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“Don’t Judge a Book by Its Cover”

What is a teenager’s summer without the dreaded summer reading? Since the summer before sixth grade, schools require students to read books like *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor and in high school, we stressed about the summer reading exams on *The Awakening* and *A Separate Peace*. So, when I got the information from Professor Gago-Jover about the freshmen required reading book, *How to Live, or A Life of Montaigne*, my summer excitement deflated. I thought I finished my required summer reading lists and could finally enjoy a summer filled with “beach reads” and magazines. Although I was disappointed, I knew I had to get the reading completed. Then, much to my surprise I found myself enjoying the novel. The construction of the chapters, as answers to life lessons, stimulated me to think about my own lifestyle. Despite my preconceptions about summer reading, I think the novel, *How to Live, or A Life of Montaigne* by Sarah Bakewell, pushed me to be more reflective and mature heading into college.

College is a big change for any student and I hope to take advantage of this new chapter in my life. While reading *How to Live, or A Life of Montaigne*, I found concrete ways to mature through the questions asked in each chapter. The chapter that felt most relevant to me was “Wake from the Sleep of Habit.” Coming from a small, suburban town in Massachusetts, I knew my college experience would be much different than high school. I would meet new friends, new teachers, and make a whole new lifestyle. Although I knew just about everything around me would change, I also wanted to change myself. Having always been pretty shy in high school, I knew I wanted to be more open and outgoing at Holy Cross. I hoped to branch out and meet many different people. In her novel, Bakewell describes Montaigne meeting the Tupinambá natives. Although some of the practices of the natives are perturbing, Montaigne is able to keep an open mind. At first, the description of the natives seemed irrelevant to me, but upon further reflection I realized it was actually applicable to my desire to meet new people. When I found out my roommate was from Alaska, the idea of befriending people from all different backgrounds became even more relevant. At Holy Cross, I meet students from many different places; from China to our neighboring town, Auburn. I put to use the lesson of “seeing things from the perspective of another person” by sharing any care packages I receive with people who may be too far away to see family and asking people to lunch who appear lonely (Bakewell 182). I joined SPUD to work with students from Worcester who struggle both in and out of school. I hope to apply what I read in Bakewell’s book to my new life experiences at Holy Cross. Not only did Bakewell’s chapter, “Wake from the Sleep of Habit,” help me mature, reading Montaigne’s “Of Cannibals” further encouraged me to be more reflective.

The chapter, “Wake from the Sleep of Habit,” discusses parts of Montaigne’s essay “On Cannibals,” but reading the full text myself allowed me to make my own interpretation of Montaigne’s writing. I enjoyed reading Montaigne’s text because, just as I hope to be reflective, Montaigne seems to be thoughtful about his judging of the natives. Montaigne describes how he can be judgmental like the rest of the Europeans and I, too, can be quick to judge a person. I thought it was powerful how Montaigne did not describe himself as completely tolerant of every aspect of the cannibalistic life, but rather more reflective on how he and the Europeans could be more respectful. When looking at life through a different set of eyes, he realizes that “our customs are no less weird than anyone else’s” (183). The use of the word “weird” emphasizes the fact that our habits are not normal to another culture, and for the Tupinambá, the customs are in fact “weird.” This lesson taught me that what is normal for me may not be normal for someone else and vice versa. I thought it was beneficial to read “Of Cannibals” a few weeks after reading Bakewell’s novel on Montaigne because it reminded me of the reflections I made over the summer about being more open and respectful of others.

While on campus and in classes, I try to apply some of the lessons from *How to Live, or A Life of Montaigne* to my new life. I make an effort to take note of all the exciting aspects of my new life like in Chapter Two, “Pay Attention” (Bakewell, p.23). I pay attention to my professors and my work so that I can be successful at Holy Cross. I share a room with a complete stranger and patiently wait for a shower to be open in a hall full of girls as Chapter Nine suggests to “Live with Others” (Bakewell, p.170). Although my roommate and I may not have similar interests, I still make sure I include her and respect our differences. Similar to Chapter Seventeen, I try to “Regret Nothing” and take advantage of every opportunity (Bakewell, p.286). Bakewell describes how Montaigne rarely “crossed things out, only to keep adding more” (286). Like Montaigne, I join groups and clubs to add to my list of activities. Each chapter explores a new outlook on life that can be applied to my new life. All of these simple answers to the question, how to live? will hopefully help me continue to mature at Holy Cross.

Despite my original dismay at the thought of reading yet another summer reading book, I was pleasantly surprised by the advice in Bakewell’s novel, *How to Live, or A Life of Montaigne*. Each chapter brought a new answer to the question “how to live?”. Montaigne hopes humans learn that no culture is perfect or right. In college, balance is an important part of being successful and Montaigne wants people to become more open to different cultures while still keeping a balance of their own lifestyle. I think that Bakewell’s novel, *How to Live, or A Life of Montaigne* was a successful choice because it teaches the reader to be respectful of people from all walks of life. College is like a melting pot of different cultures and backgrounds, which is why it is important to enter with an open mind. *How to Live, or A Life of Montaigne* taught me both the literal and figurative meaning of the phrase “Don’t judge a book by its cover.”

Works Cited

Bakewell, Sarah. *How to Live, or A Life of Montaigne*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2010. Print.