

BOOK REVIEW by Emma Wood

Birds and Bees by the Book by Patricia Weerakoon

Publisher: Anglican Youthworks

Published: 2017

This is a six-book set, including the following volumes:

Foundation Topics

Me and My Body

Me and My Brain

Me and My Family

Extension Topics

Learning About Sex

Learning About Gender

Learning About Pornography

According to the publisher, they cover three foundational topics that help children to understand the family structures in the world around them, and how their body and brain are developing as they grow. There are also three extension topics that teach children what is involved in sexual activity, what it means to be a boy or a girl, and how to protect themselves against pornography if they stumble across it.

Each new generation of children needs fresh sexual education resources, and Christian authors writing on these topics for the current generation of children face a particularly intimidating array of challenges. Conveying information that helps parents overcome the awkwardness; targeting an age group with the right level of language; finding that line between accurate, need-to-know level of detail and overexposure; and delivering the facts – all of these are exceptionally difficult for a Christian sex ed resource to achieve today in particular, while so much misinformation abounds.

Patricia Weerakoon's *Birds and Bees by the Book* series is a worthy attempt at meeting such challenges and has many strengths. The series is comprehensive in its coverage of topics, which include the purpose of sexual intercourse, the biology of sex differences, gender dysphoria, puberty, family structure, the wisdom of reserving sex for marriage, the difference between sexual and non-sexual love, and the challenges of navigating a porn-saturated world. The series spans six books: *Learning About Sex*, *Learning About Gender*, *Me and My Family*, *Me and My Brain*, *Learning About Pornography*, and *Me and My Body*. Each book has a slightly different focus, with much overlapping material, so that parents can be selective and flexible in their use of the series, which is aimed at children aged 7-10. References to the Genesis narrative are weaved throughout *Birds and the Bees*, such that the series doubles as an introductory study of Biblical genre as well.

At various points during my reading, I had concerns about the content and age appropriateness of the series, so I recommend *Birds and the Bees* with some reservations.

In *Learning About Sex*, Weerakoon explains the different meanings of the word "sex", distinguishing between as biological sex and sexual intercourse. She explains the place of sex in marriage, its bonding power, and puberty. Her explanations of the emotional changes we experience as we grow older, and which make us ready for marriage, are written in a way that will make young children all the more excited about growing up.

In *Learning About Gender*, Weerakoon reemphasises much of the material from *Learning About Sex*, while touching on much of the confusion currently surrounding gender and sex. She helpfully explains that it is our bodies, rather than our interests, which make us male and female. With regard to her discussion of gender dysphoria, Weerakoon's comments that it is "very rare" are a little out of

date, given the rapid increase of girls identifying as boys in recent years. Given that Weerakoon's purpose is partly to dispel misinformation, a mention of social contagion in relation to gender dysphoria could have been helpful here.

In *Me And My Family*, Weerakoon explains reproduction in the most detail, and links it to the importance of marriage and God's intentions. Through her references to the Genesis narrative, Weerakoon does a decent job of highlighting the naturalness of the natural family. The book goes on to discuss the existence of other family structures, including de-facto relationships, same-sex parented families, and single parent households. Parents who want to be explicit in their teaching that the natural family represents God's intentions for humanity may find Weerakoon's tone a little too neutral here, and may be wondering whether other family structures are being represented as mere differences, rather than deviations from a design. Nevertheless, the book leaves enough freedom for parents to be explicit about this if they wish, while being an informative conversation-starter.

In *Me and My Brain*, Weerakoon helpfully explains the brain's anatomy. She introduces kids to the fact that some parts of our brains are responsible for strong feelings, passions, and the pursuit of excitement, and that this needs to be governed by the parts of our brains responsible for reasoning and self-control. While our brains are still growing, Weerakoon explains, we need the guidance of adults to help us make good decisions. In the later parts of the book, Weerakoon discusses the importance of shaping our minds with good mental habits and material, and she also touches on the topic of pornography.

In *Learning About Pornography*, Weerakoon overlaps with some of the material in *Me and My Brain*, going into more detail about what pornography is. She succinctly explains what objectification is in a way that a child can understand, and what is wrong with it. At the same time, she explains why pornography can be appealing and addictive, and that it taps into natural curiosities that need to be channelled in other, healthier ways. She emphasises the importance of resisting peer pressure when it comes to looking at pornography, and of keeping lines of communication open with adults.

In *Me and My Body*, Weerakoon discusses the beauty of the human body. Throughout the book she emphasises the importance of kindness toward others, and comments on the damaging beauty stereotypes that abound, many of which are reinforced by social media use. She also discusses touch, physical safety, and the importance of physical boundaries, but parents will need to fill in some gaps here.

One of the things I appreciated most about Weerakoon's series was that, in discussion of many of the major topics, human reproduction was always central.

Though it might seem obvious that a sex education resource should have this quality, the significance of this in our day and age should not be understated. Many Christian authors writing for adults about sex, sexuality, and the body – such as Nancy Pearcey and Abigail Rine Favale – have argued that the eclipsing of the reality of reproduction in modern life is linked to a loss of awareness in the public consciousness of *design* when it comes to the body and to sexual relationships. We have sexed bodies, male and female, with deep structural differences, and these differences each play a unique part in human reproduction. These facts explain so many others; about sex, sexual relationships, our brains, and our bodies.

Children – Christian children included – are growing up in a world in which these realities are constantly suppressed. They are growing up in a world which there is no teleology, no 'givens' about bodies and sexual relationships. Our culture now views the human body as a mere tool with no

inherent meaning; a vehicle for any array of choices, expression of desire, or re-moulding. One of the keys to peddling such an ideology successfully is the minimising of the reality of human reproduction, including from contemporary sex ed, in which it is often mentioned merely as an afterthought. I can recall a number of interesting conversations I have had with younger people in which they have told me “The first thing I ever learned about sex was that it was a way for adults to give each other pleasure. I didn’t actually know that sex had anything to do with making babies until later.” The reason for such a pedagogical approach should be obvious to Christians who have been following our culture’s trends: minimise the mention of reproduction, minimise the appearance of design, and you can more easily ingrain the idea that sexual intercourse, the family, and the body is whatever one wants it to be.

For these reasons, I think it crucial that any Christian sex education resource for children puts human reproduction front and centre, and relates this timeless reality to anything else that is said. This is something Weerakoon’s series does well. Why are maleness and femaleness different from each other and intrinsic to who we are? Because without maleness and femaleness, we do not exist. Why is sex for marriage? Because sex is the process by which new life is made. Why do we have sexual desires at all? Because we are creatures that reproduce sexually. While she acknowledges that various aspects of our individual lives may not always reflect the ideal - either through ailment, circumstance, or sin – Weerakoon’s continual references back to the Genesis narrative as God’s model of how things are purposed to be teaches an important lesson in a simple way. There is such a thing as a maker’s design, and the presence of deviations from the design do not count as evidence against the design. This is a point, sadly, that is increasingly lost even on Christian adults today.

In general, the language of each of the books is accessible and non-threatening for a child in the target age range, and the illustrations of the familiar characters through the whole series will also make them enjoyable, memorable, and the messages clear. At appropriate points, Weerakoon includes helpful anatomical diagrams in the illustrations.

Having said this, some Christian parents may choose not to use *The Birds and the Bees* series, or use it very selectively.

Many parents, for good reason, choose not to pre-empt a destructive falsehood unless they have evidence that their child is in imminent danger of being exposed to it, or is in the process of being exposed to it. There is something to be said for this parenting approach: normalise God’s ideal through positive teaching and examples, and do this *well before* you explain all the ways in which the fallen world deviates from it (meanwhile, organise your home, family, schooling and social life such that you delay for as long as possible the necessity of these explanations). The international family-values group *Canavox* advocates such an approach: step 1 in a child’s sex education is to explain, early on, our natural design working aright, let this really sink in, and ingrain for a child an understanding of what is meant to be, and the inner logic of all of it. Explaining all the deviations, counterexamples, and “what ifs” is a more distant step 2. The books in the *Birds and the Bees* series does not see these tasks as two different steps, with each book in the series doing a bit of step 1 and a bit of step 2. This perhaps, is one of my few criticisms of the series from a pedagogical perspective.

At points, the language and the sequencing of ideas is unhelpful for suggestible younger children. In *Learning About Gender*, for instance, one of the pages reads, “You probably have friends who are boys and friends who are girls. You like to be with them... But this is friendship love. It’s not sexual love.” The next page continues, “If you’re a boy, it’s good to love your friends who are boys. This is friendship love. It doesn’t make you sexually attracted to them or gay.” Too much pre-empting of a falsehood can be counterproductive – like telling a kid not to touch the chocolate in the cupboard

that they didn't even know was there. This is one of the disadvantages of the series: at many points it seems like too many different maturity levels are being catered to at once, and there is an age-level mismatch between style and content. While Koorong's website describes the series as "suitable for children aged 7 to 10", this is arguably the main drawback of the series. The target audience is too large. There is a big difference between what is necessary and helpful for a seven-year-old to know, and what is necessary and helpful for a ten-year-old to know.

The Birds and the Bees will be most helpful, perhaps, for Christian parents with younger primary school-aged children who have already been overexposed to harmful information and material, and who have some catch-up work to do on these tricky conversations. These days, this will, no doubt, describe many people, so the *Birds and the Bees* series certainly has its place.

I would recommend to Christian parents that they check out this resource, read it for themselves first, then decide whether it will be helpful for their children.

Dr Emma Wood is a member of Ethicentre's publications team, and an academic with research interests in sexual ethics and the ethics of abortion. She teaches philosophy at a high school and university level and is the mother of three young children.