

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

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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?"

Sarah Bakewell was a curator of early printed books at the Wellcome Library before becoming a full-time writer, publishing her highly acclaimed biographies *The Smart Set* and *The English Dane*. She lives in London, where she teaches creative writing at City University and catalogues rare book collections for the National Trust. The riding accident, which so altered Montaigne's perspective, lasted only a few moments in itself, but one can unfold it into three parts and spread it over several years. First, there is Montaigne lying on the ground, clawing at his stomach while experiencing euphoria. Then comes Montaigne in the weeks and months that followed, reflecting on the experience and trying to reconcile it with his philosophical reading. Finally, there is Montaigne a few years later, sitting down to write about it — and about a multitude of other things. The first scene could have happened to anyone; the second to any sensitive, educated young man of the Renaissance. The last makes Montaigne unique.

The connection is not a simple one: he did not sit up in bed and immediately start writing about the accident. He began the *Essays* a couple of years later, around 1572, and, even then, he wrote other chapters before coming to the one about losing consciousness. When he did turn to it, however, the experience made him try a new kind of writing, barely attempted by other writers: that of re-creating a sequence of sensations as they felt from the inside, following them from instant to instant.

Other Books

*In Praise of Retreat*, For readers of *Walden*, *Wild*, *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek*, *A Book of Silence*, *A Gift from the Sea* and other celebrations of the inner adventure. An utterly engaging dive into our modern ways of retreat — where we go, why we're drawn, and how it's urgent. From pilgrim paths to forest cabins, and from rented hermitages to arts temples

and quiet havens for yoga and meditation. In *Praise of Retreat* explores the pleasures and powers of this ancient practice for modern people. Kirsteen MacLeod draws on the history of retreat and personal experiences to reveal the many ways readers can step back from society to reconnect with their deepest selves – and to their loftiest aspirations in life. In the 21st century, disengaging, even briefly, is seen by many as self-indulgent, unproductive, and antisocial. Yet to retreat is as basic a human need as being social, and everyone can benefit, whether it's for a weekend, a month, or a lifetime. Retreat is an uncertain adventure with as many peaks and valleys as any mountain expedition, except we head inward, to recharge and find fresh energy and brave new ideas to bring back into our everyday lives.

⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ . "under the cottage microscope" (page 194): see Jill Lepore, "The Right Way to Remember Rachel Carson," *New Yorker*, ... and Dr . Qing Li , *Forest Bathing : How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness* , Penguin Random House, 2018."