

Book Review – David Henderson

The Incredible Transformation of Gregory Todd

With Case Study Questions

Lightning Source UK, 2016, hardback, 301pp, £14.99; ISBN: 978-0-9933424-6-2

Reflections From The Incredible Transformation

Lightning Source UK, 2016, paperback, 63pp, £6.99; ISBN: 978-0-9933424-2-4

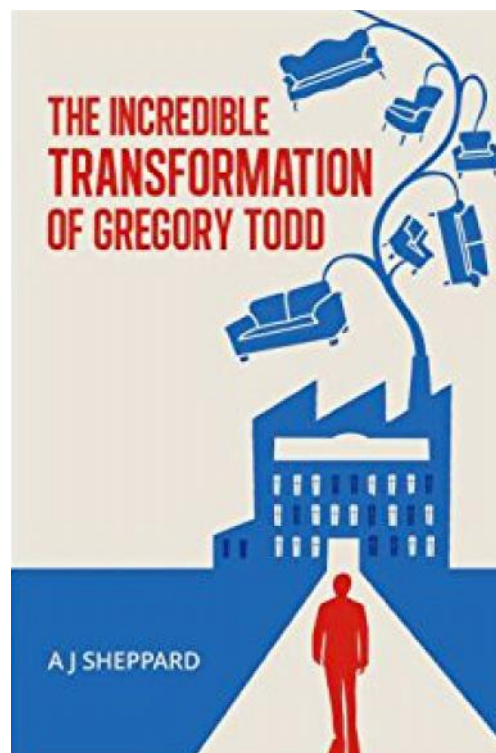
By A J Sheppard

Unusual request. “David, can you please review a novel for FIBQ? – and, by the way, it’s two books, not one.” Once I’d confirmed that this was not ‘War & Peace’, torn in two & rewritten with a Christian business slant, I gladly agreed.

The author, AJ (Andy) Sheppard, is a former McKinsey consultant who helps leaders to transform their business and manufacturing operations. His two volumes share respectively some of his business experience and his personal Christian journey. The first is a novel, ‘The Incredible Transformation of Gregory Todd’. (The book I read has a series of case study questions at the end of each chapter – there is also a version without these). The second is a series of personal reflections on Sheppard’s Christian journey, linked loosely to the novel using quotes from it. Sold separately, the two do not need to be read together.

I was struck by Sheppard’s very original approach, both innovative

and brave. He uses the novel format to share his business experience of transformational change through the medium of a story. The novel



describes the transformation of the working practices and culture of a UK Midlands-based furniture

manufacturing company and its highly-stressed CEO, Gregory Todd. The volume of reflections links his business message with some personal reflections on his Christian journey. The novel is aimed at ‘...leaders in any kind of organisation who are in pursuit of positive change.’ There is no explicitly Christian content in the novel. The author hopes that his reflections ‘.....will be of interest [to those who think a lot about life beyond work] even if you may already have formed views on the relevance of the Christian faith’.

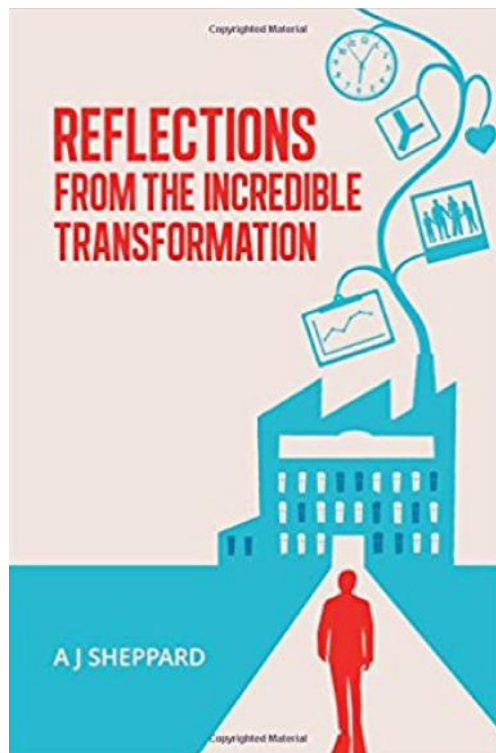
So far, so fascinating. The novel is well written with some powerful scenes and images. But the structure and some of the content didn’t fully work for me.

The novel has a straightforward plot with some twists and turns, a few too many two dimensional characters, and is one-paced until a rapid acceleration towards the end. Josh, the hero (and mainly anti-hero as far as the business leaders are concerned) is the young upstart

with the bright ideas, the pragmatism, the charisma and the resilience to transform the business. But leadership won't listen. Until the twist and denouement at the end of the novel (no plot spoilers here!), Josh seems bound to fail. Sheppard reflects the reality of this situation well – Josh (although an employee) is essentially the management consultant who can step outside the existing culture and politics of an organisation. He sees what needs to be done to set it on a better path, working with those who need organisational and personal transformation, but are trapped within 'the way things are around here', strongly resisting such change. As the novel's title suggests, core to the business transformation is the personal transformation of its CEO, Gregory Todd. This starts towards the end of the book. There is little about Gregory's experience that endorses the Christian truth that real transformation comes from within (eg Romans 12:2 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind'), although his behaviour does appear to change for the better later.

Perhaps the structural weakness of the novel is that it tries to achieve too many objectives. For example, the case study questions at the end of each chapter (on leadership and general management, change management and operations management) break up the flow of the story, turning it more into an overly extended learning tutorial/


workshop. Also, on occasion Sheppard lapses into long, jargon-filled episodes. These share his obvious technical manufacturing expertise with his readers, using his characters to voice simple explanations to help the inexperienced reader (eg me) to understand the technicalities. This interrupts the momentum that the story would otherwise maintain to its advantage.



Sheppard's reflections volume consists of a brief introduction followed by 31 pairs of reflections such as 'Time Management' and 'Exercising Authority'. Each reflection has a one-page musing from Sheppard's business perspective (linked to the novel by a quote from one of its characters) opposite a one-page reflection from

Sheppard's personal Christian journey (accompanied by a Bible verse). The novel connection is a little contrived, as the reflections happily stand independently of them. But if the reader wants to read both, it would be better to read the novel in its entirety first, followed by the reflections, as the novel quotes in the latter are not sequential.

The format works very well as material to dip into. But it would have been even more powerful and helpful had Sheppard included a brief summary of his Christian journey and experience in the introduction, rather than scattered through several of his personal Christian reflections. This would set an overall context, allowing such reflections to be dipped into individually rather than needing to be read sequentially. The depth of each Christian reflection varies greatly, so there is something in them for non-Christians, for new Christians and for more mature Christians – a strong feature of this innovative format.

In summary, Sheppard has adopted a brave and creative approach. The structure and some of the content don't quite work in total, but there are some gems scattered around. Perhaps a simplification and fuller separation of the two volumes, together with more clarity on the specific purpose of each, would go a long way to channelling his undoubted passion and considerable experience to achieve even greater impact. 



David Henderson is a Trustee of the Christian Association of Business Executives (CABE). Having worked in the corporate world for Charter Consolidated, British Steel, GlaxoSmithKline, Diageo, PricewaterhouseCoopers and IBM, he now runs his own mentoring business, Becoming The Best You Can Be. (www.becomingthebestyoucanbe.com).