

BOOK REVIEW

Masi Noor and Marina Cantazucino (art by Sophie Standing), *Forgiveness is really strange*, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018, 62pp., ISBN: 978-1-78592-124-7 (hbk), ISBN: 978-0-85701-279-1.

What is forgiveness? Why do some people forgive whilst others do not? Whom is forgiveness for – the person harmed or the person responsible for the harm? What is the function of forgiveness? These are some of the questions addressed by this short comic book – a study of forgiveness both unique and unusual.

The book is part of a series of comic books about issues or concepts that are ‘really strange’ that combines the writing of certain experts in a particular field with the artwork of Sophie Standing. Previous topics have included pain, trauma and anxiety. In the case of forgiveness the experts here are Marina Cantazucino, founder of The Forgiveness Project, and Masi Noor, who has studied the social psychology of forgiveness and its use as a conflict resolution strategy.

The book is a useful introduction to the issue of forgiveness and indeed could be viewed as a taster for the website developed by Marina Cantazucino (www.theforgivenessproject.com). Many of the personal examples provided in the book are drawn from much longer stories that can be found on the website or in Marina’s previous book, *The forgiveness project* (Cantazucino, 2016). Whereas that first book and the website leave the personal stories to communicate their messages, this new book asks questions and provides possible answers, based on research evidence, while not pushing a single point of view.

Marina has written about her purpose on her website, and this helps to understand how this new book fits into her ongoing mission:

At the heart of The Forgiveness Project is an understanding that restorative narratives have the power to transform lives; not only supporting people to move on from harm or trauma, but also building a climate of tolerance, resilience, hope and empathy.

Masi herself explains her involvement at the end of the book:

Growing up in Afghanistan, I have had plenty of opportunities to experience hurt and loss. What motivates me to explore forgiveness has been realizing the collateral damage that unforgiveness can cause, including losing my trust and confidence in others.

The book is short, and each page has very few words compared with a more scholarly text. The total word count would probably make a very short paper. However, these few words have their message enhanced by the illustrations, some of which are literal and others metaphorical. It is in the interplay between words and graphics that the impact of the book lies.

The style is informal – the authors refer to themselves as ‘we’ and the reader as ‘you’, and so the book has the feel of a letter or a workbook. The first section of the book is made up of a few questions and, by way of possible answers, offers brief quotations from people who have chosen either to forgive or not. The reader is challenged to think about their own responses to personal harm and how they might respond. At no point is the reader told that forgiveness is the right thing to do or that choosing not to forgive is wrong or weak. Examples are given that illustrate that forgiveness can sometimes be inappropriate and disempowering – as in cases of power imbalance, bullying and domestic abuse. However, there is a clear message that forgiving another can be beneficial for the person who has been harmed, in terms of their own health, well-being and longevity. Some of the stories also illustrate how those who have been able to forgive have felt empowered to reach out to others and inspire them to think about forgiveness too. The last section of the book provides tools to help a person forgive – a toolbox developed by the authors that can be found on the website www.theforgivenessstoolbox.com.

To choose to explore forgiveness using a comic book begs the question ‘does the combination of text and artwork succeed in getting the messages across better than text or artwork alone? As previously mentioned, the text is sparse, and there is no narrative flow of a fully argued text. The unusual format slows the reader down, intentionally, for this is not a book to be skimmed through. Each piece of text is carefully chosen, succinct and to the point, and sometimes a whole page of artwork is used to illustrate a single sentence or concept. The images therefore invite the reader to pause and think in a much deeper way than if the sentence had come as part of a whole page of continuous text.

The artwork alone is striking but needs the text to give it meaning. Together they provide the reader with something quite special, and certainly this reader has found new insights and new thoughts arising with each read of the book. The images are memorable, and artist Sophie Standing has the skill to choose apposite metaphors that go beyond the words to leave their message. So, on balance, the answer to the question ‘does this kind of graphic treatment of the subject succeed?’ would be yes, as an introduction to a highly complex and controversial subject.

The book would be an effective way to initiate a discussion for people interested in exploring the issue of forgiveness more deeply. Its size and cost would make it a useful core text for students of restorative justice, social psychology, philosophy and indeed forgiveness itself. Its format makes it an accessible and attractive book for younger students as well as more mature readers. However, its appeal is wider than that, and its informal, even-handed style makes it a text that anyone who has ever been harmed by another, who is struggling with whether to forgive, or how to forgive, could benefit from reading.

There are two aspects of forgiveness that could perhaps have received more attention. One is the issue of self-forgiveness. There is reference to one person’s struggle with feelings of guilt and his attempt to make indirect amends, but this is an aspect that could perhaps have had more coverage. The impact on an individual of being forgiven is also not referred to – perhaps it is too big a topic for this particular book, but it would be interesting to pursue.

Belinda Hopkins

The issue of referring to research evidence without indicating where the research has come from may be of concern to those used to more scholarly texts with footnotes, endnotes and a bibliography. In this respect, interestingly, the book differs from others in the series, which include both footnotes (without detracting from the visual impact of each page) and a bibliography at the end.

References can be found – a URL is provided at the end of the book, which, with perseverance and several clicks, does indeed lead to a comprehensive bibliography of references. A small plea to the publishers would be to make this URL simpler, as a list of thirteen numbers written in very small type was a little off-putting to this reader. A second plea would be to offer the reference list as a direct link rather than making the reader search on the product page for the link to ‘extra resources’. This terminology does not make it explicit that here will be found the missing reference list.

This is a book that intrigues and challenges. It raises more questions than answers. However, there is a clear message, and this is that if a person chooses to forgive they usually do so not for the benefit of the person responsible for causing the harm but for the benefit of their own health, happiness and well-being. Indeed, the perpetrator may never even know that they have been forgiven. For some people it is important that the person responsible for the harm knows, and for others it is irrelevant. Forgiveness is portrayed as an internal process of letting go, of transforming toxic feelings of hate, revenge and negativity into something more positive and life-enhancing. It is offered as a choice, not an obligation.

The book provides entry into a complex topic – one that is indeed ‘really strange’, and it deserves to be widely read and discussed. There is a double-page spread at the end showing a room in which there are several tables. At each table there are two people, sitting opposite each other, talking animatedly. This is perhaps the book’s final message – ‘Please find someone with whom to discuss everything we have talked about here. This is just the beginning.’

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References

Cantazucino, M. (2016). *The Forgiveness Project*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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