HUMAN RIGHTS
by Michael Freeman
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Reviewed by Vincent Sicari

During the course of the twentieth century governments were responsible for the murder of around 169,000,000 people. Think about that for a moment. It is the population of Australia eight times over. The Second World War killed some 22,000,000 Russians, some nine million Germans, six million Jews, six million Poles... The statistics of brutality can become meaningless, unimaginable, incomprehensible.

How is it that mankind can be responsible for murder and cruelty on such a vast scale? Is it possible to stop such barbarism? What can the community of nations do to prevent dictators such as Hitler repeating their evil sorcery? How can the world prevent this descent into darkness once more? Michael Freeman's wonderful little book, "Human Rights", helps us begin the journey into these and other questions.

We do not know on what philosophical basis human rights are founded, but we all know that it is important to protect human life – whatever its form; regardless of race, religion, politics and sex. Michael Freeman's book leads us through the history of human rights thinking, from the ancient Greeks, through the Christian middle ages, through the revolutions in England, America and France, to thinkers such as John Locke and Jeremy Bentham; and inexorably on to the mass murder, on a vast scale, of the Second World War.

Michael Freeman tells us it is the Second World War and the revulsion produced by the monstrous crimes of the Nazis, which inspired the community of nations to set up the Human Rights Commission; and it was the Human Rights Commission which drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Michael Freeman, in lucid, free-flowing prose, takes us on a journey – a journey through the darkest recesses of the human mind; a journey which, paradoxically, takes us through a discussion of the ultimate, the universal, the infinite, the mystery of human existence.

Michael Freeman's book is not just a history of human rights. It is more than that. Much more. It attempts to understand the concept of human rights. It looks through the prisms of law, sociology, psychology… What is it about mankind that inspires us with ideals such as justice, fairness and equality? On what are such concepts founded? Are they just concepts or do they exist in a reality beyond us? If you, as I, are interested in these questions, you will find Michael Freeman's book a fascinating read.

In these times of mass human tragedy, of refugees fleeing repressive governments and chaotic warring factions in Somalia, Afganistan, Iraq or Iran; in these times of imprisonment without trial of Guantanamo Bay; of terrorism and the onslaught on basic civil liberties represented by the war on terror; of the Pacific Solution and the horrors of the Baxter Detention Centre; of Cornelia Rau and Vivian Solon; in these times we need more books such as "Human Rights". Those of us who are horrified to see our governments implicated in abuses such as Abu Ghraib will congratulate Michael Freeman, and those like him, and wish him good fortune in his next endeavour.