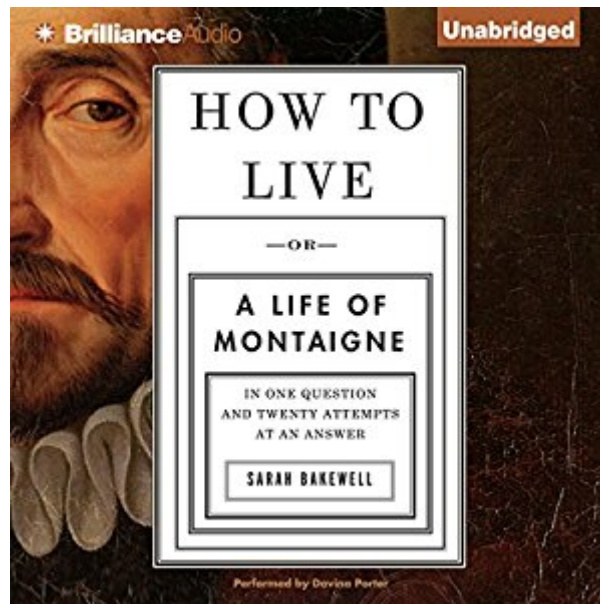


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How To Live: Or A Life Of Montaigne In One Question And Twenty Attempts At An Answer



Synopsis

National Book Critics Circle Award, Biography, 2011 This question obsessed Renaissance writers, none more than Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, perhaps the first recognizably modern individual. A nobleman, public official, and winegrower, he wrote free-roaming explorations of his thought and experience, unlike anything written before. He called them essays, meaning "attempts" or "tries." He put whatever was in his head into them: 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 best seller and, over four hundred years later, Montaigne's honesty and charm still draw readers to him. They come in search of companionship, wisdom, and entertainment - and in search of themselves. This book, a spirited and singular biography, relates the story of Montaigne's life by way of the questions he posed and the answers he explored. It traces his bizarre upbringing, his 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?"

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is not so much a biography of Michel de Montaigne as it is a biography of his book ... which is a legitimate approach since Montaigne himself described the Essays as a portrait of himself, a model of the author in text form. So, Ms. Bakewell has given us many facts about Montaigne's life as well as chronicling the fortunes of the Essays during his life as well as the endless revisions and

re-interpretations that occurred after his death. The story is told in true Montaignian fashion, out of chronological order and with numerous digressions, with chapter headings that consist of twenty hypothetical answers to the book's central question: "How to live?" Unlike Montaigne, the content of each chapter stays (mostly) relevant to the subject in its heading. The back of the book contains a brief timeline, an index, and a list of notes. (Strangely these numbered notes are not indicated in the text, making them essentially useless; but that may just be an idiosyncrasy of the Uncorrected Proof copy which I read.) I first discovered Montaigne when I happened upon the Essays in the History section of the bookstore. I knew nothing about him, but the dust-jacket blurb described him as the inventor of the essay, literature's first "modern" writer, an affable gentleman who good-naturedly natters on at length about any topic that catches his fancy (his favorite subject being himself). His mind wanders and his pen follows it wherever it happens to go. I bought the book, expecting nothing more than to be entertained, and was amazed to discover how emotionally uplifting it was. Montaigne apparently did not wish to consider himself a "philosopher" yet that's what he seemed to be. Here's an educated, well-read guy with an agreeable, easygoing manner .. completely scatterbrained and yet so WISE .. he seemed to have come to grips with his own mortality and figured out all of life's Big Questions, over 400 years ago. I was impressed. I found him to be intensely relevant and overflowing with thoughts and opinions that made So Much Sense, they perfectly matched my own. Now Ms. Bakewell's book makes it clear that my Montaigne experience is typical. Many of the great and not-so-great minds of Western civilization (since 1580) have read the Essays and gotten the eerie impression that it was written specifically for them. Many of these stories are told briefly in the book, but the biggest section is devoted to Pascal and Descartes who were strongly influenced in a _negative_ way by Montaigne. Much of their most memorable work was a reaction against him. It's truly the mark of a classic when a book continues to be so influential centuries after the author's death. _How to Live_ is not "necessary" reading by any means (you can get full enjoyment from the Essays without knowing any of this background information) but it does add some value by shedding light on the collective experience of people reading and reacting to the Essays throughout history. It is written in an approachable, readable style and is very respectful of its subject. I can recommend it as an introduction or a companion to the Essays.

You've heard of hybrid cars? Get ready for the hybrid biography. Sarah Bakewell's luminous HOW TO LIVE is just that -- an inspired collision of biography, philosophy, history, rhetoric, and literary criticism, all sprinkled with a dollop of self-help. That's right, Bakewell shows how seamlessly Michel Eyquem de Montaigne can enter the 21st century and offer advice to the harried reader. Montaigne,

after all, was anything BUT harried. Calm, cool, collected, stoic. That was our man in France. Now most readers undertake a biography because they are interested in the subject. I was more intrigued by the critical buzz Bakewell's book garnered in the press. And so it was that I got to know Montaigne, famous author of the ESSAYS, through Bakewell's unique design of 20 chapters all based on the question "How to Live?" with a different answer. They are, in order, "Don't Worry About Death," "Pay Attention," "Be Born" (Editor's Note: Very funny), "Read A Lot, Forget Most of What You Read, and Be Slow-Witted," "Survive Love and Loss," "Use Little Tricks," "Question Everything," "Keep a Private Room Behind the Shop," "Be Convivial: Live With Others," "Wake From the Sleep of Habit," "Live Temperately," "Do Something No One Has Done Before," "Do a Good Job, But Not TOO Good a Job," "Philosophize Only by Accident," "Reflect on Everything; Regret Nothing," "Be Ordinary and Imperfect" (Editor's Note: Easy!), "Give Up Control," and "Let Life Be Its Own Answer." If those topics intrigue you in any way, so will this book. What did I learn? Of course, as expected, a lot about Montaigne's life as that is the main thread. The bonuses for me were things like short but essential lessons in philosophies that influenced Montaigne (Stoics, Epicureans, Skeptics) and in personalities that he in turn influenced or outraged (Pascal, Rousseau, Voltaire, Nietzsche, etc.). Also, there was the history lesson on 16th-century France's religious wars (Catholics v. Protestants). Bloody good. And then there were all the snippets from Montaigne's essays themselves. Some readers may want to read more by tackling the behemoth ESSAYS after this book. Others may feel that this sampler is sufficient unto itself -- after all, you come out more knowledgeable about the man, his approach toward life, his writing style, and even his translators. Overall, it's an unusually refreshing run at what should have been staidly-boring material. Bakewell's theme is that Montaigne is more interesting and timeless than you think. Her hybrid biography proves the point by meeting the same criteria. If you have any interest in the past, essay-writing, philosophy, religion, politics, and the common man as championed by a most unusual man, HOW TO LIVE is your book.

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