# BOOK REVIEWS: *Life and How To Survive It* Robyn Skynner and John Cleese, Methuen, and *The Nemesis File* Paul Bruce, Blake.

## Peter Greener

*Families and How to Survive Them*, Skynner and Cleese, Methuen, London, was released to worldwide acclaim in 1983 and instantly became a best seller. *Life and How To Survive It* is the second part of the project the authors began in 1980. They "wanted to make available to the general public, in a way that was easy to absorb, those aspects of psychological knowledge we had found most helpful ourselves, towards making life more understandable, meaningful and enjoyable".

*Families* went on to become a classic text for mental health professionals and an excellent introduction to the psychodynamics of everyday life for the lay reader. By the time I'd finished reading *Life and How To survive It* I wondered whether a copy should be compulsory reading for every politician or aspiring politician in the land.

Following on from their previous book, Skynner and Cleese begin by re-visiting those factors which make for healthy individuals and families, but then move beyond, to explore recent research on characteristics of exceptionally health individuals and families.

They subsequently take the ideas from this research and, successfully I feel, extend and develop them in other contexts outside the family, examining the behaviour and characteristics of schools, businesses and organisations, social groups and societies.

When they move beyond the family and the organisation to examine societies, they explore the correspondence between the sickest and most healthy levels of families and their counterparts in societies. They develop a framework of analysis which helps to make sense of how political systems develop. They identify the characteristics of chaotic societies (Somalia comes to mind), totalitarian societies (Nazi Germany is the illustration they use), and democratic societies. They look at the part splitting and projection play in helping political leaders develop and maintain their power, and they emphasise how the form of government of a people relates to the stage of development of the society concerned.

To help encourage and develop debate about what might constitute elements of optimally healthy societies, they compare and contrast two peoples – the Ik of Uganda ("the loveless people") and the Ladahkis of northern India ("so healthy and so emotionally secure"), and two nations, the United States of America and Japan.

As with so many authors, they go on to highlight the danger of the deepening divide between nations of the first and third worlds, but they bring a new perspective to the argument. They look at the psychological elements that are at play in these situations. The richer nations, often former colonisers, continue, they suggest, to act out a parent/child split – projecting all their childish 'bits' onto less developed nations, just as within nations the rich view the poor as lazy, irresponsible and unwilling to work.

Moving beyond the social, economic and psychological discourse, they acknowledge that they take a risk of losing readers in Chapter 4, where they explore the place of spiritual and religious ideals in our lives. Those who stay with the chapter will be rewarded with some frank revelations about the place of spiritual and mystical experience in the lives of the authors, timely, following the theme of this year's Conference in Nelson.

The final chapter addresses what we can do to change not only ourselves, but our organisations and the society in which we live. Throughout, the emphasis is on the importance of personal growth and development and on influencing society so that change is organic, not brought about through the enforcement of power. Skynner says that people who are attracted to politics are often trying to change everyone else as an alternative to the real need to change themselves. Taking back projections and avoiding splitting, they suggest, is central to the development of real power; that is the challenge they leave us with.

"When democratic nations use the CIA and MI5 to behave like Big Brother we should not hesitate to see that it corresponds to behaviour in the sickest societies" (Skynner and Cleese, 1993, p 152)

In 1169, at the invitation of Dermot MacMurrough, the banished King of Leinster, Strongbow arrived with his troops in Ireland. Exactly 800 years later, British soldiers were to arrive again following the current round of 'The Troubles". Three years prior to this, in 1966, a young man called Paul Bruce, following in his father's footsteps, joined the British Army. *The Nemesis File* is the account of his six year career in the Army, though more precisely is a chilling and sickening account of the 12 months he spent in Northern Ireland on active service with the SAS.

Skynner and Cleese highlight the impact that positive experiences outside our family of origin can have on us, and explore how an experience in a 'healthy school' or organisations) can help overcome the experience of growing up in an 'unhealthy family'. The experience of Paul Bruce demonstrates how the development of apparently healthy attributes – trust, loyalty and obedience – can be used by the state to turn a young man, fiercely proud of his achievement at successfully becoming a member of the SAS, into a cold-blooded killer.

After leaving the army, Paul Bruce became an alcoholic. Over twenty years later this book strikes me as part of his therapy. The grammar and style are not those of a professional author, and at times the themes are repetitive, but that's hardly surprising. For those who think the world should be fair, this book is a rude awakening.