

The Australian

Where faith and reason meet

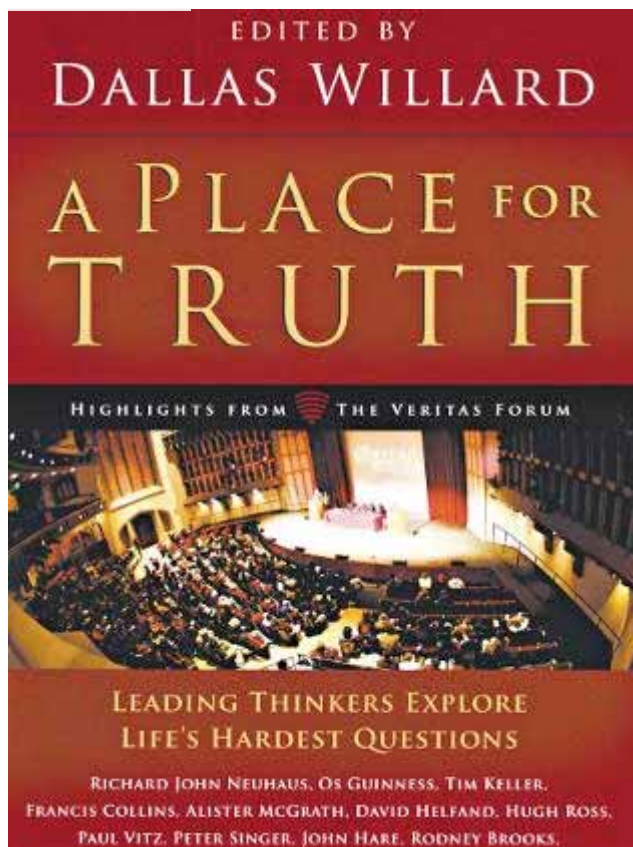
- **BRIEFING BOOKS:** Stephen Matchett
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From the cover of *A Place For Truth: Leading Thinkers Explore Life's Hardest Questions*, edited by Dallas Willard.

Source: Supplied

Reviewed: *Leading Thinkers Explore Life's Hardest Questions*; *The Real Science Behind Sex Differences*; *Manners in Colonial Australia*; *The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*

A Place for Truth: Leading Thinkers Explore Life's Hardest Questions

Edited by Dallas Willard

IVP Books, 321pp, \$27.95

THIS is serious stuff for people focused on the contested high ground where faith and reason intersect. Some exchanges address all but eternal issues, such as ethicist Peter Singer and moral classical scholar John Hare who debate whether it is possible to live a moral life without a belief in God. Others are equally complex, if a little silly, such as the discussion about the possibility of robots becoming human. However, just about all of the contributors make dignified cases for the reflective life in which people struggle not to just live moral lives but spiritual ones. This collection will irritate believers and atheists alike, but anybody who admires subtle thinking on abstract issues will admire the energy on display.

Delusions of Gender: The Real Science Behind Sex Differences

By Cordelia Fine

Icon Books, 338pp, \$29.99

MEN may be from Mars and women from Venus but if you put blokes and sheilas on each other's planet they will work out how to manage. That's because our brains adapt to circumstances and are not as hard-wired for gender roles as popular science writers suppose. There is no doubting Cordelia Fine has a case to make that neuroscience is used by some in a way that it has often been used in the past: to reinforce, with all the authority of science, old stereotypes and roles. But although she is arguing a case about the way society's ideas of what men and women do best shape behaviour, this is an excellent book that puts the old nature-or-nurture debate in the context of the new science on the way our brains work.

Savage or Civilised? Manners in Colonial Australia

By Penny Russell

New South, 406pp, \$34.95

MANNERS maketh the person and they shape the society that makes Penny Russell's study more interesting than many monographs by academic historians. She records the way 19th-century Australia created its own code of behaviour as social circumstances inevitably altered the rules brought from Britain. Russell explains how values were changed by a relaxed social structure, where people cared who you were and where you came from. Russell is too solid a scholar to play the populist card by projecting our ideas of an Australian character back on to our ancestors and there is a great deal in this book about status that no longer applies. It is one of the many strengths of a study that looks at the past in its own terms, not as a simpler version of the present.

What's Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption

Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers

HarperCollins, 279pp, \$35

WE are living in a global village where technology makes possible the sort of inter-personal transactions that used to occur only between people who could shake hands on an arrangement. Good for individuals prepared to break the capitalist-consumer chain but bad for businesses renting rooms or cars or selling stuff, all sorts of stuff that people are prepared to share or pass on when they no longer need it. There are some of the standard possessions-can't-buy-happiness homilies, but they never get out of hand and most of the book is full of impressive examples of entrepreneurs establishing new markets. Ultimately, the authors' optimism is infectious.

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