ForeWord Reviews

BIOGRAPHY

How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer
Sarah Bakewell
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In 1580, the French essayist and minor nobleman Michel de Montaigne had an audience with Henri III, King of France. The king broke the ice: he had read Montaigne's Essays, he said, and had liked them. "Sir," the author reportedly answered, "then Your Majesty must like me."

As retold by Sarah Bakewell, a London-based writer, historian, and curator, this episode reveals the essence of Montaigne: that "he and his book were the same." Generous, inquisitive, adhering to no fixed plan, author and book grew and changed together. To the end of Montaigne's life, new thoughts swarmed into the midst of his text in a frenzy of addition and alteration.

This is the spirit Bakewell attempts to capture in her biography. Instead of a straightforward narrative, her book is a series of essays, each based on a theme from Montaigne's works. Each attempts to answer what she sees as his central question: "How to live?" Though mining the *Essays* for maxims is long-established practice, Bakewell distinguishes herself by emphasizing not the Stoic, but the casual, worldly Montaigne who advises, "question everything," and, "be ordinary and imperfect." Tracing these principles through their author's life takes us on a journey that includes not only Montaigne's birth and death, but also many fascinating detours.

Some detours take us to later time periods, showing us Montaigne's impact on readers as diverse as Nietzsche and Virginia Woolf. True to her principle that Montaigne's book is his life, Bakewell treats reinterpretation as character development, leading to occasional surrealism, as when we learn how nineteenth-century Romanticism meant Montaigne "would, for ever more, have a wild side." Especially interesting is the point where Montaigne's contem-porary world and the world of his successors intersect—in the person of Marie de Gournay, Montaigne's admirer, adoptive daughter, and posthumous editor. The story of de Gournay, a unique Renaissance woman of letters, could constitute a book by itself.

Throughout, Bakewell's approach is less about analyzing Montaigne than providing readers with a wealth of unusual information. (Where analysis does appear, Bakewell typically

offers a range of possibilities, sometimes coyly hinting at which she prefers.) This light-handed approach, combined with Bakewell's brisk (if occasionally clichéd) prose should make *How to Live* an ideal introduction for the general reader. Bakewell's genial book communi-cates great enthusiasm about its subject, and will likely inspire many new readers to adopt Montaigne as a mentor and a friend.

Paul Franz