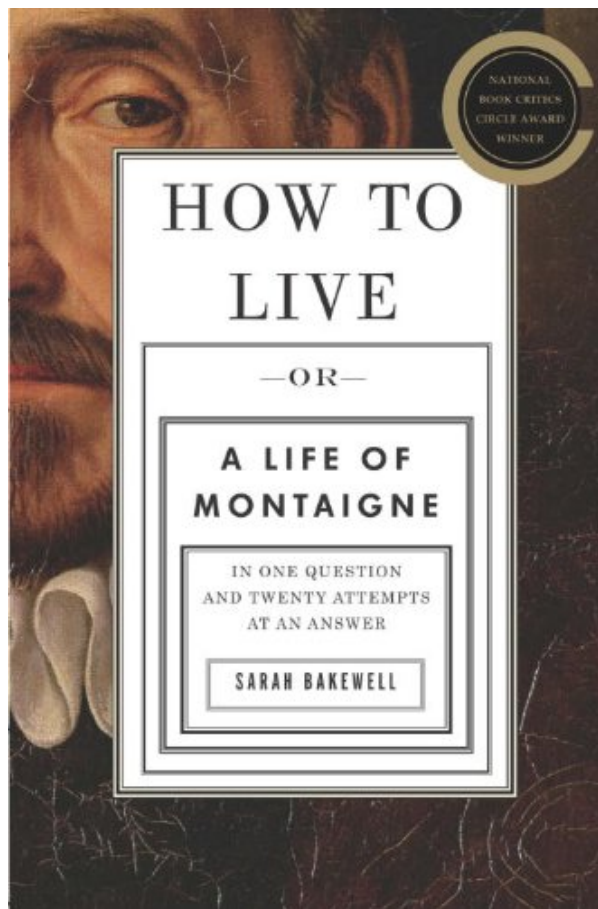
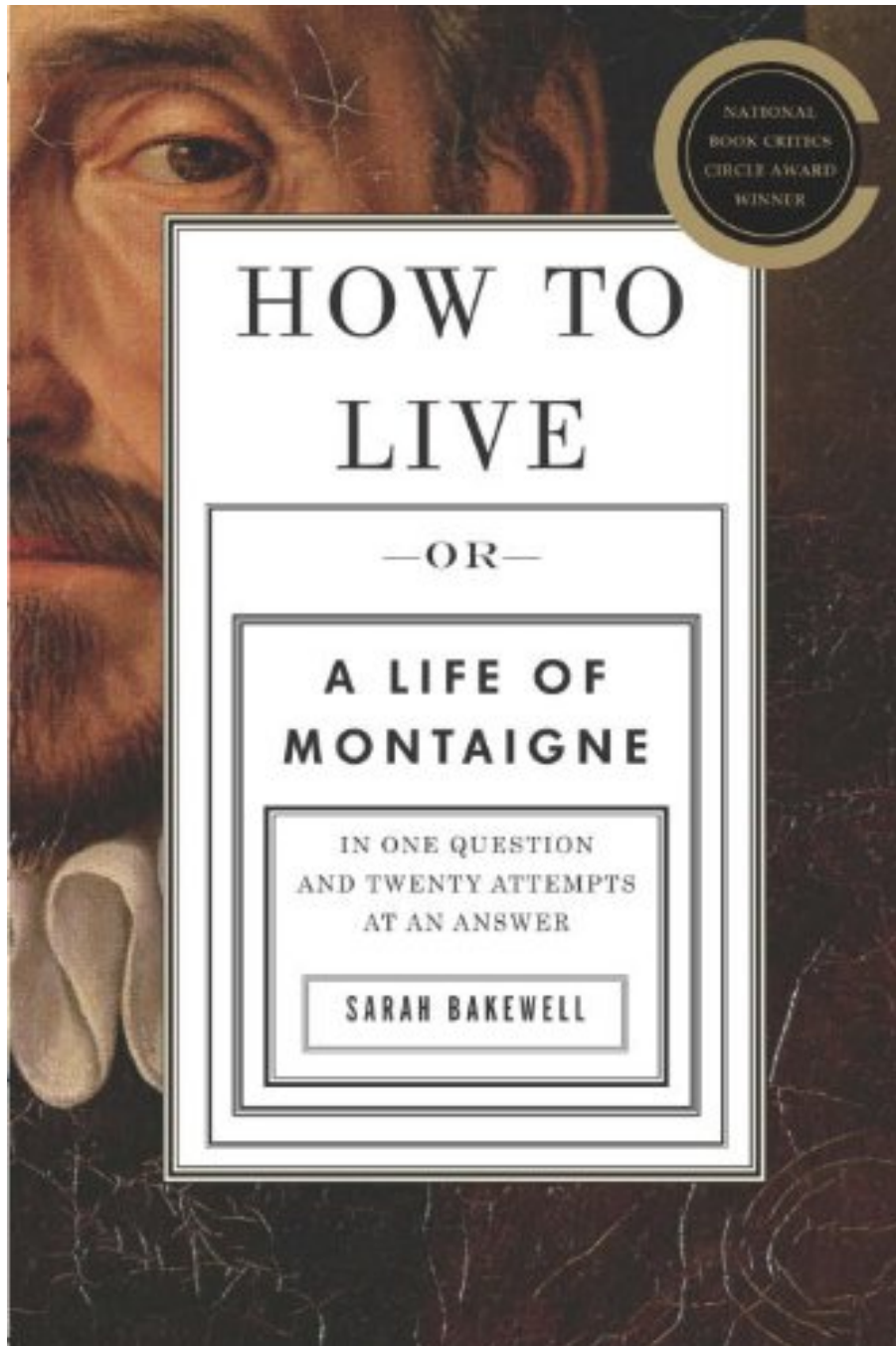


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IN ONE QUESTION AND TWENTY
ATTEMPTS AT AN ANSWER BY SARAH
BAKEWELL**



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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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From Booklist

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5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

French onion soup for the soul

By Kimi

This remarkable book is the perfect primer on the most noble everyman soul-searcher Michael de Montaigne. Ms. Bakewell honors her own love of the 16th-century founder of the personal essay by giving readers a carefully rendered, diligently sourced guided tour of Montaigne's timeless accounting of his own heart and soul. *How To Live* is mostly about just how to be in life and in the world. It loses nothing in translation nor across the passing of 500 years since Montaigne wrote his famous collection of essays. . With war and plague literally at his gate, Montaigne recused himself from the outside turmoil and set out to study his own hopes and misgivings. Bakewell shows his legacy is nothing short of a road atlas for the human

condition through the ages. Bakewell's digest, in words and pictures, is an inspiration for those who would honestly take the same path today.

Readers should be advised that Montaigne's efforts are not of the same sort as the Facebook and Tweet pronouncements of our selfie-centered times. Montaigne's careful reconnoiter of his own life and times that Bakewell has selected here depicts a person determined to know himself in the world, not to show himself off to the world.

Perhaps most refreshing of all Montaigne's enviable traits that Bakewell takes particular effort to point out is his abiding caution to readers of his essays that his opinions are his alone and as such contain the caveat that he could be wrong. What a thing to read in our current age of heralding the know-it-all who most often knows the least of all.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

How to ENJOY Your Intellectual Life: Read this book

By An Alexandria music lover

Sarah Bakewell is a genius. In this book she gives us a moving biography of Montaigne, a history of the genesis and contents of his marvelous essays, an introduction to the history of editing his great masterpiece, and a lively and fascinating narrative of informed and popular responses to his book in successive eras. Montaigne very much feels like real presence in this book, one with a distinctive personality that is vividly represented by the author. One feels that Bakewell, along with hundreds or thousands of earlier readers have developed a personal relationship with the great writer, and Bakewell helps explain why this in the case even though an overwhelming share of readers of his essays of course have had no contact with him, except through his essays. Bakewell also does a wonderful and interesting job of explaining the very different critical reception Montaigne's essays received among his contemporaries and in succeeding generations of readers, both in France and elsewhere.

The ingenuity of the biography helps explain why critical reception of Bakewell's own book was so positive. But the plain fact is that Bakewell is also a stylish writer, capable of holding our fascinated (and occasionally amused) attention, even when she is discussing the minutiae of successive editions or of obscure editorial quarrels. The book was warmly recommended to me by a friend who said flatly it was the best book he'd read in a year or, indeed, in any recent year. You'll probably find this kind of enthusiasm in many of the Amazon reviews. If you're interested in philosophy or in a charismatic writer and thinker in a long bygone, tumultuous era, and if you care about artful construction and stylish writing, this might be the book for you. It certainly was for me.

P.S., I simultaneously read the Kindle version of the book and listened to the Audible version beautifully read by Davina Porter.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

A Fine Biography of a Very Important Writer

By Richard B. Schwartz

Sarah Bakewell's biography of Montaigne won the National Book Critics Circle Award for biography in 2010. It is a fine book, one that will engage the attention of all readers interested in the subject. That subject, of course, is very wide-ranging. Inspired by the philosophers of antiquity, Montaigne is one of the principal French writers of the Renaissance. To a degree he created the 'essay' form and his work has been pivotal for later thinkers. John Florio's English translation was taught—in my day—as a work of literature itself and it helped to popularize a writer 'adopted' by the English as one of their own, at least in interests, spirit and unique personality. Montaigne was claimed by the romantics; he influenced Nietzsche, heartened the postmodernists and remains a writer of global importance and influence.

SB's biography answers the question, 'how to live?' in twenty chapters, each of them keyed to a theme in

Montaigne's work. Hence, chapter 9: "Q. How to live? A. Be convivial: live with others." The themes, however, do not trump the biography. This is not an endless examination of thematic content with an occasional look at the events in Montaigne's life. It is a systematic biography held together by thin thematic divisions.

It is also a very learned biography, expanding at length, e.g., on the civil wars of the period, the driving ideologies, weaponry and specific details, both personal and political. It studies, e.g., the manner in which the texts of the Essays have come down to us, (what we would call) the copy texts, the emendations, the condensations, and so on. There is comparatively little on the content of the Essays themselves, 'comparatively' being the operative word. We learn a great deal about Montaigne's classical influences, the nature of his pyrrhonism, the dimensions of his political associations, his personal relationships, his estate, its winemaking, and so on, but the only essay that is discussed at some length is (as one would expect) the longest of the essays, the Apology for Raymond Sebond.

It is sometimes said that the first requirement for a great biography is the author's love for her subject (balanced, always, by a willingness to speak the truth, wherever its elements might fall). SB clearly admires Montaigne and wishes that today's thinkers, writers and politicians (Montaigne served in all three capacities) would read him, be inspired by him and take lessons from him.

The writing is crisp and clear, direct and candid. While it is undergirded by a great deal of scholarship that scholarship does not drag the book down and bore the reader with tedious details. It contains a bibliography, index and series of endnotes, sufficient to guide the reader to other texts and explore/verify issues that have come under question.

The book is very much like its subject—a pleasant, human and humane read that takes on difficult subjects with a light touch and details experiences that will find echoes in the reader's own heart.

Highly recommended.

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