



How to Live: Or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer

Sarah Bakewell

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Winner of the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography

How to get along with people, how to deal with violence, how to adjust to losing someone you love—such questions arise in most people’s lives. They are all versions of a bigger question: how do you live? How do you do the good or honorable thing, while flourishing and feeling happy?

This question obsessed Renaissance writers, none more than Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, perhaps the first truly modern individual. A nobleman, public official and wine-grower, he wrote free-roaming explorations of his thought and experience, unlike anything written before. He called them “essays,” meaning “attempts” or “tries.” Into them, he put whatever was in his head: his tastes in wine and food, his childhood memories, the way his dog’s ears twitched when it was dreaming, as well as the appalling events of the religious civil wars raging around him. The Essays was an instant bestseller and, over four hundred years later, Montaigne’s honesty and charm still draw people to him. Readers come in search of companionship, wisdom and entertainment—and in search of themselves.

This book, a spirited and singular biography, relates the story of his life by way of the questions he posed and the answers he explored. It traces his bizarre upbringing, youthful career and sexual adventures, his travels, and his friendships with the scholar and poet Étienne de La Boétie and with his adopted “daughter,” Marie de Gournay. And we also meet his readers—who for centuries have found in Montaigne an inexhaustible source of answers to the haunting question, “how to live?”

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