

**A Review of '*Princesses and Pornstars:
Sex, Power, Identity*'
(Published by The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne 2008)**

Emily Maguire is a young writer, perhaps most prominent in church circles for *The Gospel According to Luke* - a novel about faith and life, and love between a pastor of a church (Luke) and a worker at a sexual health clinic. The orientation of the novel was clear to me from the start, and I believe it could have been more aptly called, *The Gospel According to Emily*.

While Emily Maguire has written many articles for newspapers, this is her first major non-fiction work. It is clearly a book written by a writer, and as such reads well, with a mix of personal comment, stories from other people and references from contemporary books. While the direct religious references are not frequent, there is much to consider in this book as many aspects can be linked to a challenge to Christian ethos and morals. The title is of course linked to the current debate in our era where pornstars become role models and pornography has become in some places so mainstream it is routine. It is also a questioning of the present situation with regard to the place of women and whether real change has taken place or are women stuck with a choice of being a princess or a pornstar?

The book covers the areas one would expect from a feminist work written in a post-modern culture. It is also presented in a spirit of reasonableness, though I found underlying a didactic quality that was somewhat at odds with the prevailing ethos of supreme tolerance in a post-modern world. Rather than comment on every aspect of the book, I thought it more prudent to comment on the areas that I found more intriguing. For example, the discussion on sex education raised with me one main question. Why do abstinence and modesty movements deny people's sexuality? Her analysis of pornography suitably fits a post modern feminist interpretation which wants to harness pornography for what it perceives is the right way. I found this section somewhat naïve, which could be chalked up to my flawed male understanding, but ultimately as a Christian it fails to realise the inherent nature of sin and the pervasive destructive nature of pornography because one is never satisfied.

The place of women and work is a continuing theme, but for me this illustrated a failure to look at this in a different way. Emily Maguire seemingly perpetuates the focus of men and work which she wants to critique, and in most places thus continues the myth of work as only being that performed by people for money. She may not believe this herself, but the quotations and references are such that money becomes the unwitting centre. This is a common trap for all of us, but I constantly remind myself that in the church the majority of 'work' is not paid, and in some cases not counted. We all need to work, and most need to do paid work to pay bills and live, but even if you don't need the money, work is good for you and part of creation.

Questions related to child care and parenting is something that needs more consideration, though, as Emily has decided herself not to have children (a point she acknowledges), she was not able to incorporate personal reflection. Now thirty one, Emily Maguire has been married since she was twenty, an interesting fact in

itself, marrying young and still being married. Even more intriguing is her attitude to marriage, which she notes as conflicted. "Although I am more in love with my husband now than on the day I married him, if I was making the decision today I would choose not to get married."

After considering her position it was unclear to me what she thought marriage actually was. The main wedding she talks about is one between two of her female friends, which would not have been a legal wedding, but illustrates the popular idea around today of recognition services. This story would have naturally left most readers smiling and thinking how wonderful love is. It certainly begged the question of what marriage is, and simply illustrated to me the focus on individual rights today which renders rites of life as more a personal adventure for each and any couple in any format they want. It also helped me to consider more the Christian understanding of marriage and how.

For me (and it would appear for other reviewers I have read), the most significant and devastating chapter is that concerned with body image – 'The body trap'. Women - airbrushed, nipped, tucked, changed for a day and a new perspective, especially for men. Do we encourage any proper consideration of this tremendous social change which has arisen so dramatically? Is our main theology of beauty telling the bridal party that beauty is something that also comes from within? How can the Church help to address this dominant culture?

Overall, I found this work to provide an example of the current logical difficulty that is faced by many promoters of tolerance and love, wonderful concepts that are of course difficult to argue against especially when they are not defined. I could not help but wonder when I read this book, how can we hold any relationships above others (or if this should even be a question), and why certain things can still be regarded as not helpful, let alone sinful? As an example for discussion; are people now so reluctant to critique different forms of relationships, let alone endorse marriage as a good and proper 'institution' and the appropriate place for sexual relationships, because a post modern society not does provide a consistent moral framework to do so, or are people simply afraid of offending anyone in any type of relationship that is different to their own?

I need to state that I am not suggesting that Emily Maguire does not have high standards and a moral framework and understanding, but I was left intrigued as to the authority and basis of her decisions and words of advice, and whether the world is a relative place or some things are related for all time and society.

While I can find points of help in most books, this book is a particularly helpful example of why I believe secular humanism is inadequate. Violence, sexual harrassment and discrimination against women will not be ended by good moral education (especially for men) and a call to better arms. A thing called sin is not easily swayed by helpful advice, no matter how good the prose.

Peter Bentley

Note: first published in ACCatalyst: Volume 2, June 2008