good read – especially for singles,

and those who are struggling with their singleness – but this book would be a benefit for anyone seeking to engage with the deep things of life.

