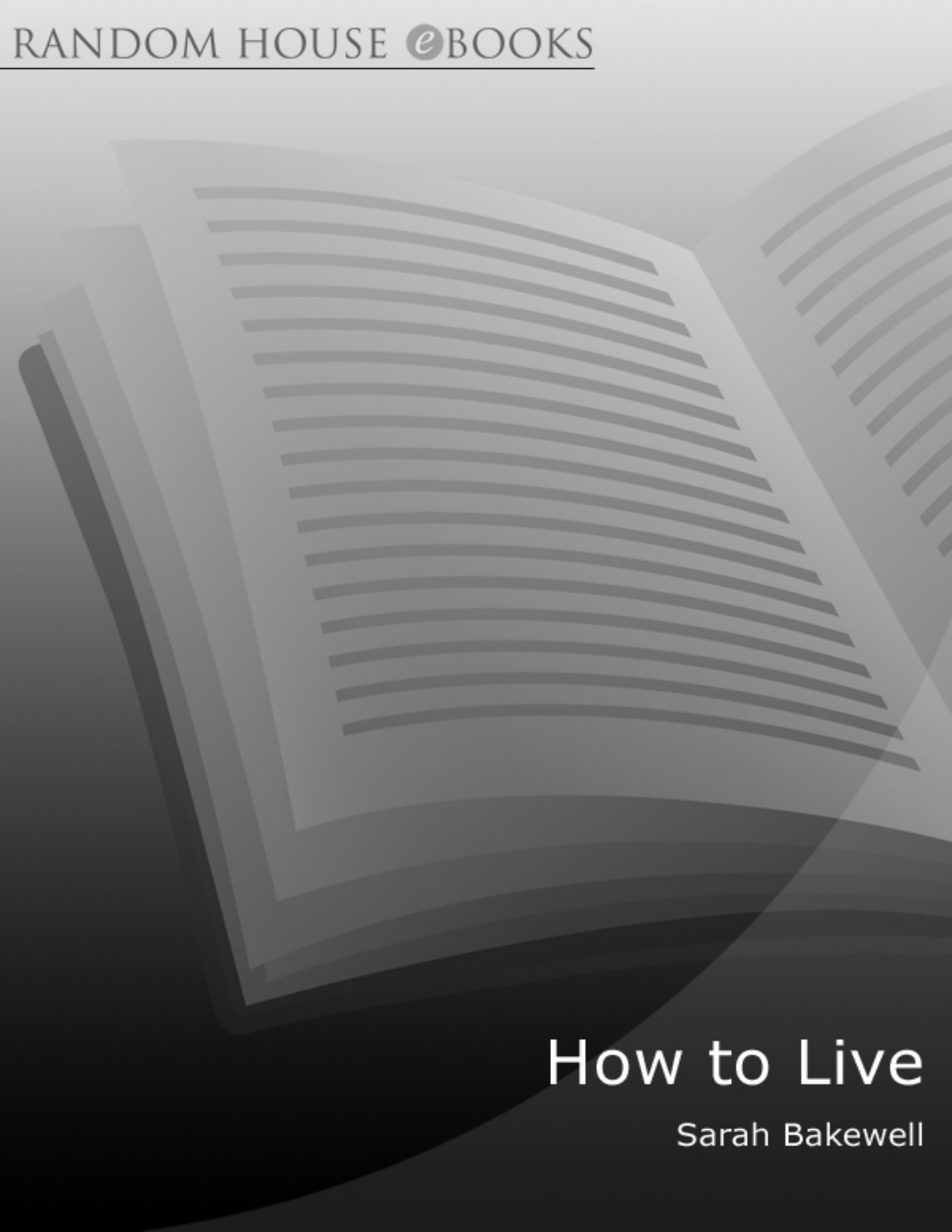
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



How to Live

Sarah Bakewell

Contents

Copyright

About the Book

An illuminating and humane book… It's rare to come across a biographer who remains so deliciously fond of her subject' *Independent*

How to get on well with people, how to deal with violence, how to adjust to losing someone you love? How to live?

This question obsessed Renaissance nobleman Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, whose free-roaming explorations of his thought and experience were unlike anything written before. Into these essays 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, events in the appalling civil wars raging around him. *The Essays* was an instant bestseller, and over four hundred years later, readers still come to him in search of companionship, wisdom and entertainment – and in search of themselves.

This first full biography of Montaigne in English for nearly fifty years relates the story of his life by way of the questions he posed and the answers he explored.

'Bakewell writes with verve. This is an intellectually lively treatment of a Renaissance giant and his world' *Daily Telegraph*

'Splendidly conceived and exquisitely written… It should persuade another generation to fall in love with Montaigne' *Sunday Times*

'This welding together of biography and self-help mirrors exactly the project of Montaigne's Essays' *Financial Times*

‘A bright, engaging book that can only enthuse you to read the essays themselves … Try it and you will make a new, most intimate friend’ *Daily Mail*

About the Author

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* 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.

ALSO BY SARAH BAKEWELL

The Smart
The English Dane

List of Illustrations

A. Dürer, *Le branle*, 1514. Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée du Petit-Palais, France/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Wine label of the Château Michel de Montaigne. Photograph by John Stafford.

Sixteenth-century gymnasts, from A. Tuccaro, *Trois dialogues de l'exercice de sauter et voltiger en l'air* (Paris: C. de Monstr'oeil, 1599).

Andrew, Adolphe Best, Isidore Leloir, *Le Réveil de Montaigne enfant*, from *Musée des Familles, Lectures du soir*, VI (Jan. 1840), p. 100.

F. de Belle-Forest, *Le Vif pourtrait de la Cité de Bordeaux*, 1575. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Hermaphroditus, and Rhodope and Hemo, from Ovid, tr. L. Dolce, *Le Trasformationi* (Venice: G. Giolito de Ferrari, 1561).

The reading fool, by A. Dürer, from S. Brant, *Narrenschiff* (Basel: J. Bergmann von Olpe, 1494).

Blaise de Monluc. Frontispiece to his *The Commentaries* (London: H. Brome, 1674).

The 'Bordeaux Copy' of Montaigne's *Essais* (Paris: A. L'Angelier, 1588), v. I, fol. 71v., showing Montaigne's marginal addition: 'qu'en respondant: parce que cestoit luy parce que c'estoit moy' ('except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I'). *Reproduction en quadrichromie de l'Exemplaire de Bordeaux des* Essais *de Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan (Fasano-Chicago: Schena Editore, Montaigne Studies 2002).

Seneca. Marble bust. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Epicurus. Stone bust. Greek Museo Capitolano, Rome, Italy/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Montaigne’s medal or *jeton*. The only copy is in a private collection; drawing by Sarah Bakewell based on a photograph in M.-L. Demonet, *A Plaisir* (Orléans: Editions Paradigme, 2002).

Octopus, from G. Rondelet, *Libri de piscibus marinis* (Leyden, Bonhomme, 1555). Wellcome Library, London.

A. Ditchfield, *Montaigne et sa chatte*, ca. 1867. Aquatint. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

F. Delpech, *Blaise Pascal*, 19th century. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Entry recording death of Montaigne’s child Thoinette, from M. Beuther, *Ephemeris historica* (Paris: Fezandat, 1551), Montaigne’s copy, page for 28 June. Bibliothèque municipale de Bordeaux.

Tupinambá Indians in 1552, by T. de Bry, from J. L. Gottfried, *Newe Welt und Americanische Historien* (Frankfurt: M. Merian, 1631). Private Collection/The Stapleton Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library.

A defiant prisoner among the Tupinambá, from M. Léry, *Histoire d’une voyage* (Paris: A. Chuppin, 1580).

L. Le Coeur, *Montaigne*, 1789. Aquatint, from *Galerie universelle des hommes qui se sont illustrés dans l’Empire des lettres, depuis le siècle de Léon X jusqu’à nos jours* (Paris: Bailly, 1787–1789). Montaigne as windswept Romantic.

Montaigne’s visit to Tasso in Ferrara. Lithograph by P. J. Challamel after Louis Gallait’s painting *Le Tasse visité dans sa prison par Montaigne* (1836), in *Revue des peintres* (1837), no. 208.

F. Dubois, St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre, 24th August 1572. Oil on panel. Musée d’Archéologie et d’Histoire, Lausanne, Switzerland/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Charles IX’s medal depicting the St. Bartholomew’s massacres as a defeat of the Hydra. N. Favyer, *Figure et exposition des pourtraictz et dictons contenuz es medailles de la conspiration des rebelles en France* (Paris: J. Dallier, 1572).

Heaven and Hell, engraving by H. Cock after J. de Mantua, 1565. Private collection/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Henri III. Frontispiece to A. Thevet, *Les vrais pourtraits et vies des hommes illustres* (Paris: La veuve I. Kervert & G. Chaudière, 1584). Mary Evans Picture Library.

A band of flagellants, from *The Chronicles of Chivalry*, 1583. Engraving. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Stefan Zweig, c. 1925. Photograph by Trude Fleischmann. International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

A harpy, or monstrous figure. 18th century engraving. Private Collection/Archives Charmet/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Kidney stone fragments. Photograph by Herringlab.

Baths at Leuk, Switzerland, from S. Münster & F. Belle-forest, *Cosmographie universelle* (Paris: N. Chesneau, 1575). Wellcome Library, London.

Baths at Plombières, France, 19th century copy of woodcut from J. J. Huggelin, *Von heilsamen Bädern des Teütschelands* (Strasbourg, 1559). Wellcome Library, London.

Map of Montaigne’s travels in 1580–1581. Map by Sandra Oakins.

Colosseum and unidentified ruin, from H. Cock, *Praecipua aliquot Romanae antiquitatis ruinarum monimenta, vivis prospectibus, ad veri imitationem affabre designata* (Antwerp: H. Cock, 1551). University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center.

Henri of Navarre (Henri IV), by T. de Bry, 1589. Private collection/The Stapleton Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Diane d'Andouins, Countess of Gramont, known as 'Corisande'. 19th century. Engraving after Melchior Péronard. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Assassination of the Duc de Guise, from J. Boucher, *La vie et faits notables de Henri de Valois* (Paris: Didier Millot, 1589).

John Florio. Frontispiece to his *Queen Anna's New World of Words* (London: E. Blount & W. Barrett, 1611).

Charles Cotton, lithograph after painting by Sir P. Lely, in I. Walton, *The Compleat Angler*. Private Collection/Ken Walsh/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Diagram of digressions in each volume, from L. Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Vol. 6, Chap. 40 (New York: J. F. Taylor, 1904).

The 'Bordeaux Copy' of Montaigne's *Essais* (Paris: A. L'Angelier, 1588), v. I, fol. 34r. *Reproduction en quadrichromie de l'Exemplaire de Bordeaux des* Essais *de Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan (Fasano-Chicago: Schena Editore, Montaigne Studies, 2002).

Marie de Gournay. Title-page portrait in her *Les Advis* (Paris: T. du Bray, 1641).

Michel Iturria, 'Enfin – une groupie!' *Sud-Ouest*/Michel Iturria.

H. Wallis, *Montaigne in his Library*, 1857. Oil on canvas. Photograph from J. Sawyer sale catalogue; present location of original unknown. A nineteenth-century fantasy, with Marie de Gournay at Montaigne's feet taking dictation.

Pierre Charron. Frontispiece to his *De la sagesse* (Paris: Douceur, 1607).

L'Esprit des Essais de Michel, seigneur de Montaigne (Paris: C. de Sercy, 1677), and *Pensées de Montaigne* (Paris: Anisson, 1700).

Romulus and Remus suckled by the she-wolf. Engraving by A. Lafreri from a 4th century BC Etruscan bronze, in his *Speculum Romanae magnificentiae* (Rome: A. Lafreri, 1552). University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center.

Joseph Robert-Fleury, *Derniers moments de Montaigne*, 1853. Oil on canvas. Collections Ville de Périgueux, Musée d'art et d'archéologie du Périgord (Maap), France. Inv. No. B.438. Photograph by Maap.

Montaigne's tomb. From F. Strowski, *Montaigne* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1938)

Montaigne's cat: marginal sketch in a copy of Montaigne's *Essais* (Paris: A. L'Angelier, 1602) owned by the Dutch jurist Pieter Van Veen (b. 1561 or 1562), and illustrated by him, perhaps as a gift for his son. British Library, London.

Chronology

1533 (28 Feb.)	Montaigne is born
1539?–48	He goes to school at the Collège de Guyenne, Bordeaux
1548 (Aug.)	Salt-tax riots in Bordeaux; Montaigne witnesses the mob killing of Moneins
1548–54	He studies: probably law, probably in Paris and/or Toulouse
1554	He begins work at the Cour des Aides in Périgueux
1557	All Périgueux men are transferred to the Bordeaux *parlement*
1558–59	Montaigne becomes friends with Estienne de La Boétie
1559	Treaty of Câteau Cambrésis ends France's foreign wars, with disastrous consequences
1562	Massacre of Vassy: beginning of the civil wars
	In Rouen with Charles IX, Montaigne meets three Tupinambá Brazilians
1563 (18 Aug.)	La Boétie dies, Montaigne at his bedside
1565 (23 Sept.)	Montaigne marries Françoise de La Chassaigne
1568 (18 June)	Pierre Eyquem dies, and Montaigne inherits the estate
1569	Montaigne publishes his translation of Sebond's *Natural Theology*
	Montaigne's brother Arnaud dies in a tennis accident
1569 or early 1570	Montaigne himself almost dies in a riding accident
1570	Montaigne retires from the Bordeaux *parlement*

	His first baby is born, and dies after two months
	He edits the works of La Boétie
1571 (Feb.)	Montaigne makes his birthday inscription in his library
(9 Sept.)	His only surviving child, Léonor, is born
1572	Montaigne probably begins work on the *Essays*
(Aug.)	St Bartholomew's massacres
1574	Death of Charles IX; Henri III becomes king
1576	Montaigne has his medal struck, with scales and the motto *epokhe*
1578	He suffers his first kidney-stone attacks
1580	*Essais:* 1st edition
(June)–1581 (Nov.)	Montaigne travels in Switzerland, Germany and Italy
1581 (Aug.)	He is elected mayor of Bordeaux
1582	*Essais:* 2nd edition
1583 (Aug.)	He is re-elected mayor of Bordeaux
1584 (Dec.)	Henri de Navarre stays at Montaigne estate
1585	Plague on the estate; Montaigne flees
1587	*Essais:* 3rd edition
(Oct.)	Henri de Navarre again calls at Montaigne estate
1588	Montaigne in Paris on secret mission, then follows court of Henri III. He meets Marie de Gournay
(May)	Day of the Barricades; Henri III flees Paris
(June)	*Essais:* the much enlarged '5th' edition (the 4th, if it existed, has never been traced)
(10 July)	Montaigne imprisoned in the Bastille, and released
(Autumn)	He recuperates in Picardy with Marie de Gournay
(Dec.)	Henri III has the duc de Guise assassinated
1588–92	Montaigne works on final additions to the *Essays*
1589 (Aug.)	Henri III is assassinated; Henri IV succeeds to

	the throne, though his claim is disputed
1592 (13 Sept.)	Montaigne dies of a quinsy
1595	Marie de Gournay's edition of the *Essais*, which will dominate Montaigne-reading for three centuries
1601	Death of Montaigne's mother Antoinette de Louppes de Villeneuve
	Pierre Charron's 'remix', *La Sagesse*
1603	*Essayes:* first English translation by John Florio
1616	Death of Montaigne's daughter Léonor
1627	Death of Montaigne's widow Françoise de La Chassaigne
1637	Descartes's *Discours de la méthode*
1645	Death of Marie de Gournay
1662	Blaise Pascal dies, leaving the notes published as the *Pensées*
1676	*Essais* placed on *Index of Prohibited Books*
1685–86	*Essays* translated into English by Charles Cotton
1724	French *Essais* published in London by refugee Pierre Coste
1772	Discovery of Montaigne's travel journal in an old trunk
	Annotated 'Bordeaux Copy' of *Essais* unearthed from archives and used to authenticate the journal
1789	French Revolution
1800	Revolutionary authorities decide to re-bury Montaigne as a secular hero in the Bordeaux Académie, but the plan goes awry
1850	Montaigne's 'plague' letters published, causing consternation
1854	*Essais* removed from the *Index of Prohibited Books*
1880–86	Montaigne's tomb renovated and moved to University of Bordeaux
1906	First volume of Strowski's edition published,

	based primarily on ‘Bordeaux Copy’
1912	First volume of Armaingaud’s edition published, based primarily on ‘Bordeaux Copy’
2007	New Pléiade edition published, based primarily on Gournay’s 1595 edition

For Simo

SARAH BAKEWELL

How To Live

OR

A Life of Montaigne
in one question and
twenty attempts
at an answer

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Q. How to live?

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE IN ONE QUESTION AND TWENTY ATTEMPTS AT AN ANSWER

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY is full of people who are full of themselves. A half-hour's trawl through the online ocean of blogs, tweets, tubes, spaces, faces, pages and pods brings up thousands of individuals, fascinated by their own personalities and shouting for attention. They go on about themselves; they diarise, and chat, and upload photographs of everything they do. Uninhibitedly extrovert, they also look inward as never before. Even as bloggers and networkers delve into their private experience, they communicate with their fellow humans in a shared festival of the self.

Some optimists have tried to make this global meeting of minds the basis for a new approach to international relations. The historian Theodore Zeldin has founded a site called 'The Oxford Muse',[1] which encourages people to put together brief self-portraits in words, describing their everyday lives and the things they have learned. They upload these for other people to read and respond to. For Zeldin, shared self-revelation is the best way to develop trust and co-operation around the planet, replacing national stereotypes with real people. The great adventure of our epoch, he says, is 'to discover who inhabits the world, one individual at a time'. The 'Oxford Muse' is thus full of personal essays or interviews with titles like:

Why an educated Russian works as a cleaner in Oxford

Why being a hairdresser satisfies the need for perfection

How writing a self-portrait shows you are not who you thought you were

What you can discover if you do not drink or dance

What a person adds when writing about himself to what he says in conversation

How to be successful and lazy at the same time

How a chef expresses his kindness

By describing what makes them different from *anyone* else, the contributors reveal what they share with *everyone* else: the experience of being human.

This idea – writing about oneself to create a mirror in which other people recognise their own humanity – has not existed for ever. It had to be invented. And, unlike many cultural inventions, it can be traced to a single person: Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, a nobleman, government official and wine-grower who lived in the Périgord area of south-western France from 1533 to 1592.

Montaigne created the idea simply by doing it. Unlike most memoirists of his day, he did not write to record his own great deeds and achievements. Nor did he lay down a straight eyewitness account of historical events, although he could have done: he lived through a religious civil war which almost destroyed his country over the decades he spent incubating and writing his book. A member of a generation robbed of the hopeful idealism enjoyed by his father's contemporaries, he adjusted to public miseries by focusing his attention on private life. He weathered the disorder, oversaw his estate, assessed court cases as a magistrate, and administered Bordeaux as the most easygoing mayor in its history. All the time, he wrote exploratory, free-floating pieces to which he gave simple titles:

Of Friendship
Of Cannibals
Of the Custom of Wearing Clothes
How we cry and laugh for the same thing
Of Names
Of Smells
Of Cruelty
Of Thumbs
How our mind hinders itself
Of Diversion
Of Coaches
Of Experience

Altogether, he wrote a hundred and seven such essays. Some occupy a page or two; others are much longer, so that most recent editions of the complete collection run to over a thousand pages. They rarely offer to explain or teach anything. Montaigne presents himself as someone who jotted down whatever was going through his head when he picked up his pen, capturing encounters and states of mind as they happened. He used these experiences as the basis for asking himself questions, above all the big question that fascinated him as it did many of his contemporaries. Although it is not quite grammatical in English, it can be phrased in three simple words: ‘How to live?’

This is not the same as the ethical question, ‘How *should* one live?’ Moral dilemmas interested Montaigne, but he was less interested in what people ought to do than in what they actually did. He wanted to know how to live a good life – meaning a correct or honourable life, but also a fully human, satisfying, flourishing one. This question drove him both to write and to read, for he was curious about all human lives, past and present. He wondered constantly about the emotions and motives behind what people did. And, since he was the example closest to hand of a human

going about its business, he wondered just as much about himself.

A down-to-earth question, ‘How to live?’ splintered into a myriad other pragmatic questions. Like everyone else, Montaigne ran up against the major perplexities of existence: how to cope with the fear of death, how to get over losing a child or a beloved friend, how to reconcile yourself to failures, how to make the most of every moment so that life does not drain away unappreciated. But there were smaller puzzles, too. How do you avoid getting drawn into a pointless argument with your wife, or a servant? How can you reassure a friend who thinks a witch has cast a spell on him? How do you cheer up a weeping neighbour? How do you guard your home? What is the best strategy if you are held up by armed robbers who seem to be uncertain whether to kill you or hold you to ransom? If you overhear your daughter’s governess teaching her something you think is wrong, is it wise to intervene? How do you deal with a bully? What do you say to your dog when he wants to go out and play, while you want to stay at your desk writing your book?

In place of abstract answers, Montaigne tells us what *he* did in each case, and what it felt like when he was doing it. He provides all the details we need to make it real, and sometimes more than we need. He tells us, for no particular reason, that the only fruit he likes is melon,[2] that he prefers to have sex lying down rather than standing up, that he cannot sing, and that he loves vivacious company and often gets carried away by the spark of repartee. But he also describes sensations that are harder to capture in words, or even to be aware of: what it feels like to be lazy, or courageous, or indecisive; or to indulge a moment of vanity, or to try to shake off an obsessive fear. He even writes about the sheer feeling of being alive.

Exploring such phenomena over twenty years, Montaigne questioned himself again and again, and built

up a picture of himself – a self-portrait in constant motion, so vivid that it practically gets up off the page and sits down next to you to read over your shoulder. He can say surprising things: a lot has changed since Montaigne was born, almost half a millennium ago, and neither manners nor beliefs are always still recognisable. Yet to read Montaigne is to experience a series of shocks of familiarity, which make the centuries between him and the twenty-first-century reader collapse to nothing. Readers keep seeing themselves in him, just as visitors to the 'Oxford Muse' see themselves, or aspects of themselves, in the story of why an educated Russian works as a cleaner or of what it is like to prefer not to dance.

The journalist Bernard Levin,[3] writing an article on the subject for *The Times* in 1991, said, 'I defy any reader of Montaigne not to put down the book at some point and say with incredulity: "How did he know all that about me?"' The answer is, of course, that he knows it by knowing about himself. In turn, people understand him because they too already know 'all that' about their own experience. As one of his most obsessive early readers, Blaise Pascal, wrote in the seventeenth century: 'It is not in Montaigne but in myself that I find everything I see there.'

The novelist Virginia Woolf imagined people walking past Montaigne's self-portrait like visitors in a gallery. As each person passes, he or she pauses in front of the picture and leans forward to peer through the patterns of reflection on the glass. 'There is always a crowd[4] before that picture, gazing into its depths, seeing their own faces reflected in it, seeing more the longer they look, never being able to say quite what it is they see.' The portrait's face and their own merge into one. This, for Woolf, was the way people respond to each other in general:

As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror … And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue.

Montaigne was the first writer to create literature that deliberately worked in this way, and to do it using the plentiful material of his own life rather than either pure philosophy or pure invention. He was the most human of writers, and the most sociable. Had he lived in the era of mass networked communication, he would have been astounded at the scale on which such sociability has become possible: not dozens or hundreds in a gallery, but millions of people seeing themselves bounced back from different angles.

The effect, in Montaigne's time as in our own, can be intoxicating. A sixteenth-century admirer, Tabourot[5] des Accords, said that anyone reading the *Essays* felt as if they themselves had written it. Over two hundred and fifty years later, the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson said the same thing in almost the same phrase. 'It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book, in some former life.' 'So much have I made him my own,' wrote the twentieth-century novelist André Gide, 'that it seems he is my very self.' And Stefan Zweig, an Austrian writer on the verge of suicide after being forced into exile during the Second World War, found in Montaigne his only real friend: 'Here is a "you" in which my "I" is reflected; here is where all distance is abolished.' The printed page fades from view; a living person steps into the room instead. 'Four hundred years disappear like smoke.'

Enthusiastic buyers on the online bookstore Amazon.com still respond in the same way. One calls the

Essays ‘not so much a book as a companion for life’, and another predicts that it will be ‘the best friend you’ve ever had’. A reader[6] who keeps a copy always on the bedside table laments the fact that it is too big (in its complete version) to carry around all day too. ‘There’s a lifetime’s reading in here,’ says another: ‘For such a big fat classic of a book it reads like it was written yesterday, although if it *had* been written yesterday, he’d’ve been all over *Hello!* magazine by now.’

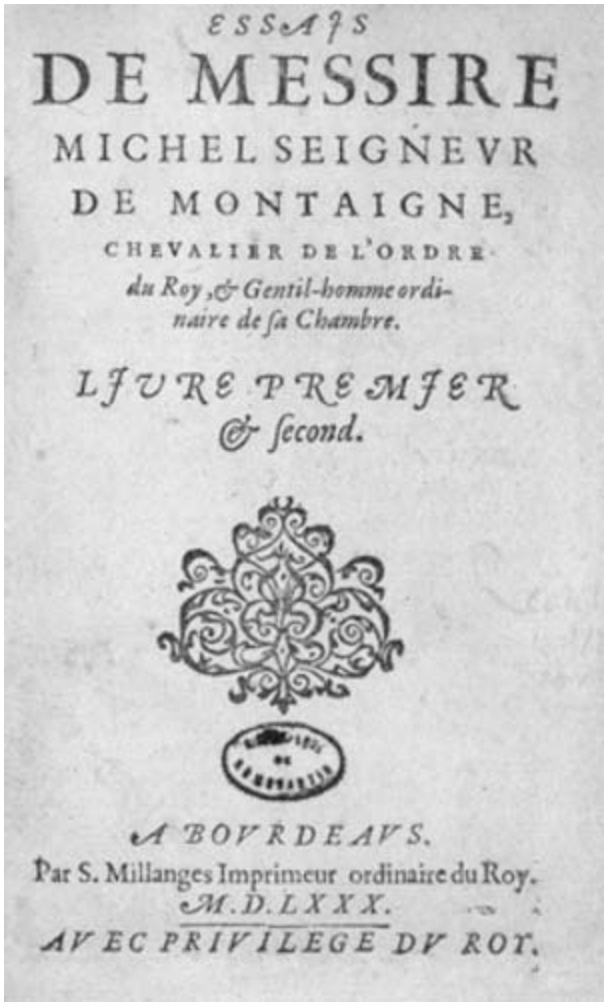
All this can happen because the *Essays* has no great meaning, no point to make, no argument to advance. It does not have designs on you: you can do as you please with it. Montaigne lets his material pour out, and never worries if he has said one thing on one page and the opposite overleaf, or even in the next sentence. He could have taken as his motto Walt Whitman’s lines:

> Do I contradict myself?[7]
> Very well then I contradict myself,
> (I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Every few phrases, a new way of looking at things occurs to him, so he changes direction. Even when his thoughts are most irrational and dreamlike, his writing follows them. ‘I cannot keep my subject still,’[8] he says. ‘It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness.’ Anyone is free to go with him as far as seems desirable, and let him meander off by himself if it doesn’t. Sooner or later, your paths will cross again.

Having created a new genre by writing in this way, Montaigne created *essais*: his new term for it. Today, the word ‘essay’ falls with a dull thud. It reminds many people of the exercises imposed at school or college to test knowledge of the reading list: reworkings of other writers’ arguments with a boring introduction and a facile

conclusion stuck into each end like two forks in a corn-cob. Discourses of that sort existed in Montaigne's day, but *essais* did not. *Essayer*, in French, means simply to *try*. To essay something is to test or taste it, or give it a whirl. One seventeenth-century Montaignist defined it as firing a pistol[9] to see if it shoots straight, or trying out a horse to see if it handles well. On the whole, Montaigne discovered that the pistol shot all over the place and the horse galloped out of control, but this did not bother him. He was delighted to see his work come out so unpredictably.


ESSAIS
DE MESSIRE
MICHEL SEIGNEVR
DE MONTAIGNE,
CHEVALIER DE L'ORDRE
du Roy, & Gentil-homme ordinaire de sa Chambre.
LIVRE PREMIER
& second.
A BOVRDEAVS.
Par S. Millanges Imprimeur ordinaire du Roy.
M.D.LXXX.
AVEC PRIVILEGE DV ROY.

He may never have planned to create a one-man literary revolution, but in retrospect he knew what he had done. 'It