

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley looks at how to live life.

What do we mean by 'a good life', and how do we go about living it? This is one of the central questions of all philosophy. And amid the pressure and pace of modern existence, it takes on even more significance, which doubtless helps to explain why the bookshop shelves are overflowing with self-help books on how to be successful, happy, fulfilled, etc. But the books I am discussing below are not in the category of self-help manuals – far from it.

Help

In fact, the first – *Help* by Oliver Burkeman – offers a devastating critique of the self-help genre, delivered in a delightfully humorous and irreverent style. The basic (and self-contradictory) premise of all self-help books is that we need their help. The assumption is that we are all in some way inadequate: not happy enough, not healthy enough, not efficient enough, not attractive enough, not rich enough, not gregarious enough, not clever enough ... so we need help. And self-help books are there to provide it. So Burkeman obligingly takes us through the back lanes and dead-ends of popular psychology as expressed through such manuals and systems. His first chapter debunks the

clichés of self-help: *Finding your passion, Making fresh starts, Focusing on your goals, Instant personal magnetism*, etc. He points out that '*reading lists of things to do is often a seductive way to avoid doing them*'. Subsequent chapters cover *Emotional life, Social life, Work life, Productivity, Mental life, Everyday life, Gurus, God-men and other questionable characters*. The last chapter offers extensive and very useful references to



further reading and resources. This is a wise and a fair book. He does not dismiss every idea out of hand, but acknowledges their value – when they have one. Essentially, however, his message is that we are responsible for ourselves, and no self-help book will change that; that before deciding to change something, we should make sure it needs fixing; that we should have modest expectations and not go for radical and unrealistic action; and that we should be kinder to ourselves. If you are looking for texts for conversation classes on critical thinking, there is plenty here to feast on.

How to Live

Sarah Bakewell's superb book is difficult to categorise. It is certainly not a self-help book. Neither is it a straightforward biography. Rather, it is a delightful stroll through the life, times and writings of the remarkable man who was Michel de Montaigne, with excursions into philosophy, history and human psychology. The initial question is *How to live?* and the 20 chapters which follow offer, not so much answers, as insights drawn from various aspects of Montaigne's life and his essays. Here are the chapter titles:

Don't worry about death, Pay attention, Be born, Read a lot, forget most of what you read, and be slow-witted, Survive love and loss, Use little tricks, Question everything, Keep a private room behind the shop, Be convivial: live with others, Wake from the sleep of habit, Live temperately, Guard your humanity, Do something no one has done before, See the world, Do a good job, but not too good a job, Philosophise only by accident, Reflect on everything; regret nothing, Give up control, Be ordinary and imperfect, Let life be its own answer.

It is hardly surprising that Montaigne enjoys the reputation he does, given the fact that readers will always find themselves reflected in what he writes.



His originality lay in the fact that he wrote about himself, including his faults and failings, in such an open and disingenuous manner that we cannot resist following him in his meandering through whatever topics took his interest. He has a protean quality: the whole of life is there, endlessly fascinating and engaging. Whether he is writing about his own near-death experience, speculating about his cat's feelings, describing his unimpressive personal appearance, reflecting on the difficulty of achieving marital contentment, describing the habits and customs of American Indians, detailing the pain of his kidney stones, or lamenting the death of his beloved friend La Boétie, we are drawn into the stream of his consciousness by the warmth and frankness of his manner. His writing is full of paradox and contradiction, yet happily aware of the fact, and accepting them willingly. He lived through one of the most violent periods in French history, when indescribable acts of cruelty were routinely committed, and when plague regularly decimated the population. Yet somehow he survived it with his integrity and humanity intact. His message of moderation, scepticism, suspension of judgement and getting on with life is all the more relevant in our troubled times.



Learning to Dance

Learning to Dance by Michael Mayne is in many ways an admirable book. Each of the 12 chapters is centred on a month of the year, and starts with a lyrical evocation of nature in that month. The chapters then go on to explore, through reflection and a wealth of quotations (the book is worth reading for the quotations alone), scientific issues such as the Big Bang, Evolution, DNA, the brain and the

cosmos, and psychological and human issues such as identity, consciousness, suffering, ageing and belief. Basically, the book is an extended apologia for Christianity, written in an attempt to reconcile religion and science, while exploring 'what it means to be human'. Not everyone will buy the Christian message, of course. Michael Mayne makes two main assertions: that the complexity of the cosmos is the work of a divine and unknowable intelligent creator; and that the problem of an omnipotent God who does not prevent pain is not a real problem, because 'the world of suffering is a necessary context for growth towards God'. I, for one, find his arguments unconvincing, and he certainly makes some unjustifiable and extreme claims: 'The God who reveals himself as Christlike is the only God on offer.' '... a God who ... before all else desires that



we should desire him.' If that is truly the case, then give me Buddhism any day! Many readers will doubtless find that a spiritual sense of awe at the wonder of nature and the universe does not require them to sign up to a particular brand of religious belief. However, the book is still well worth reading: it is beautifully written and offers almost unlimited scope for critical thinking classes.

The Age of Absurdity

Michael Foley's book is an attempt to analyse the many ways in which contemporary life gets in the way of happiness. He does this by trawling through 'philosophy, religious teaching, literature, psychology and neuroscience for common ideas on fulfilment ...'. But this is by no means a dull book – it is feisty, full of humour at the many absurdities which characterise our lives. What makes fulfilment impossible is the modern sense of boundless wanting, the sense of entitlement and the avoidance of effort. The new trinity is: 'I must succeed' 'Everyone must treat me well' and 'The world must be easy'. In the meantime, 'We can't sit still. We can't shut up. We can't escape self-obsession. We can't stop wanting things'. Foley's argument is that fulfilment only comes about through

endless effort. It does not grow on trees. As he rightly points out: 'If we could feel good without effort, we would no longer feel good.'

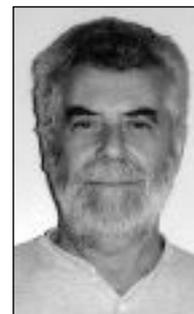
And our effort is worthwhile for its own sake, even if it does not appear to be 'successful', because 'the search for meaning is itself the meaning'. The key common concepts which turn up repeatedly in all the fields he draws on are 'personal responsibility, autonomy, detachment, understanding, mindfulness, transcendence, acceptance of difficulty, ceaseless striving and constant awareness of mortality'.

The down-to-earth message of the book will not be welcome to many ears, but it is realistic and far from boring. I have now read the book three times and each time found more things to reflect on.



As language teachers (and learners), we know that learning a language is a long and difficult process. These books are a salutary reminder that, in this respect at least, life is very much like language learning! **ETp**

Bakewell, S *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer* Vintage 2010
 Burkeman, O *Help* Canongate 2011
 Foley, M *The Age of Absurdity: Why modern life makes it hard to be happy* Simon and Schuster 2010
 Mayne, M *Learning to Dance* Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd 2011



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the *Oxford Resource Books for Teachers*.

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