

Suffolk Humanists and Secularists

Newsletter July 2017

"Stem Cell Revolutions"



Tuesday 11th July “Stem cell revolutions”.

This superb documentary uses animations and illustrations to explain how stem cells were discovered, how they work and how they are poised to revolutionise medicine. The potential of stem cells to clone and regenerate tissue and even grow new organs raises a host of ethical issues which will form the basis of our subsequent discussion.

As usual we meet at 7:30 p.m. In the Darwin room of Arlington's Brasserie, Museum St . Ipswich.

Summary of our May Meeting: “Read any good books lately?”

I am always intrigued about how it is that books influence people's views and attitudes and the books chosen at this meeting were no exception. While it is understandable that books can affect political views it seems a bit of a surprise that a book on software design processes can have a similar effect. Anyway here is a resume of the books presented and discussed:

'Earthsea' by Ursula Le Guin

Ursula Le Guin's 'Earthsea' (comprising 4 novels) is

about an ancient world of wizards, magic, darkness, light and dragons. Ursula Le Guin usually writes science fiction, but 'Earthsea' is pure fantasy. It is similar to Tolkein's 'Lord of the Rings'. Essentially it is a story of the triumph of good over evil. A lovely, absorbing read.

'A History of the World in 100 objects' by Neil MacGregor

Neil MacGregor was Director of the British Museum when he was asked by BBC Radio 4 to broadcast a series of programmes based on 100 objects chosen by him and colleagues at the museum which told the story of humanity.

The objects had to range in date from the beginning of human history (2 million years ago) right up to the present. This they duly did on the radio, once a week. For those who couldn't visit the British Museum to view the objects chosen, this book (beautifully illustrated and written) was published. It's a very engaging read of past human history.

‘The Mythical Man-Month’ by Frederick P. Brooks, Jr.

Certain books are said to be capable of changing your life. For some, it's The Bible. For me, two such books are ‘Catch 22’ and ‘The Mythical Man-Month’. The latter is a technical manual concerning computer software projects. It affected my working life after I read it in the sixties. It was revolutionary in its approach to computing and like all revolutions caused upsets, specifically for me and my career. Having read it and tried to apply its concepts, I sometimes found myself at odds with my colleagues, preaching concepts they were not interested in. I was an atheist evangelist!

‘The Dispossessed’ by Ursula Le Guin

In ‘The Dispossessed’ an alternative to capitalism is described in detail. Ursula Le Guin writes about a future society based on twin planets. One world is an Earth-like mixture of capitalist, socialist and fascist states. The other world is home to an anarchist society, which has no laws (though it is not lawless), has no rulers and has no money. ‘To make a thief, make an owner; to create crime, create laws.’ Personal freedom is everything, even to the point where altruism is found to be offensive! Needless to say, religion plays no part in this society. Science and technology are almost all that the world’s population have. It’s bleak, but Le Guin makes it work.

The Demon-Haunted World (or Science as a Candle in the Dark) by Carl Sagan. 1996.

Carl Sagan champions a sceptical inquiring outlook and rational thought as a defence against having the wool pulled over your eyes by a variety of agents including 'new age' pseudo-scientists, fundamentalists, ufologists, politicians and worse. I particularly like his chapter on “The Fine Art of Baloney Detection” where he exposes many rhetorical tricks and false arguments people use to try and slip around the truth, and how to spot them. He does not openly declare himself an atheist, but his writing about his upbringing, love of his parents and understanding of wanting and of loss, speaks of a humanist outlook, and he demolishes religion's 'God moves in mysterious ways' and appeal to a 'handed down authority' tactics. A nice contrast to Dawkins' more confrontational approach. In a world where truth is becoming increasingly hard to discern from chaff this book deserves to be more widely read!

Church and State in English Education 1870 to the present day by M Cruickshank.

This book was published over 50 years ago but still provides a comprehensive coverage of the religious undercurrents that led up to the present day structure of schools in England. It is essentially a catalogue of fudged deals between government and the various religious pressure groups. A key

event was the Cowper-Temple clause which amended the 1870 Elementary Education act. This act aimed to subsidise CofE schools with ratepayers money and in its unamended form would have given the CofE authority to give Religious Instruction to all pupils irrespective of their background. The CT clause allowed parents to withdraw their children from this Religious Instruction. This amendment was further refined in the 1944 and 1988 acts which require schools to have “a daily act of worship of a broadly Christian nature” but allows parents the right of withdrawal.

Lion: A long way home by Saroo Brierley).

This book is the autobiography of Saroo Brierley who was born in a tiny village in India but became separated from his older brother in a railway station. The five-year-old Saroo boarded a train and fell asleep. He ended up on the streets of Calcutta from where he was later taken by adoptive parents to Tasmania. The book chronicles how twenty five years later he used Google Earth to find his way home to his family.

Cry the Beloved Country by Alan Paton

Possibly the most significant book addressing the apartheid era in South Africa. Zulu priest Stephen Kumalo leaves his village to find his family who previously migrated to the city of Johannesburg. He finds that his sister is now a prostitute, his brother a labour protestor and his son, Absalom, has been arrested for the murder of a white man. Kumalo struggles in Johannesburg to rescue his family and the book combines the desperation, fear and inhumanity in the South Africa of the 1940s.

Future Events

Tuesday 11th July 7:30 at Arlingtons
Topic: " Stem Cell Revolutions" (see front page)

Saturday July 29th Lunch meeting: The next of these will be held at the Duke of York in Woodbridge from 12:00 noon onwards.

Please let me know if you plan to attend.

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Tuesday 8th August Annual General Meeting followed by Barbecue.

This will be held at Stutton. Details will be in the next Newsletter.

It has always proved difficult to get enough volunteers to join the committee so please don't be shy. We usually have 4 or five one hour committee meetings every year. Note: Any motions - please let the secretary know asap beforehand

Ipswich Faith and Community Forum

With the strapline: "Working for the common good through growing friendship and understanding between people and communities of differing faiths and beliefs" IFCF provides opportunities for individuals and groups to identify shared issues where they can work together.

Somewhat in contrast to the more traditional interfaith approach, the group aims to help people work together despite their beliefs rather than because of them.

This new group started last October and is now holding regular monthly discussion sessions. So far topics have included "Acts of Peace" which aims to identify and promote activities that help encourage good neighbourliness. The most recent meeting was an update on the Ipswich area refugee situation and just before the election the topic was "Your faith: Your politics".

For more information see the website:
ipswichfaithandcommunityforum.org.uk

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