

Out of Hours

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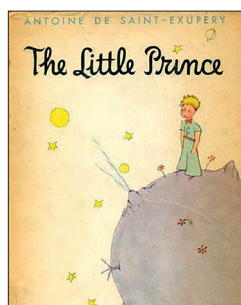
The Little Prince

ESCAPING INTO CHILDHOOD

The Little Prince

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Mahaveer Publishers, 2009, PB, 128pp, £9.99
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I don't feel grown-up yet. People assume I must be grown-up because I have the outward adult male appearances of a job, children, a house, and a beard. But deep down, adulthood is always ahead of me, not quite for now, and if I'm honest, I'm not sure I ever want to reach that point.

Perhaps that's why I love *The Little Prince* so much. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's first-person narrator gives us just enough background that we see him trying to suppress his attraction to a child-like view of the world, and learning to talk of adult 'matters of consequence'. Then he crash-lands his aeroplane in the desert, and out of nowhere meets the little prince.

What follows is the pieced-together story of the little prince's journey to the desert from Asteroid B-612, with charmingly amateurish drawings by the author. The images are a major part of the joy of this book, iconic enough to feature on the French 50 Franc note before the Euro came along. We come to share his affectionate bemusement at the obsessions of the adults he meets on the way. They give and follow orders, drink to forget, count money, or catalogue mountains, but each is, literally, enclosed in their own little world. The little prince is briefly entertained, then a little bored by these people. They have no beauty in their lives, no fun, and no one to look after. As the little prince somehow pierces our defences, we are drawn into believing that his loyalty to a rose might just be the most important thing in the world.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was himself a pilot, and he did crash his plane in the



desert about 8 years before writing this book. After writing it, he disappeared while flying over occupied France and was never seen again. These biographical tidbits anchor this fantastic parable just enough to the real world for us to recognise its truths. Like all classic fairy tales, the magic draws us in and, before we know it, we're learning lessons on how to tame a fox (which we can't help but apply to the humans we know), and believing that the stars are so beautiful because of a rose we shall never see. It's only when you're immersed in this world, when you've let your (adult) self go, that this seems not just to make sense, but also to contain some eternal truth.

You might not be convinced. This might all seem a bit silly. You've probably got some work to do, perhaps some banking. I know, we can't ignore those things. You can read *The Little Prince* in an afternoon. You can read it as an escapist fantasy, without any deeper meaning if you wish. You could even read it as a medical allegory, about the importance of finding the true heart of the work we do. This is not to be found in endless measurements of blood pressures, glycated haemoglobins, and body mass

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indexes, but in the unique person you are, caring for the unique person of your current patient.

At times where our profession feels under threat, perhaps we need some way to help us seek out the fun and beauty in our world, much as a child would.

And what happens in the end? Well, the little prince comes to an arrangement with a snake and ... well, let's just say you'll look up at the stars and see them differently. I read this book every year.

And every year it makes me cry like a child.

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