

Life Works: Amanda Ferguson: Review

There are so many psychology self help books, written in the same remorselessly up-beat 'all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds' tone, that the most fair-minded reader cannot help but feel a sinking of the heart when asked to give an opinion of one. In the case of "Life Works", though, I have to admit that my preconceptions were completely unfounded.

Ms. Ferguson begins her book with a resounding affirmation of the rights of the carer by alluding to the airline drill command telling mothers to put the oxygen mask over their own noses before attending to the baby and from this point on she had grabbed my attention. A counsellor putting care for the carers as her central motif?! What might she write next?

The avowed intent of this book is to help people help themselves and, as such, it is written very clearly, using everyday examples of issues. The limitations of this approach are acknowledged and suggestions are made about when getting professional help might be more appropriate (such as dealing with drugs and alcohol). Explanations and suggestions are drawn from a wide range of psychological and psycho-analytic theories along the lines of 'what helps best' rather than promoting an allegiance to a particular school of thought. Simple exercises are given at the end of each chapter to promote strengths and coping skills.

In fact, the very clarity of the book is quite deceptive, lulling the reader along into covering the issues easily and steadily so that it is some time before it becomes clear that this book is very different from those that have gone before. For me, the wake-up call sounded on p.20 "Change, however, doesn't always result in such a fairytale ending." At last! A recognition that a person can embark on a course of personal growth, which may be well founded and appropriate, only to be rejected by those around them. How likely is it that all the people in your life, who formed a relationship with the old you are going to continue to accept you if they find that you have undergone a major change in orientation? It might make you happy, but that doesn't mean that it will appeal to them.

Once I was beginning to pay close attention, I detected a writer who has rejected a number of the standard 'self help' clichés. Take her opinions on stress – is it some terrible disaster to be avoided at all costs? Apparently not "Stress and anxiety are a normal part of life. We all grapple with them and try to use them to our advantage – a bit of anxiety before making a speech can give us the energy that we need in order to pull it off, .." (p.43). Clearly stress has its contribution to make and it is perfectly normal and nothing to get into a big flap about. Ms. Ferguson goes on to give about the most useful piece of psychological advice that can be given; you can control your anxiety levels by a very simple breathing exercise.

If this is not enough, Ms. Ferguson suggests very firmly that her audience should give up the dream of the perfect family. She acknowledges that the family is the major influence in human development, but points out "Our parents did the best they could for us." (p.86). In one sentence she has closed what has become a favourite bolt hole for those fleeing from the responsibilities of adult life; that they can never change because they had a terrible childhood. This revolutionary beginning is continued with case histories of people who had undeniably dreadful experiences as children, but managed to overcome them by adult development and growth. Christine (p.106) is shown as learning to manage money issues, which originally derived from an abusive parent, by facing the problem in adult life. Jana (p.146) is described as "...able to build the security, self-esteem, and confidence that she needed within herself." So Ms. Ferguson's views are very clear; childhood is not destiny and adults can change the future if not the past.