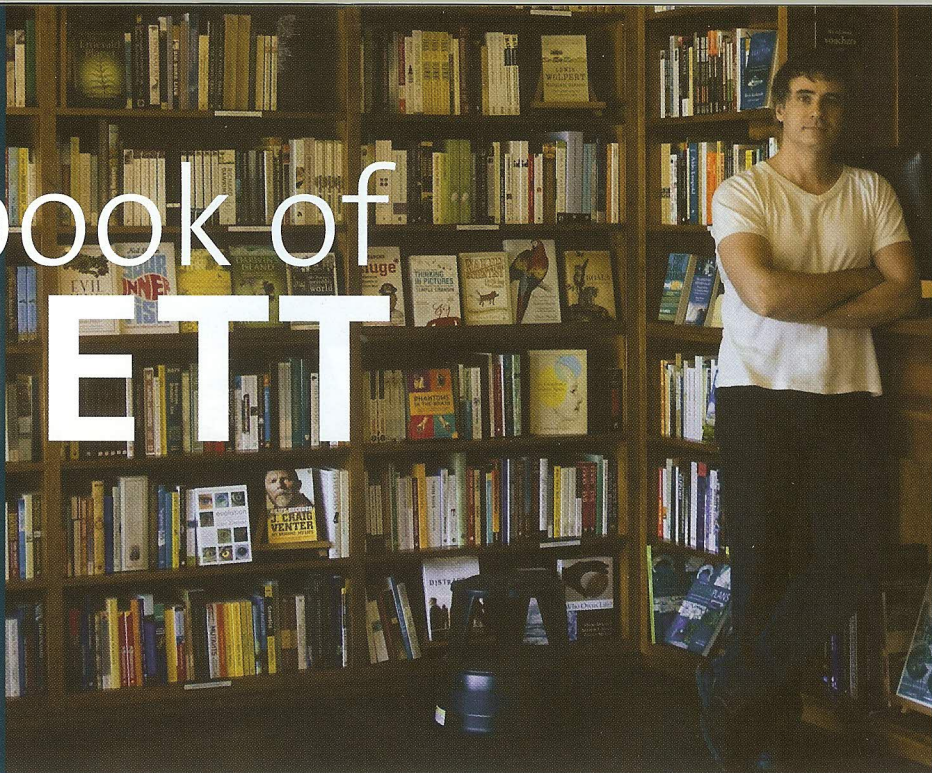
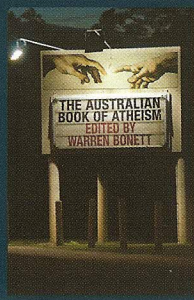


The book of BONETT



Warren Bonett, owner of the Sunshine Coast's specialty science bookshop Embiggen Books and editor of *The Australian Book of Atheism*, talks to **Michael Kitson**.

Can you discuss the genesis of this book? Was it difficult to find contributors?

Before I returned to Australia four years ago, I had been listening to people like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins describe Australia as an example of how well a non-religious and basically secular country could run. Yet I knew of a variety of ways in which the then government was attempting to bring religious groups into policy-making positions as well as into social services. I had also heard stories of children being taught creationism in our schools. Once I was back, I became good friends with [writer and atheist activist] Chrys Stevenson, who helped me get it all started by providing me with a list of 80 or so Australian atheists and agnostics. I wrote to them all and about 50 accepted. After that it was the difficult process of whittling it down to a manageable print size.

What are some of the local issues for Australian atheist thinkers?

High on the list are abortion, education, chaplaincy and the influence of religious lobby groups on government. And there's one issue which crosses all the boundaries and that is free speech. There are moves in the UN and in parts of Europe to make criticism of religions a possible hate crime. Australia tends to follow suit across a range of legal issues like this and so there's a real danger that it'll become even more difficult to criticise bad ideas where we find them.

Several years ago books such as Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great* became Christmas bestsellers. Do you think atheism still attracts the same attention in the Western world today?

Those two books along with Sam Harris's book *The End of Faith* and Dan Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* were the first atheist books to come out in response to the attacks on 9/11, which has served as the catalyst for open criticism of violent acts justified by faith and by extension the belief sets that provide the spiritual legitimacy for the people performing them. Since then many other books have come out, of course with varying degrees of success, and polls like those conducted by Nielsen show atheism as the fastest-growing segment of 'belief/nonbelief' in Australia and America. So it seems that there is an increasing market for books that challenge religious authority.

Are there any religious or 'new age' books or writers that you admire (even if you disagree with their arguments)?

Not particularly. The best of these writers though would be people like John Selby Spong and Karen Armstrong. Both are clearly intelligent and good writers but I simply find the mental gymnastics required to shoehorn Christian beliefs into the deist religious defense they mount too much to deal with. As for new age authors, to me they largely read like spiritual pick'n'mixers: a little of this, a little of that, a dash of pseudoscience

(usually using the word quantum somewhere) and sprinkled liberally with self-helpisms.

How did your experience as a bookseller help you in the development of this book?

It actually helped a great deal. It helped in particular to be running a shop with a 3000-strong science section and 1000-strong philosophy section, as the authors I contacted could see I was serious about the things I was writing to them on. Part of the help came from authors who spoke here and reps who come to see us. They could see that we were trying to do something a little different and so helped us with contacts.

Booksellers are facing challenging times. What future do you see for a specialty science bookstore such as Embiggen Books?

I really wish I knew. We are currently exploring relocation options because the area in which we're situated has been heavily hit by the GFC (retirees losing super, construction industry losing thousands, and tourism down). Building a new business in this context is pretty difficult, but we've been here over two years now, battling for every extra sale we make. It's our specialty which keeps us going as people travel hundreds of kilometres to us every week.

Do you have something planned to say to God on the off chance you meet?

Hi! What do I call you? Thor? Zeus? Baal? Vishnu? Well whatever, I'd like a detailed account of what you were doing for the 13.699 billion years prior to creating us, please. And, if you don't mind, I'd like some kind of explanation for your apparent dislike of sex, women, certain body parts, free inquiry, science, criticism, certain foods, homosexuals, and certain medical treatments? And finally—string theory—can you explain that to me? ☐

The Australian Book of Atheism: Insights from Australia's Leading Atheist Thinkers is published by Scribe in December. See review, page 36.

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