

THE BICYCLE BOOK

by Bella Bathurst. Harper Press. 320 pp. \$45.00

Reviewer: JAMES GRIEVE

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What on earth is the government playing at? It fiddles about with footling matters like a carbon tax and sending deserving refugees to be Islamically caned in Malaysia, when it could be banning books! Senator Conroy, now, there's a man whose heart lies in the DLP and who knows how to protect Australians against information. Yet here is this *Bicycle Book* sneaking under the radar, freewheeling about the Commonwealth, implicitly spreading its insidious message about cycling without helmets, and what have he and his pusillanimous cohorts done to stop it?

Well, it comes from Britain. Enough said, perhaps. For what else could one expect from a nation where more than 3 million people regularly cycle, where biking in London has more than doubled in recent years and where – readers who find this image offensive should read no further – cycling helmetless in a public place is absolutely, incredibly, foolhardily, in a word Britishly, quite legal! Bella Bathurst revels in describing their “woolly bonnets, Santa hats, things with built-in headphones”. Allowing such pernicious images of carefree bikers to circulate uncensored among us must be among the most irresponsible acts of the Gillard regime. Not only does Ms Bathurst make a few mere passing mentions of helmets, but when she does turn her attention to one of them (on page 283) it is for further subversion: she describes an accident in which a cyclist was so brain-damaged that he all but died in the operating theatre – and he had been wearing a helmet!

This clearly should not be allowed. Someone should invite this author to visit Australia to spruik some of the achievements of our federal and State (and Territory!) authorities: cycling by children declined by about 40% when helmets were made compulsory; our obesity rate is almost the worst in the world; laws on compulsory helmets incur a health cost to us all of about half a billion dollars a year; and Brisbane and Melbourne are losing thousands of dollars a week on public bicycle-hire schemes which dissuade citizens from biking because they must wear

helmets, which they don't want to be compelled to do, unlike uncivilised places such as Dublin, Montreal, Paris, London, Barcelona, Washington, Seville, Tel Aviv or Mexico City where millions have to run the risk of severely addled brain every day unprotected by a solicitous compulsion to restrict their intolerable freedom (see <http://www.cycle-helmets.com>).

The author devotes chapters to the opposite cycling cultures of Holland and India. She gives a history of the bike and its diverse uses. There is a chapter on how to make your own frame: first, go to Lincolnshire, then find this chap, Dave Yates, who makes a living from custom-building bikes for fussy customers and from giving tutorials on making your own. There are sections on the (inevitable) Tour de France; on boutique cyclists covered in fluorescent verbiage and wearing those hirply shoes; on mountain bikers, stunt riders and cross-country racing. Much of the text is interviews with cyclists old, new, infirm, crazy, feral, compulsive and injured. A chapter discusses the militarisation of bicycles: the Swiss, for instance, had not long ago 3 whole regiments of infantry on bikes, only disbanded in 2004.

This book has much of interest to say about cycling and cyclists. Mind you, I could have wished for a few expert hints on the 3 banes of the life of the all-weather cyclist: punctures, rain gear and lights. But the author has even less to say on these than on helmets. Does she not ride after dark? Could it be that it doesn't rain in Britain? Here, it rains a bit, mainly in October; and you can always tell when it's raining in Canberra, because that's when all the cissy boutique cyclists without mudguards get their wives to drive them to work. Even so, they would do well to consult this book, despite its unconscionable laxity on the matter of headgear and its cavalier attitude that cycling is for pleasure and healthiness rather than for doing what wise government compels you to do. Any cyclist, serious or frivolous, will find it is full of fascinating facts and diverting digressions.

James Grieve is an all-weather objector against compulsion based on poor evidence.