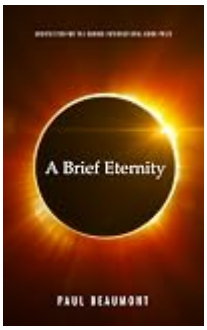
BOOKS I HAVE READ: A BRIEF ETERNITY

Posted on February 23, 2014 by Eddie

Category: Observations



A number of my friends have written books, but they tend to be non-fiction or technical ones in linguistics, biology, biblical stuides and other areas I've worked in. A Brief Eternity, by my friend Paul Beaumont is, as far as I'm aware, the first novel that any friend of my has had published. Not only that, it has been nominated for an award or two. Even more unusually, for a book by one of my friends, the novel serves as a basis for an attack on Christianity from an atheist point of view. Not what you'd expect at first glance from a book written by someone I first met in a church youth group!

So, first thing's first; Paul writes really well. The book flows nicely, is easy to read, generally makes its points well and at times is really funny. It's a good read.

The basic theme of the book is similar to Lewis' Great Divorce. Someone who unexpectedly finds himself in heaven is given the opportunity to visit hell and to get in contact with old friends. The story has a neat, if predictable, twist at the end so I won't say any more about how it works out.

There are some brilliant little cameos in the book. I loved the single goat that somehow managed to provide all of the goat's milk cheese needed for the whole of heaven and the idea of people smuggling cigarettes out of hell so that people in heaven could have a secret smoke. It's probably a mark of my own strange sense of humour that I found the idea of the rapture being triggered by a computer glitch really funny.

It is probably clear from this that there are aspects of the book which some Christians will find uncomfortable, blasphemous even, but A Brief Eternity is meant as an attack on Christianity and it's supposed to be uncomfortable!

For me, the book is at its best in its reaction to the absurdities the more extreme end of some modern forms of millenialism and bliblical literalism. At times I found myself nodding my head in agreement with things that I suspect I wasn't supposed to agree with. But then again, I don't believe in that God either!

However, I think this also points to the parts where the book is at its weakest. At one point, the main character is bored by the bland soft rock that is the only music available on TV heaven. Apparently there was no Bach or Mendelsohn! A Brief Eternity takes a swing at modern expressions of Christianity, which is fair enough, but it ignores two thousand years and more of thought and artistic endeavour.

This is most obvious when the book deals with "big themes". Issues such as why God allows suffering or some of the "texts of terror" from the Old Testament are brought out of the hat as though they were entirely new questions which proved that Christianity was false. This is unfortunate. It's not as though Christians haven't wrestled with these things for the last 2,000 years, not to mention the books of Lamentations and Ecclesiastes in the Bible. In one scene, God is put on

trial for cruelty an interesting idea which first crops up in the book of Job.

I'm not saying that an awareness of historical theology or OT wisdom literature would have changed the author's mind. However, it is unfair to imply that the ideas that are rasied are new ones or to imply that the only solutions are simplistic literalism. If Christianity were as intellectually vapid as Paul implies it would not have survived 2,000 years. Then again, perhaps the book is giving a fair critique of some current expressions of the Christian faith.

So, who should read this book? I would suggest that any Christian who is interested in western culture and how Chrisitans and the Christian faith are perceived by many people should read it. If you are easily offended by people criticising your faith then you really do need to read it.

I don't suppose many atheists read my blog, but they won't need to be told to read this book, as I suspect they will be snapping it up in their droves. But can I gently suggest that it doesn't give an entirely fair picture of Christianity and that they might want to get some balance by reading some of the more thoughtful Christian writers such as Alistair McGrath, NT Wright or even Peter Enns to get a broader view of Christian thought.

So; I reckon Christians should read an atheist book and atheists should read some Christian stuff. You can't accuse me of bias!

In closing, I need to remark that I was given a review copy of A Brief Eternity. I don't think my comments are coloured by the fact that I didn't pay for it.

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