

The Consolations of Philosophy

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From the author of *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, a delightful, truly consoling work that proves that philosophy can be a supreme source of help for our most painful everyday problems.

Perhaps only Alain de Botton could uncover practical wisdom in the writings of some of the greatest thinkers of all time. But uncover he does, and the result is an unexpected book of both solace and humor. Dividing his work into six sections -- each highlighting a different psychic ailment and the appropriate philosopher -- de Botton offers consolation for unpopularity from Socrates, for not having enough money from Epicurus, for frustration from Seneca, for inadequacy from Montaigne, and for a broken heart from Schopenhauer (the darkest of thinkers and yet, paradoxically, the most cheering). Consolation for envy -- and, of course, the final word on consolation -- comes from Nietzsche: "Not everything which makes us feel better is good for us."

This wonderfully engaging book will, however, make us feel better in a good way, with equal measures of wit and wisdom.

"It is common," Alain de Botton writes in *The Consolations of Philosophy*, "to assume that we are dealing with a highly intelligent book when we cease to understand it. Profound ideas cannot, after all, be explained in the language of children." While his easygoing exploration of philosophers from Socrates to Nietzsche isn't exactly written for the Blue's Clues set, few readers will cease to understand it. Furthermore, it's a joy to read. De Botton's 1997 *How Proust Can Change Your Life* forged a new kind of lit crit: an exploration of *Remembrance of Things Past*, delivered in the sweet-gummed envelope of an advice book. He returns to the self-help format here, this time plundering the great thinkers to puzzle out the way we ought to live.

What was stunning about the Proust book was de Botton's brazen annexing of a hallowed novelist to address lite emotional problems. That format is less arresting when applied to the philosophers, since which earnest philosophy major has not, from time to time, tried to apply the alpine heights of thought to his own humble worries? Usually, sophomoric attempts to turn to, say, Kant for advice on love tend to be unmitigated disasters. In de Botton's case, however, he is able to find consolation for a broken heart in Schopenhauer, consolation for inadequacy in Montaigne. Epicurus, usually associated with a love of luxury, is a solace for those of us without much money--and de Botton learns from him that "objects mimic in a material dimension what we require in a psychological one. We need to rearrange our minds but are lured towards new shelves. We buy a cashmere cardigan as a substitute for the counsel of friends."

Lest the reader become burdened by all this philosophizing, the book is peppered with illustrations--the section on Nietzsche of course includes a DC Comics drawing of Superman. And it's further leavened by the author's personal anecdotes and winning confessional tone. Early on, for instance, he admits his own gnawing need for popularity: "A desire to please led me to laugh at modest jokes like a parent on the opening night of a school play." Before he became a medicine man for the soul, de Botton was a first-rate novelist, and it shows in his writing. --Claire Dederer

"An enjoyable read... In clear, witty prose, de Botton...sets some of [the philosophers'] ideas to the mundane task of helping readers with their personal problems.... The quietly ironic

style and eclectic approach will gratify many postmodern readers."

-- Publishers Weekly

Other Books

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