

Manalive

One of the many influential books in my life has been Manalive by one Gilbert Keith (GK) Chesterton, the "Prince of Paradox". GK Chesterton seems largely forgotten these days by mainstream Christians, perhaps because he let the side down by becoming Roman Catholic! He was a comedic character in appearance, but very serious about the truth using written parables and paradox to communicate his strong beliefs.

I first read Manalive in the mid-80s when some of my Christian sacred cows were dying and I needed some reality. I still have my tatty old orange and cream Penguin paperback copy, but like me at times it is fragile, so I now mostly read it on my Kindle.

Manalive is about Innocent Smith, a man who breezes like Mary Poppins into a London boarding house. His influence brings a Holy Spirit like sense of chaos and anarchy to the other guests; a breath of fresh air and life.

When all is happy it is suddenly revealed that Smith is wanted for the crimes of burglary, desertion, polygamy, and attempted murder. In the second half of the book these charges are defended and the hopeful paradoxes of Innocent Smith are then revealed.

This book reminds me that rather than be merely "Christian" I have the gift to really live life and the power to dispense that life to others. A pivotal part of "Manalive" is when Smith is asked why he has a large well-polished American revolver in his luggage and answers: "Oh, that!" said Smith, throwing it a single glance; "I deal life out of that".

What he means by this strange statement is clarified later in the book.

A few years ago, I was deeply affected by a very unpleasant situation and while this was going on was reminded of the story in 2 Kings 4:38-41, where some prophets observe that "There is Death in the Pot". It seemed that God was saying I was being affected by people delivering death instead of life.

In the end the challenge to me was that I had the power to live & deliver life and anyway the darkness disappears when one turns on the light. Like Innocent Smith, I now carry a (metaphorical) revolver to deal life.

Manalive is a book I go to when I need cheering up. It breathes life, hope and the glory of God in a completely non-religious way. Over the years it has been a book that has given me permission to rebel, to be an anarchist and to live in a better and holy way.

As I get older and life gets a little shorter, I have to repent more and live; to have the perspective to be a "Man Alive".

I highly recommend this book and the other works of GK Chesterton. He was a dude.