

BOOK REVIEW: THE BOOK OF VIRTUES

By William J. Bennett; 1993; 831pp; ISBN 0-684-83577-0

I recently purchased the *Children's Book of Virtues* by Bennett (a good value, second-hand copy) and have been enchanted by the delightful prose, poetry and illustrations it contains. My son and I use it as a treasured read-aloud and greatly enjoy the gentle instruction contained within a wide range of fables, tales, poems, speeches and myths.

Bennett's master book, the *Book of Virtues*, contains the same set of writings plus hundreds more (though sadly lacks illustrations). It is a weighty tome to dip into over a lifetime (about three inches thick by B5 format), including extracts from the Bible, classical mythology, English poetry, Shakespeare, Aesop, Dickens, Tolstoy, Baldwin, as well as fairy tales and modern fiction. I feel sure that some of these stories were read to my class when I was in primary school. They are classic stories which children (and adults) 'ought' to know about.

The works are presented in ten chapters entitled: Self-Discipline, Compassion, Responsibility, Friendship, Work, Courage, Perseverance, Honesty, Loyalty and Faith. Bennett states that "this book is intended to aid in the time-honoured task of the moral education of the young". It provides "a compendium of great stories, poems, and essays from the stock of human history and literature" which "embodies common and time-honoured understandings of these virtues".

He believes that teaching children such stories are important for four reasons:

- the stories give children some specific reference points for 'moral literacy';
- such stories are fascinating to children—they engage the attention of the child;
- they help anchor our children in their culture, its history and traditions; and
- they engage us in an act of renewal, welcoming our children to a world of shared ideals.

"These stories speak to morality and virtues not as something to be possessed, but as the central part of human nature, not as something to have but as something to be, the most important thing to be. To dwell in these chapters is to put oneself, through the imagination, into a different place and time, a time when there was little doubt that children are essentially moral and spiritual beings and that the central task of education is virtue."

If you applaud the style of 'popular wisdom' expressed by characters in "The Simpsons", you will probably find this book 'corny' and 'old-fashioned'. However, the issues discussed should never be dismissed because they are told using good language and subtle examples. They represent timeless wisdom and exemplify those traits that define 'good character'.

As Paul says in Philipians 4, verse 8:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report—meditate on these things.