

Review - A Life Stripped Bare

Contributed by Lozzie

Lozzie gets down to basics in the first of a pair of reviews of books on ethical living by Leo Hickman.

While many people would find it unthinkable to give up their cars, toilet bleach, DVD players, their tumble dryers, or shares in BP in order to make the world a better place, an increasing number are wanting to step back from out-and-out consumerism and find a way to live a cleaner existence - one that is not only easier on the physical body but one that is lighter on the conscience too.

Leo Hickman, a columnist for the Guardian newspaper, decided to conduct an experiment on himself: he would give up all these things over the course of 12 months and report back on whether it is possible to live a life that is "Western but aware". The result was his book "A Life Stripped Bare", which seems to have two versions available - one subtitled "Tiptoeing through the ethical minefield" and the other "My year trying to live ethically".

Hickman is perfect for this assignment because he is so ordinary; a run-of-the mill, average 30-something bloke living with his wife and baby daughter in London. He is not an eco-warrior, a downsizer or a Green activist and is a total novice when it comes to 'ethical' living. He hasn't the first clue as to what constitutes a low-impact lifestyle and appeals to his Guardian readership for ideas - many of which are reprinted in the book. Some of the funniest parts of the narrative are when he describes the problems he has persuading his family to give some of the ideas a try. I would love to read an account of the same 12 months written by his wife!

There must be a hundred books out there that are churned out with the premise of being guide books - sometimes patronisingly telling you how you can live a better and less impactful life, but I enjoyed Hickman's book because it was a first-hand account told by someone who did not start out particularly passionate about the subject, but converted slowly and surely to ideas that I personally feel very strongly about. Therefore the book had a feel-good factor because, at the end of it, I had a distinct sense of "See? I told you so!" I wanted to anonymously post copies of the book through all my neighbours' front doors, or leave copies à-la-BookCrossing on buses and in waiting rooms.

Hickman describes with real candour the process of everything from using washable nappies, going for a week without TV or radio, using an organic box scheme, holidaying abroad by train, starting a wormery, and how it feels when the ethical auditors he invites to scrutinise his pre-experiment lifestyle criticise almost every aspect of his house and life. Made me think very hard about many elements of my own lifestyle which, in spite of being a rabid nutta Downsizer, still retain plenty of room for improvement.

This is a well-written book but my one and only complaint is that it did not have a reference or a "further reading" section. Useful names, addresses and websites are dotted around throughout the text and it would be great to see them all compiled at the back of the book for ease. Then it would REALLY give all those swanky self-help coffee table books a run for their money.

Post Script - I see that Hickman has been reading my mind: he has published a second book entitled "A Good Life" (Eden Books, Transworld c. £13.00) which, according to Eve Magazine is - "For every ethical dilemma, there's an answer. Printed on recycled paper using vegetable inks, it's this year's must-have coffee-table tome." Ha!

Lozzie's review of "A Good Life" will be posted soon on Downsizer.