

THE BAD BEEKEEPERS CLUB by Bill Turnbull

A review by Andy Watters of Kingston Beekeepers Association

My cynical persona imagines an executive meeting room full of suits; Mr. Turnbull sat at one end of the table trying to pitch his idea of a whimsical autobiography of a much loved TV personality to a bunch of stony-faced salesmen.

“But Mr. Turnbull, what’s the angle huh?...The USP?”

“But I’m a famous and much loved TV personality.

“Not famous enough though Bill.”

...or as much loved as you’d like to think Mr.T”

“Come on now Bill, cast me a juicy worm.”

“Look, I’m sorry, I’m going to have to leave now, I have to go and check my bees.”

And the rest is history, as they say.

No matter how much he may try and convince us of his poor record as a beekeeper, I can see through his cunning plan. It’s precisely his use of the word ‘bad’ that gives the book it’s unique selling point and sets it apart from all other beekeeping books I’ve ever cast eyes upon. After all, beekeeping writing invariably leads from the standpoint of how to be a ‘good’ beekeeper, and thereafter proceeds to list all procedures and manipulations on how to achieve this heady status. A very dry read indeed, unless you’re an overtly devout beekeeper with masochistic leanings to boot.

‘What not to do’ can be just as helpful as ‘What to do’ and by giving us an account of his bad beekeeping experiences, he has in fact given us fellow beekeepers some useful bites of information. From my own experience as a beekeeper and talking with other beekeepers, we could all join Bill’s ‘Bad Beekeepers Club.’ Hardly a week goes by where one is not inadvertently killing bees or making matters worse, where our intentions were precisely the opposite. In fact, as I was starting to read Bill’s book, my own beekeeping skills were taking a bit of a battering; bees swarming with no meaningful intervention from me. Actually, that’s not quite true, as the one manipulation I proceeded in carrying out only made matters worse and I ended up losing two swarms of bees, when if I’d just left well alone, I actually would have lost none. Doh!!

When I look back at my own failings as a beekeeper and regularly listen to others’ failings as well (beekeepers are usually only too happy to relate tales of their ‘bad’ beekeeping experiences) I begin to wonder why no one has ever written such a book before. After all, the world is as full of bad beekeepers as it is good, each being one in the same in my experience. I expect what we needed was exactly what has happened here – the combination of celebrity and beekeeper to give the right mix for a successful book.

I enjoyed this book much more than I expected to. In fact there’s not much to dislike about it. It’s warm, witty and whimsical; I hope that it opens up the world of beekeeping to a new audience without necessarily creating thousands of new beekeepers in the process. Can Britain cope with the consequences of the success of this book?

Though it uses beekeeping as the main thread running through the entire book, it was actually the non-beekeeping stories that I found most appealing. As a fan of ‘Strictly’ I especially enjoyed Mr. Turnbull’s

relating of his experiences on that show. I found myself drawn to the oft painful descriptions of the physical torture that was 'Strictly' – obviously more wincing than a bee sting above the neckline; Bill's descriptions of his training/torture wouldn't look out of place in some S&M handbook, if such a thing exists. And I'll bet his bees were happy that he was otherwise engaged and giving all his attentions to his lovely dancing partner rather than them! I have this picture in my head of honey bees queuing up every week to use the telephone to vote for Bill Turnbull in Strictly. So that's how he managed to survive so many weeks!

His writing skills lie in his ability to write as he speaks. Ok, there are no great peaks and troughs, no heart wrenching moments of raw emotion, no lingering pictures that etch images onto the brain and re-assert themselves as conscious thought. And that's not to be derogatory in offering a review. It's precisely this gentle ride through carefully selected aspects of his life experience that make this book so lightly and frothily enjoyable. I defy you not to warm to the man after having taken the gentle roller coaster ride through his life with bees and other animals.

If you are a non-beekeeper, then this will give you a rare insight into the fascinating world of the honeybee. There is just enough detail here to keep you interested without overstepping the mark with 'too much information' causing your brain to shut down. And the new or even seasoned beekeeper will find much to relate to. I'm sure on at least one occasion, while reading the book, you will find yourself either inadvertently nodding your head or talking out loud, the words "That's happened to me!"

This is the ideal book to take on holiday. It's a sandwich filler of a book - take two great works of literature and fill with a light and frothy paperback. You won't be disappointed with the resultant combination of flavours.

I think this book deserves a sequel. And I think we can let Mr. Turnbull ride his bike without 'stabilisers' next time - he doesn't need honeybees to hitch his story to. I'm sure he can ride reasonably well without the need of a USP or 'angle.'

Andy Watters