

How Proust Can Change Your Life ; Not a Novel Study Guide

**How Proust Can Change Your Life ; Not a Novel by
Alain de Botton**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

How Proust Can Change Your Life ; Not a Novel Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	5
Chapter 3.....	7
Chapter 4.....	8
Chapter 5.....	10
Chapter 6.....	11
Chapter 7.....	13
Chapter 8.....	15
Chapter 9.....	16
Characters.....	17
Objects/Places.....	20
Themes.....	22
Style.....	24
Quotes.....	26
Topics for Discussion.....	28



Plot Summary

How Proust Can Change Your Life by Alain De Botton is a whimsical parody of a self-help book. It aims to explore author Marcel Proust's life, as well as Proust's literary works and letters, to uncover some Proustian wisdom that might help the reader to lead a better life.

Proust was an early 20th century author, most famous for his huge novel series *In Search of Lost Time*, also known more popularly as *Remembrance of Things Past*. Proust was an infamous recluse and hypochondriac, who died at age 51 after succumbing to pneumonia. Proust spent much time on the French social scene, hobnobbing with aristocrats, although because of his reclusive tendencies and low self-esteem, he suffered great psychological distress in his bid to be friendly and well-liked. Proust's father was a doctor with an international reputation and his brother Robert was a surgeon. Proust struggled to emerge from his father's shadow, drawn to literature and writing instead of a more "respectable" profession. Proust also had an unhealthy relationship with his mother. His mother was extremely smothering to the point that Proust could hardly function without her. For all of these reasons, Proust was fairly unhappy for the majority of his life, a fact he was unafraid to share in numerous letters and indirectly in his works.

De Botton argues that suffering can actually lead to a better and fuller life. As Proust himself might espouse, only in suffering can we learn to appreciate what is around us and to understand it better. Suffering, in fact, leads to knowledge. We should live in the moment and carefully observe our surroundings. The ordinary can be extraordinary and beautiful if we are able to view our world with fresh eyes.

De Botton extends this basic premise of "seizing the moment" into theories of art and readership. Proust would argue that, as readers, we should find something of ourselves in what we read. Works written hundreds or thousands of years ago are still relevant because of their ability to reflect something in ourselves back at us. Artists can help to open our eyes to new experiences and new ways of viewing the world. However, an excessive reliance on art is never healthy because there comes a part when art becomes irrelevant or inadequate to express our unique experience. At that point, the reader must become the writer, artistically creating in order to make his or her own statement on life.

Proust also has some wisdom for friendships and romance. Friendship should be about warmth, affection, and companionship and not necessarily about genuineness or an intellectual exchange of ideas. Therefore, the ideal friend wisely withholds criticisms or opinions about another friend in favor of a congenial atmosphere. On the subject of love, lovers should take pains to make love fresh and ever-new, always beguiling and a pursuit, because if love is too easy and familiar, it necessarily breeds contempt.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Author De Botton starts with, "There are few things humans are more dedicated to than unhappiness" (pg. 3.) He reasons that there are plenty of things to be unhappy about, including the frailty of our bodies and the insincerities of social life.

To begin to explore the subject, author Marcel Proust, De Botton starts with a Paris newspaper of the 1920s called L'Intransigeant. The newspaper had a popular column that polled celebrities on interesting questions. One column in particular posed a scenario in which the end of the world is scientifically certain and it is announced to the world. In this scenario, the column asked, what would be the effect on people and how would they behave?

Various celebrities of the day chimed in with responses, including writer Henri Bordeaux, actress Berthe Bovy, and palm reader Madame Fraya. Answers ran the gamut. One claimed he would get in a last game of golf while another thought all social inhibitions would utterly fall away. Another person to respond was author Marcel Proust. By the 1920s, Proust was a bona fide celebrity. His 1913 novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, won him international acclaim. Proust's answer was that imminent death would cause us to appreciate life more and to embrace life's possibilities fully. People would do things they would otherwise never have done, including go to the Louvre museum, fall in love, and travel to India.

De Botton points out that Proust's own character was at odds with the answer he gave. He was an infamous recluse and always sickly and agoraphobic. He had not been to the Louvre in ten years and hated museum crowds. He also could not stand the long trip to India. Proust was also not a great lover by any stretch of the imagination.

Four months after Proust wrote his response to L'Intransigeant, he died from a cold at the age of 51. Normally bedridden, he had dared to attend a party and he caught a cold waiting for a taxi. He refused all medication from doctors and so a cold turned to bronchitis and then into pneumonia.

Fortunately for us, Proust, in his novel *In Search of Lost Time*, left a much more thorough guide to living than his brief response to L'Intransigeant. A main component of *In Search of Lost Time* is a study of how to appreciate life and use it more fully and De Botton will extract Proust's wisdom for the reader.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Proust's father, Dr. Adrien Proust, was a well-respected doctor and the son of a provincial grocer who manufactured wax candles. Dr. Proust was especially concerned with public sanitation and consulted various governments on controlling infectious diseases such as cholera. He was internationally-renowned and died in 1903.

De Botton believes that Proust was intimidated by his father's accomplishments. Proust flirted with professions like a lawyer or stockbroker but could never summon up any passion for anything outside literature and writing. He spent five years as a librarian at the Mazarine library, but missed much time on sick leave, skipping out on work in favor of social gatherings and spending his father's money. Proust was fired at five years of not showing up to work.

After both his parents died, Proust began work on his masterpiece, *In Search of Lost Time*. He stated to his maid that he wanted the book to do for people what his father did for people; make them better.

Writing was not a foreign concept for the Prousts. Dr. Adrien Proust was the author of no less than thirty-four books, on everything from public sanitation to personal physical fitness. His most successful book was called *Elements of Hygiene*, published in 1888. It was intended for teen girls as a way to help improve everything from posture to diet. De Botton provides a few pages from the book. Dr. Proust advised teen girls to refrain from slouching while sitting, as it would damage internal organs. He also warned against the dangers of the corset, and explained several fitness exercises complete with diagrams.

De Botton turns to the question, "How Should We Read?" Proust's own answer was to find something of ourselves and our situation in the book we are reading. For evidence of this assertion, De Botton points to Proust's remark about a painting by Domenico Ghirlandio, called *the Old Man and the Boy*. Proust swore that, in the image of the old man in the painting, he saw the Marquis de Lau, a well-known figure in the Parisian social world that Proust knew.

De Botton next reveals he has had a similar reaction when reading Proust's work. Proust's detailed portrait of a character named Albertine, and the way she talks, reminds De Botton of his girlfriend, Kate. And Proust's description of the Duchesse de Guermantes reminds De Botton of the stepmother of an ex-girlfriend. De Botton names this phenomenon of seeing ourselves in works of fiction the Marquis de Lau Phenomenon or MLP.

De Botton then develops a list of benefits for MLP: the comfort of feeling at home everywhere, the comfort that there is indeed a universal human nature; the feeling that what we are feeling and experiencing is shared, and that we are not alone in the human



experience; and finally the "finger-placing ability," an increase in our own perceptive powers such that Proust can describe something and the reader can then discover that something in his or her own life.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

In *Search of Lost Time* is a long and quite labyrinthine book. In the fifth volume of the book, a single sentence is so long that it would run for four meters if typed out in standard-sized book text. Proust's elaborate and long descriptions are legendary. An early French publisher failed to understand "why a chap needs thirty pages to describe how he tosses and turns in bed before falling asleep" (pg. 33.)

No contemporary publishers "got" Proust at the beginning of his career because of this long-winded prose and so he was forced to initially self-publish. Proust continues to have this reputation, such that the "All-England Summarise Proust Competition" was held by the comedy troupe Monty Python, which aimed to find the most succinct summary of Proust's many volumes of text.

Why did Proust create such long-winded writing? Proust provides some insight in writing about reading the newspaper. The newspaper, essentially, reduces horrible murders, great tragedies, and the whole of human experience into "a morning treat" to be digested along with a croissant and coffee. French papers in the early 20th century had a flair for reducing particularly cruel events into bite-sized one- or two-sentence bulletins. In January 1907, a typically brief bulletin talked about a son murdering his mother, and Proust happened to know the young man, Henri van Blarenberghe.

Disturbed, Proust wrote a five-page article about the incident, almost to refute the smug brevity of the newspaper, to help explain and describe the horrible event of the murder, and Henri's state of mind around the time of the event.

The point is that abbreviation does not do justice to the course of human events. The great stories of literature would appear entirely boring if reduced to a one-sentence sound bite. Proust claimed that the same degree of discoveries about the human experience can be made in a soap advertisement, as can be made in *Pensees*, a well-known book of aphorisms noted for its succinct wisdom, written by Blaise Pascal in 1623. In Proust's own case, to help get to sleep, he would sometimes examine a mundane train timetable, probing it for meaning and value. Proust urges us to focus our attention on the present and to not let life pass by too quickly. A life examined is a life well-lived.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

De Botton wonders whether the artist can be separated from the work and whether any examination as to the merits of art should also include a survey of the artist's biography. Proust decidedly felt that a piece of art should be evaluated separately from the artist, and that the artist is in fact unimportant in any judgement of the art he or she produced. Perhaps appropriately, then, Proust's writing is logical and wise, whereas his life by contrast was filled with missteps and both physical and psychological misery.

To begin with, Proust had an extremely overbearing mother, who encouraged a nurse-patient relationship with Proust and who caused Proust to be helpless and clinging. Proust would have conversations in letters with his mother about the quality of his stool or the effectiveness of sleep. Proust could do nothing without his mother and his amount of lovesick loyalty for his mother bothered many of his friends. Perhaps as a result of this unhealthy relationship, Proust dealt with repressed sexual desires and eventually, self-loathing homosexuality. Proust thus developed a pessimistic view toward romance, viewing love as an incurable disease. His friends and acquaintances often did not understand Proust and his eccentricities, compounding his unhappiness.

Physically, Proust had asthma attacks since the age of ten and too much time outdoors made him go into a fit. He rarely got fresh air, preferring to keep his flat's windows shut. Proust developed a horrible diet of a single and unhealthy meal a day. He had constant constipation and it burned when he urinated. His skin was so sensitive that he could not use soap or cologne. He always felt like he had a cold and had numerous violent coughing fits.

Psychologically, Proust had a fear of mice and heights. He feared change and any alteration to rigid routine. Thus he traveled with only very great difficulty. Many days, he could barely get out of bed. He had a manic sensitivity to noise, enraging his neighbors. He also felt like he was on the edge of dying.

By contrast, brother Robert Proust, a surgeon, was built like an ox and was extraordinarily healthy. He had several bad war and car accidents and quickly recovered. De Botton wonders who we should model ourselves after and if it should be Robert, who was strong but who did not feel or become affected by his surroundings or Marcel, who was painfully aware of his surroundings.

De Botton comes down on the side of Marcel Proust. Proust argued that pain is a kind of knowledge and suffering allows us to better perceive our environment. Pain requires us to think, to act, and to acquire knowledge. More broadly, learning "painlessly" via a teacher in a classroom is far inferior to learning "painfully" in the course of living and suffering hardship. Bliss breeds ignorance.



Perhaps this philosophy helps to explain Proust's healthy disregard for doctors and a disdain that works its way into his work. Doctors, after all, profess to know what ails the body without feeling any pain themselves. They merely read about symptoms or theories in medical textbooks.

Going back to the question posed at the beginning of the chapter, it is valuable to examine Proust, as a man who suffered greatly in life. According to this philosophy, Proust's insights are equally as great.

The final question that arises from this chapter then is how can we, as humans, suffer more successfully? We must turn our grief into knowledge and transform pain into ideas, thus lessening their visceral effect.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Proust became very annoyed when people would use trite and cliched expressions around him. Proust felt people should take the time to create unique expressions of their experiences, and to not rely upon tired sayings. They are "superficial articulations" of ideas and experiences, and they fall short in relaying one's personal impression of an object or situation. Proust criticized a fellow writer's work, *The Lover and the Doctor* by Gabriel de La Rochefoucauld, because he used phrases like "the moon is discreet." By contrast, Proust used a unique metaphor for the moon in one of his works, describing it as an actor who slipped in to the audience to watch the rest of her acting company. In the view Proust is espousing, this more elaborate and unique metaphor displays a more genuine impression of the moon than de La Rochefoucauld's somewhat common phrase.

Using cliches, and adopting other's manners of speaking, is also being less than true to oneself. This is evident in *In Search of Lost Time*, when the romantic interest Albertine adopts the speech and manners of a bourgeois young woman. Proust's disdain for cliché is further illustrated in his encounter with an editor named Louis Ganderax, who wrote a piece about composer Georges Bizet full of flowery phrases borrowed from world literature. Ganderax fancied himself as the defender of the French language, but Proust wrote a long letter to Bizet's widow criticizing Ganderax for his over-reliance on the words of the past. Proust felt everyone should see the world like it was new, and express themselves uniquely. Besides, if Ganderax's view prevailed, there would be no great works of literature, because great authors are able to express themselves in unique ways. In one sense, rules are made to be broken.

Expanding on this view, De Botton explains that Proust himself had a wide variety of nicknames, according to whom he was with, everything from *mon petit serin* or my little canary to "Le Flagorneur," the toady. People viewed Proust differently and he was a different person around different people.

As far as original and non-cliched means of expressions, we need go no further than Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and his cast of unique characters with their eccentric and closely-observed behaviors. One of these is Aunt Leonie, who daydreams about her family dying in a house fire so she could impress the community with her courage under such duress.

Given this philosophy, it is not surprising then that Proust responded very favorably to the work of the Impressionist painters, including Claude Monet. The Impressionist philosophy corresponds closely to Proust's own. Reality is not objective but subjective and a subjective impression of reality is more valuable and authentic than a mere mechanical reproduction. Proust even has an Impressionist-like painter in his cast of characters named Elstir.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

The subject of Chapter 6 is "How to Be a Good Friend." De Botton quotes many praises about Proust from his friends, lauding his generosity, selflessness, modesty, great conversation, intellectual curiosity, and more. De Botton then follows this list with Proust's own quotations on friendship. Proust's quotations are full of cynicism about friendship. Proust describes friendship as a lie and a farce, a foolish sacrifice.

Proust's point was that we are not ourselves when with friends, and that the act of conversation is far inferior to the act of writing, insofar as sincere expression of the self. Why is conversation so inferior? Only with writing is a person able to think and make thoughtful decisions about what to say. Conversation, on the other hand, is quick and constant, and does not allow for the kind of introspection necessary for true expression. Additionally, writing allows for revision, whereas conversation does not allow for any such amendments.

Proust himself endlessly revised his work. He intended *In Search of Lost Time* to be only three volumes, but it extended into several more volumes. Original manuscripts are full of scribbled notes and scratched-out lines, as part of Proust's constant quest to better the work and arrive at a more perfect means of expression. This outraged his frustrated publishers, but it made for a better book.

Proust also debunks the notion that with friends, we are somehow able to share intimate thoughts and thus be more genuine. Many thoughts we have about friends cannot be uttered such as a criticism of their writing or their fiancée and we must constantly check our own speech. Furthermore, if any such criticism were uttered, likely it would end up breaking the friendship, causing doubt as to the genuineness of a friendship that could be so easily dissolved.

Proust's own problems with friendship came as a result of his supernatural powers of perception such that he saw all the faults of his friends, and yet could not utter them for fear of upsetting them. By contrast, he was extremely generous with his friends and a "people-pleaser" who never criticized. His low self-esteem did not help matters either.

Instead of criticism, Proust turned his power of perceptions to manipulation through praise and he was quite successful, winning a great many friends who spoke very fondly of him after his death. Proust was able to separate his true feelings about people from the process of winning them over, and conducting a friendship based upon warm affection.

This is how De Botton feels friendships should be conducted in the Proustian fashion. We should be warm, superficial, and affectionate with friends and we should withhold our true feelings in the name of congeniality. Proust succeeded in winning friends by

keeping the focus of conversations on the other person, rather than himself, and to never utter a word of criticism. Proust's own overtly affectionate and fawning nature was identified by some of his friends and called "proustification."

The point is not that we should be decidedly false with friends. Rather, the point is that we should be able to separate our intellectual life and our need for companionship and affection. Proust did just that. One example is two letters discovered that Proust wrote to writer Fernand Gregh. Gregh wrote a dreadful book of poetry and asked Proust for his thoughts on it, shortly after Gregh himself belittled one of Proust's books. Proust wrote a scathing letter, but he did not send it. The second letter he did send was full of praise for Gregh.

Additionally, Proust was able to share his true feelings with his friends in the form of *In Search of Lost Time*. Many characters in the book were modeled, fully or partially, on real-life friends, and Proust actually got in a bit of trouble with friends who recognized their fictional counterparts and their follies.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

De Botton refers to an essay Proust wrote about a theoretical young man who was thoroughly unhappy in his mundane and impoverished life. This young man yearned for the finer things, grand palaces and cathedrals, talking with princes, and traveling the world.

Proust's remedy for this young man was an introduction to the paintings of Jean-Baptiste Chardin. Chardin was famous for his still-life renderings of ordinary objects: fruit, kitchen utensils, loaves of bread, crockery, and also for ordinary peasant scenes. Chardin's skill was taking these ordinary scenes and injecting them with a certain elegance and beauty. Chardin made the ordinary extraordinary.

With this kind of view of the world, the young man would suddenly find grandeur and beauty in his "ordinary" surroundings. Proust wrote this essay in 1895, before he became famous, and it was rejected by the editor of a local newspaper at the time.

In Proust's view, painters had the ability to "open our eyes" and compel us to appreciate things we could not appreciate before. Our dissatisfaction or unhappiness with our current state could therefore be a failure of perspective, rather than any objective source of that unhappiness.

Proust returned to the notion of the "unhappy young man" with his unnamed narrator in *In Search of Lost Time*. The narrator was also bored and gloomy with his life. De Botton describes a moment when this narrator's eyes were opened, involving the enjoyment of a madeleine or a small cake. Suddenly, in eating this cake, all the narrator's gloom was replaced by energy and zest for life. This madeleine was perfectly ordinary and the kind of cake the narrator had eaten as a child.

There is thus a distinction between actual life, and the "image" of life. Too often, human beings become upset or sad because of the image they have created for the life they should be leading or the life they have expected, rather than the life they are truly living. It is only natural, then, to become upset when the image does not match the reality.

As an example of this, the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* travels to a seaside resort, and in his mind he has the image of a dark, desolate, and "Gothic"-style beach with craggy cliffs and raging waves. What the narrator finds is a typical early 20th century bustling resort town. The image does not match the reality, and the narrator is upset. However, the artist Elstir is in the town, and he paints completely ordinary objects and people he observes in the town: yachts, homes, women in cotton dresses. Elstir shows these paintings to the narrator and forces him to see the beauty in the ordinary. The narrator is changed by the experience, and he becomes a happier person by the end of his trip.

A charge might be leveled against Proust, that he did not practice what he preached, and that he was not content with the ordinary, with his frequent parties at nightclubs with minor royalty. In response, Proust might say that he was unhappy with this glamorous life. In fact, people cannot and should not be judged by easy categories. "Aristocrats" are not always intelligent and refined people, and illiterate poor people like Proust's own maid are not always uneducated and unrefined. Proust, in fact, thought his maid was terrific company. In *Search of Lost Time* explores this same phenomenon by having the main character's beloved romantic interest, Albertine, as someone who did not have a great interest or knowledge of art, which was all the rage in aristocratic circles, but who nonetheless was engaging and charming.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

De Botton asks whether Proust has anything to say about love and romance. Proust himself, in a letter, asserted that he was excellent at arranging everyone's happiness in love except for his own. Proust touted his selflessness and powers of diplomacy.

The frequent problem with love, of loving someone for a long period of time, is a human being's tendency to become bored and restless, even ungrateful, in regards to objects and people that are ever-present and easily accessible. For an example, Proust lamented when people complained about a telephone call failing or a hum in the telephone line. The telephone is a marvelous invention and yet because people were familiar with it and it was an everyday object, they treated it with contempt. For an example in *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator becomes enamored of being with a woman named Gilberte. He finally ingratiates himself enough to be invited for tea but after about 15 minutes with the woman, the narrator becomes bored and restless.

How do we, as creatures of habit, combat this tendency to develop contempt for the familiar, especially in regards to lovers? There are two solutions. The first might be summed up by the phrase, "absence makes the heart grow fonder." Lovers must continually play a game of cat and mouse. They must be deceptive and find ways to make love fresh and new, and they must make love a pursuit, rather than a foregone conclusion. Secondly, lovers must take great pains to discover new things about their partner. Perhaps familiarity comes from a false belief that we know a person well enough, when in fact there are a great many more things to discover.

On the first point of absence makes the heart grow fonder, De Botton shares a candid letter Proust wrote to his grandfather. While still a young man, Proust was taken to a brothel by his father in order to cure Proust of his chronic masturbation. Proust was unable to perform with the prostitute and this failure corresponds to the sense that a lover must be difficult to obtain and that there must be a pursuit involved. In this case, the prostitute is too readily available for proper romantic feelings or even lust to take hold.

A final prescription for ensuring long-lasting love is the threat of infidelity. Jealousy sparks renewed intensity of romantic feeling. This is simply one additional aspect of the "cat and mouse" theory of love.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

This final chapter deals with a theory of reading. The question posed is how seriously should we take reading? Proust at 28 had done nothing with his life and his novel writing was going nowhere. At this point, he discovered the literature of John Ruskin. Proust was enamored of Ruskin's careful observations of brooks, statuary, and many other things. So moved was Proust that he became a Ruskin scholar. Proust translated several Ruskin works into French and when Ruskin died in 1900, Proust wrote a eulogy and several essays. It was clear, then, that reading was extremely valuable for Proust. Ruskin helped Proust to open his eyes and to discover valuable parts of the human experience.

Proust appeared to be heading for a life in academia. However, he stopped short. Proust became dissatisfied with relying on not just Ruskin, but upon any other artist's conception of the universe. An artist's sees the world through his or her own eyes and because everyone is unique, at one point or another the reader will feel that the artist's "prism" on to the world is inaccurate or inadequate. The reader or spectator will be bothered and frustrated by an excessive reliance on reading. This dependency on reading means that the reader is not experiencing life for himself or herself firsthand.

Additional dangers of an excessive reliance on reading are listed. The reader might feel that a writer's wisdom in one area means that the writer is a sage in all areas, which may not be true. Secondly, a reader may be creatively crippled or intimidated by a great piece of literature and be unable to write or do anything artistic. For an example, De Botton cites the case of Virginia Woolf the British novelist. Woolf so loved and respected Proust that it severely affected her own writing output for a time. She felt Proust was so perfect, she deemed that there was no point in her own "scribblings." Eventually Woolf was able to snap out of her funk by realizing that Proust's work and her own work could co-exist and both make contributions.

Another danger of reading is artistic idolatry, treating writers like icons or idols when they do not deserve to be. Fanatic readers, in the case of Proust, might try to cook up dishes mentioned in *In Search of Lost Time*, or visit real-life Illiers-Combray, an important location in the work. Proust himself would scoff at such foolishness. The actual dishes or actual locations are irrelevant to the spirit of the work and what is trying to be conveyed. It is more important that we use Proust to help see our world through our own eyes, rather than Proust's world through his eyes.

For all of these reasons, readers should use books as an introduction to the world, as a way to open eyes and see the world in a different way. After this process, readers must have the strength to toss the books aside, in an effort to make their own artistic expressions and forge their own experiences.



Characters

Marcel Proust

Marcel Proust was a writer and man of letters in early 20th century France. Author De Botton uses Proust's biography and philosophy to develop a methodology on how to live better. Proust himself was a fairly miserable man throughout much of his life. He was only attracted to writing and literature and various other occupations ended in failure. He was initially viewed as a "hanger-on," mooching off of his family's fortune in order to hobnob with aristocrats and attend parties.

Physically and psychologically, Proust could be described as somewhat of a wreck. He was a hypochondriac and was perpetually ill and allergic to a great many things. He had many fears, and could not stand noise. He had a low opinion of himself and was never happy in love or friendship. He was also a homosexual at a time when such behavior was not condoned, adding to his misery.

Nevertheless, Proust was a brilliant writer, and is known today for his epic novel *In Search of Lost Time*, among other minor novels. Proust displayed a fine attention to minute detail, and a powerful ability to accurately observe human behavior and thoughts. Much of his novel was semi-autobiographical with characters modeled after various friends and acquaintances in his social circles.

Dr. Adrien Proust

Dr. Adrien Proust is the father of Marcel Proust. He was a doctor who was especially interested in public sanitation and protecting the public against such diseases as the bubonic plague and cholera. In this capacity, he toured Europe, consulting with governments and cities about what steps to take to minimize the threat of contagion.

He was a physically imposing man in stark contrast to Marcel. De Botton believes that Marcel was likely intimidated by Adrien and struggled to emerge from under his famous father's shadow. Dr. Adrien Proust was a sensible man and lamented the fact that Marcel did not seem likely to acquire a stable profession, instead leeching off the family fortune with his interest in literature. Adrien instead admired his other son Robert, who followed in his father's footsteps to become a surgeon.

Dr. Adrien Proust authored 34 books on health, well-being, and various medical issues, indicating that Proust's own writing talents were somewhat hereditary. A typical book was *Elements of Hygiene*, in which Adrien instructed young girls on posture, diet, and proper exercise. Dr. Adrien Proust was quite progressive for the age and for one example, he decried the use of corsets for their effect on vital internal organs and respiration.



Robert Proust

Robert Proust was Marcel's brother and a well-regarded surgeon. De Botton describes him as an extremely healthy and hearty man in contrast to his brother.

The Narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*

The unnamed narrator of Proust's masterpiece, *In Search of Lost Time*, was a young man much like Proust himself who was extremely sensitive and quite often despairing. The object of his affections was a girl named Albertine.

Jean-Baptiste Chardin

Chardin was a painter of still lifes of ordinary objects as well as a painter of mundane peasant scenes. Proust felt that an appreciation of Chardin might help us to discover the beauty of our everyday world.

Henri van Blarenberghe

Van Blarenberghe was a young man, an acquaintance of Proust, who brutally butchered his mother to death. Proust was unhappy with the brief treatment of the crime the newspaper offered and thus delivered a multiple-page essay on the tragedy and the possible motivations behind the act.

Proust's Mother

Proust's mother was entirely overbearing and she coddled her son to the point of his helplessness, perhaps leading to some of his maladies. Proust was extremely close to his mother, and lived with her until her death.

Louis Ganderax

Ganderax was the self-described "defender of the French language," an editor who wrote a comically pretentious and overwrought ode to composer Georges Bizet. Proust wrote a letter to Bizet's widow, ridiculing Ganderax for his excessive reliance on clichés and tired phrases.

Fernand Gregh

Gregh was a man who wrote a disparaging comment about one of Proust's books in a local periodical. Gregh then asked Proust to review his own work. Proust wrote a wicked note about the book, but thought better of sending it and what Proust did send to Gregh



was glowing and laudatory. This episode demonstrates an ideal approach to friendship according to author De Botton.

Virginia Woolf

Woolf, the famous English author, read Proust and was creatively frozen by his brilliance, feeling there was then no point to write herself. Only after much struggle did Woolf come to the conclusion that her work and Proust's work could do different things. Thus each could be valuable on its own merits.



Objects/Places

In Search of Lost Time

In Search of Lost Time is Marcel Proust's masterpiece of French literature. It is a novel in seven volumes. It is one of the longest novels ever written. An alternate title for the novel is Remembrance of Things Past.

MLP

Marquis de Lau was a well-known member of French social circles whom Proust was acquainted with. Proust claimed that in a painting by Domenico Ghirlandio, called the Old Man and the Boy, he saw the Marquis de Lau as the "Old Man." The Marquis de Lau Phenomenon or MLP is thus the tendency for the viewer/reader to see parts of themselves or their experience in works of art.

All-England Summarise Proust Competition

The All-England Summarise Proust Competition was a farcical competition held by the comedy troupe Monty Python whose aim was to summarize In Search of Lost Time as succinctly as possible. Monty Python was poking fun at the book's infamous length.

Newspapers

Proust had a problem with newspapers because they condensed so much of complicated human tragedy into tiny one-sentence bulletins. Nevertheless, Proust very carefully read the newspaper and imagined the stories behind each of the brief bulletins.

Impressionism

Impressionism was a movement in art which sought to capture the personal perception of landscapes or objects, rather than an objective reproduction. Proust was very enthusiastic about the movement, because he too placed much value in personal expression and subjectivity.

Friendship

According to the book, the goal of friendship should be affection and companionship and not intellectual stimulation. Friends should thus refrain from rendering hurtful opinions in favor of a stress-free and congenial atmosphere.



Love

To maintain love between two people, both lovers should seek to make the relationship ever new. Love should be a pursuit and a game of cat and mouse. When love grows stale and ordinary, there is a danger the lovers will come to resent or hate one another. Familiarity breeds contempt.

Mazarine Library

Proust worked at Mazarine Library for approximately five years. He took constant sick leave and was much more interested in attending parties than working, leading to his termination.

Elements of Hygiene

Elements of Hygiene was Dr. Albert Proust's best-selling fitness book. It instructed girls in such areas as proper posture and physical exercises.

Illiers-Combray

Illiers-Combray is a location in France important in *In Search of Lost Time*. Apparently a cottage industry has sprung up around the town, and tourists often flock to the town because it was mentioned by Proust. Proust would not approve of this tourism. Illiers-Combray by itself is not important and was merely one small element of a larger work.



Themes

The Value of Suffering

Author De Botton points out that Proust, despite all the advice he dispensed for better living, suffered psychologically and emotionally for much of his life. Psychologically, he had low self-esteem, was a closeted homosexual, reclusive, and had many fears. Physically, Proust had near-constant colds and allergies and was often confined to bed.

De Botton, through Proust, proposes that suffering is in fact valuable, and perhaps leads to a richer life experience. If bliss leads to ignorance, why would we bother to learn how a car works if it runs perfectly all the time?. Then unhappiness leads to knowledge and a constant pursuit of betterment and truth. In this view, Proust's insights as revealed through his literature are quite valuable and wise, precisely because Proust suffered to such a degree in his life.

The solution to grief, pain, loss, and suffering, then, is to transform these bad emotions into something more useful. We must learn something from our pain, we must accomplish greatness despite suffering. Rather than concentrating on the pain, we must channel it toward education and self-knowledge. Moreover, objectively there may not be much to be upset about at all; human nature is such that we create images and preconceptions, based on psychology rather than reality, that color our emotions. The additional suggestion is to fight these preconceptions and to appreciate what is real.

The Problem with Cliches

Proust often scolded his friends or contemporary writers for using cliches, or otherwise well-known, tired phrases. Proust felt that cliches were somewhat of a crutch, that they were a poor substitution for original expression. To Proust, cliches represented "superficial articulations," and they do not do the phenomenon of personal and unique expression justice.

Additionally, cliches can be symptomatic of a larger problem of not being true to oneself. A cliché is a type of deception, an adoption of someone else's speech. An example of this is Albertine in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. She attempts to adopt the speech patterns and behaviors of a bourgeois young woman. While using cliches, a person necessarily cannot accurately express himself or herself, and the result is a sort of falsity.

Instead, Proust urges us to discover new and personal ways to express ourselves. This will require concentration and thought, unlike cliches, which can be quickly dashed off. By doing so, reciprocally, we will be able to better perceive the world.

This problem of cliches relates to the larger problem of the inadequacies of speech in general. Speech is constant—their can be no awkward pauses in a normal conversation



with friends and it cannot be reconsidered or revised. This is in contrast to writing, which can be thoughtful and carefully considered.

Beauty in the Ordinary

In an essay, Proust addresses the problem of a young man facing the bleak prospect of a mundane and ordinary existence, sitting in his ordinary kitchen. Proust urges this young man to discover the paintings of Jean-Baptiste Chardin, who painted ordinary scenes of crockery, kitchen utensils, fruit, and everyday peasant activities. Chardin was able to portray the beauty of everyday objects, be it the delicate and fibrous nature of a peach or the complicated gleam coming from a silver vase.

Proust's point was that "ordinariness" is in the eye of the beholder. In fact, the world around us is full of miraculous and marvelous things; it only takes a change of perspective, often provoked by a skillful artist, to compel us to view things in a new way. Personal dissatisfaction can be thus a product of proper perspective, rather than anything concrete and objectively detrimental in the environment.

The artist has the ability to open our eyes to new ways of seeing, and to new aspects of the human condition. Spectatorship should thus be somewhat selfish. The viewer of art should find something of himself or herself in the art. The question should be asked of art. How can I apply this art to my own life and experience? This is another step towards perhaps the most noble and basic goal, that of truth and self-knowledge.

Style

Perspective

De Botton has created what amounts to a self-help book, with wisdom founded upon a rather unusual source, Marcel Proust. It is clear that De Botton has plenty of affection and respect for the French author, and that De Botton's hope is to make Proust more accessible to a general audience. De Botton is an author himself and undoubtedly he has been influenced by Proust.

This influence has a kind of echo effect in the work itself. Proust was heavily influenced by the work of John Ruskin, but then reached a point where Ruskin was inadequate for Proust's need for self-expression, thus leading to Proust's own writing. In the same way, De Botton greatly admires Proust, but in this book he has certainly put his own philosophical stamp on the material. De Botton may begin with an anecdote or noteworthy event from Proust's life, but his creative interpretation of that anecdote or event is entirely his own. Thus, the life philosophy espoused in the book is perhaps equal parts Proust and De Botton.

De Botton is a well read and educated man, with a knowledge of art and literary history, as well as the French language. He uses this knowledge to his benefit as he parses Proust's literature and reorganizes it to suit his "self-help" purposes.

Tone

De Botton approaches his subject, Marcel Proust, with plenty of tongue-in-cheek fun and humor. He implicitly acknowledges that Proust is, for many, an impenetrable subject, and that tackling *In Search of Lost Time* is the literary equivalent of climbing Mount Everest. He therefore uses humor and glibness to lower the intimidation factor of Proust, and to make the man and his work more accessible.

Throughout the book's nine chapters, De Botton is half-comic and half-serious. There is the sense that he is often "reaching," and that connections and conclusions are forged from the material of Proust's life with only the loosest logic. Often times, De Botton implicitly demands that the reader suspend any expectation for conventional coherence in the text as he conducts a kind of tangential and absurdist journey through Proust. For example, De Botton thoroughly examines the many reasons why Proust was miserable, and then proceeds to "turn the tables" and suggest, in fantastic fashion, that suffering is actually good. Still, De Botton seems sincere about the wisdom thus derived; though the journey was comic and silly, the destination is valuable enough, and De Botton often succeeds in gathering enough steam by the end of the chapter to provide a compelling case. At the end, the wisdom of Proust shines through the silliness.



Structure

The book is divided into nine chapters. As the overall approach is a kind of parody of a self-help manual or "how to" guide, each chapter is devoted to an aspect of life, and how Marcel Proust may help us to live our lives better. For example, Chapter 1 is titled, "How to Love Life Today," and Chapter 4 is titled, "How to Suffer Successfully."

Author Alain De Botton weaves in and out in haphazard fashion Proust's biography and his novel *In Search of Lost Time*, unearthing anecdotal little nuggets that De Botton then expands into a larger statement on how to live life. De Botton uses a variety of sources in this search of Proust, be it letters from Proust to a variety of acquaintances, excerpts from one of Proust's father's health books, a contemporary newspaper column, and passages from *In Search of Lost Time*.

De Botton's approach could be called postmodern. He dances around subjects and picks and chooses moments of Proust's life or work to elucidate certain points. De Botton is not afraid to go off on whimsical tangents or to make humorous or sometimes absurdist connections between two seemingly unrelated events or things. Beyond the constriction of the chapter's subject matter, De Botton freely uses a mishmash of sources to prove his points, many of which he approaches in a very indirect way.

Quotes

"There are few things humans are more dedicated to than unhappiness. Had we been placed on earth by a malign creator for the exclusive purpose of suffering, we would have good reason to congratulate ourselves on our enthusiastic response to the task" (Chapter 1, pg. 3.)

"In Search of Lost Time had the advantage of pointing directly enough to a central theme of the novel: a search for the causes behind the dissipation and loss of time. Far from a memoir tracing the passage of a more lyrical age, it was a practical, universally applicable story about how to stop wasting time and start to appreciate life" (Chapter 1, pg. 9.)

"What is considered normal for a person to feel in any place at any point is liable to be an abbreviated version of what is in fact normal, so that the experiences of fictional characters afford us a hugely expanded picture of human behavior, and thereby a confirmation of the essential normality of thoughts or feelings unmentioned in our immediate environment" (Chapter 2, pg. 27.)

"Whatever the merits of Proust's work, even a fervent admirer would be hard pressed to deny one of its awkward features: length. As Proust's brother, Robert, put it, 'The sad thing is that people have to be very ill or have broken a leg in order to have the opportunity to read In Search of Lost Time'" (Chapter 3, pg. 31.)

"A good way of evaluating the wisdom of someone else's ideas might be to undertake a careful examination of the state of their own mind and health. After all, if their pronouncements were truly worthy of our attention, we should expect that the first person to reap their benefits would be their creator" (Chapter 4, pg. 49.)

"Though we can of course use our minds without being in pain, Proust's suggestion is that we become properly inquisitive only when distressed. We suffer, therefore we think, and we do so because thinking helps us to place pain in context. It helps us to understand its origins, plot its dimensions, and reconcile ourselves to its presence" (Chapter 4, pg. 66.)

"So if speaking in cliches is problematic, it is because the world itself contains a far broader range of rainfalls, moons, sunshines, and emotions than stock expressions either capture or teach us to expect" (Chapter 5, pg. 97.)



"The artist who gives up an hour or work for an hour of conversation with a friend knows that he is sacrificing a reality for something that does not exist (our friends being friends only in the light of an agreeable folly which travels with us through life and to which we readily accommodate ourselves, but which at the bottom of our hearts we know to be no more reasonable than the delusion of the man who talks to the furniture because he believes that it is alive)" (Chapter 6, pg. 108.)

"Conversation required an abdication of oneself in the name of pleasing companions: 'When we chat, it is no longer we who speak...[W]e are fashioning ourselves then in the likeness of other people, and not of a self that differs from them" (Chapter 6, page 121.)

"The happiness that may emerge from taking a second look is central to Proust's therapeutic conception [regarding his works]. It reveals the extent to which our dissatisfactions may be the result of failing to look properly at our lives rather than the result of anything inherently deficient about them" (Chapter 8, pg. 140.)

"Deprivation quickly drives us into a process of appreciation, which is not to say that we have to be deprived in order to appreciate things, but rather that we should learn a lesson from what we naturally do when we lack something, and apply it to conditions where we don't" (Chapter 8, pg. 164.)

"The moral? That there is no greater homage we could pay to Proust than to pass the same verdict on him as he passed on Ruskin—namely, that for all its qualities, his work must eventually also prove silly, maniacal, constraining, false and ridiculous to those who spend too long on it" (Chapter 9, pg. 197.)

Topics for Discussion

Why was Proust a generally unhappy man? Why might unhappiness or suffering be an advantage in the art of living?

Describe what friendship should and should not be, according to the conclusions De Botton draws.

What kind of reaction did initial publishers have to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*?

Describe the episode with the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* and the madeleine cake and how we might apply its lessons to better living.

What explains Proust's disdain for clichés in writing?

Why did Proust feel that Impressionist painters like Claude Monet were valuable? What did they accomplish in Proust's view?

Why does Proust recommend the paintings of Jean-Baptiste Chardin?