

# Puppy rather than monster of depravity

This assessment of the human condition will sell, says **Rachel Mann**

## Humankind: A hopeful history

**Rutger Bregman**

Bloomsbury £20

(978-1-4088-9893-2)

Church Times Bookshop

£18



FEW people seeking a breezy summer read buy 450-page books about social psychology and evolutionary ethics. That is about to change.

Rutger Bregman's impressively positive *Humankind* may become the go-to classic for all those who are looking for hope in troubled times. Bregman is the Dutch historian who annoyed the world's billionaires at the 2019 World Economic Forum, when he said that tax-avoidance was ruining the world. *Humankind* proves that Bregman is no mere agent provocateur. This is one of those smart, readable books destined to sell shed-loads.

*Humankind's* thesis is simple: *Homo sapiens* is the dominant species not because we are ruthless predators, but because we are good. We are successful because we are relational and co-operative — so much so that we should, he thinks, be called "*Homo puppy*". For Bregman, it is "civilisation" and its structural iniquities that cloud our "nomadic" brains and lead us into perdition. If this sounds dangerously close to an Edenic fantasy about the nobility of humanity's "natural" state, the strength of Bregman's argument lies in the examples that he deploys.

His most striking example of "innate" human goodness is his

account of the "real Lord of the Flies". In William Golding's fictional version, boys get stranded on a tropical island and descend into savagery. According to Bregman, it has been read as an exemplar of "vener theory": the idea that, without strict rules, civilised humans rapidly revert to cruelty. Bregman exposes Golding's fiction as bunk through the true story of a group of Tongan teenagers who were stranded on an island for a year. They created a co-operative society and remain friends for life. It's jaw-dropping stuff.

Still, one example does not make a plausible thesis; so Bregman attacks "vener theory", case by case. He shows how famous psychological experiments such as "Milgram's Shock Machine" and the "Stanford Prison Experiment" — which supposedly demonstrate our underlying beastliness — are rubbish. If his examples do not quite make a full thesis, his critique leads him to call for a "new realism", in which society is shaped around trust in our resilient goodness rather than our presumed meanness.

*Humankind* is not comfortable reading for Christians. Bregman grew up in a conservative Evangelical context, and he treats Christianity as a version of "vener theory". I wish that his chapter on the power of "turning the other cheek" took seriously the impact of Jesus's dictum on Christian practice. There are also moments when his example-based approach is limited and glib. None the less, this is a book to bathe in. Popular, infuriating, and at times brilliant, it is delicious summer reading: a reminder that we are marked by Original Blessing as much as Original Sin.

Canon Rachel Mann is Rector of St Nicholas's, Burnage, and a Visiting Fellow of Manchester Met University.



**Seaside tradition:** a donkey ride at Bognor Regis in the 1970s, from *Seaside 100: A history of the British seaside in 100 objects* by Kathryn Ferry (Unicorn, £14.99 (£13.50); 978-1-912690-84-8). Sandcastles, piers, beach huts, promenade shelters, and ice-cream cones are among the objects under scrutiny

## Threadbare days

Lyle Dennen reviews summer recollections

### British Summer Time Begins: The school summer holidays 1930-1980

**Ysenda Maxtone Graham**

Little, Brown £18.99

(978-1-408-71055-5)

Church Times Bookshop £17.10



YSENDA MAXTONE GRAHAM's new book, *British Summer Time Begins*, has nothing to do with clocks going forward, but is a warm, wise look back at the British summer holidays from the view of children during the mid-20th century.

She has done a vast number and range of perceptive interviews of

those who were children between 1930 and 1970. They tell endearing and sometime disturbing stories of what it was like. When she asked Sir Nicholas Soames if his parents ever took him abroad, he replied, "Certainly not! No one went abroad except to fight a war."

When Maxtone Graham sensed a great spiritual and physical freedom, Dennis Skinner characteristically responded: "Don't give me 'romantic past'. It was sheer poverty."

This book would be an interesting read during any summer, to see how the British had been, how children were treated, what people's values and lifestyles were, the relationship between the sexes, how the class

structure functioned, and what people's hopes and fears were. Read in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, it has a gripping, questioning, and slightly surreal quality.

The 50-year period covered by the book should include the poverty of the Great Depression, the horrors of the Second World War and the Nazis, the end of Empire, and then the Swinging Sixties; but these only slightly touch the experience of the children.

What was central to the memories of those who had been children then was the end of school; the boredom of the long summer; other children to play with; parents; home; food; the trip to the seaside or countryside, or maybe even abroad; and then the end of summer and the return to school. The author powerfully comments: "It doesn't always matter who loves you, when you're a child, as long as someone does."

Maxtone Graham develops some important themes through the book. There is the contrast that the world, for children, was porous. Children were expected to go out and play; they were not to be seen for the day, and had to create their own games and use their imagination. There were no imprisoning devices of video games, laptops, or smartphones for children, and people were not, then, as fearful and protective of their children as we feel we must be. Then, there was a greater absence of materialism, of making do with whatever one had. This was not just the poor, but also "the upper-class taste for the threadbare".

The Ven. Dr Lyle Dennen is a former Archdeacon of Hackney.

Pat Ashworth reads of a power to restore

## Walks, and gardens green

### The Well Gardened Mind: Rediscovering nature in the modern world

**Sue Stuart-Smith**

William Collins £20

(978-0-00-810071-1)

Church Times Bookshop £18



MONTHS of confinement in a time of stress have been confirmation, if any were needed, of the restorative power of a garden.

Sue Stuart-Smith uses her clinical knowledge and experience as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist to examine what it is that makes gardening so transformative, and why it is so crucial to mental health

and the environment that we live in.

It is one of those beautiful books that opens so many windows in your mind that you feel not just better informed but wiser for reading it. She explores the deep existential processes involved in creating and caring for a garden: "protected space that allows our inner world and the outer world to coexist free from the pressures of everyday life"; "a way of grappling with our place in the world and helping us feel we have some grip on life"; "a place to buffer us when the going gets tough".

The natural cycles of growth and decay, disappearance and return, she believes, can help people to understand and accept that mourning is part of the cycle of life. The science

is fascinating, as she probes the idea that we can cultivate the soul or self like a garden. This is something that goes back to ancient times, and is beginning to be applied to the brain in contemporary science. New imaging techniques show that a constant process of being weeded, pruned, and fertilised is shown to keep the brain healthy at cellular level.

Equally riveting is the history: the Benedictines, who lifted gardening from the realm of penitential toil; Hildegard of Bingen, who recognised that people could thrive only where the natural world thrived; reformers such as the physician William Tuke, who campaigned for gardens in asylums; Freud, whose love of flowers helped him to pre-

pare for death; and Wordsworth and his sister, whose garden helped them to recover an inner sense of home.

Case studies, legends, anecdotes, and personal history all contribute to this powerful book. I never knew that Sheffield cutlers were renowned for their horticultural skills and grew auriculas in their cramped backyards; that coalminers cultivated pansies; or that there were many gardens on the Western Front.

Gardening has a new impetus in an age in which levels of depression and anxiety have increased and drug costs are rising, the author suggests, concluding: "More than ever, we need to remind ourselves that, first and foremost, we are creatures of the earth."