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A Story of Life, Love, and Death

Priya Banerjee

Washington University in St Louis

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A Story of Life, Love, and Death

Most women can trace their first love back to middle school. I can too. I was 12 years old when it happened to me. I didn't know his name, but I was completely enamored by him. I had fallen for *Le Petit Prince* (The Little Prince) by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, which I had bought for my French class. I immediately fell head-over-heels in love with every precisely chosen word and phrase.

Le Petit Prince is about a pilot whose plane crashed in the middle of the Sahara Desert. While the pilot is trying to fix his plane, a boy walks up to him seemingly out of nowhere and asks him to draw a picture of a sheep – the first meeting between two very different people preceding their life-changing friendship. Their dialogue continues in quite an unusual manner, and the pilot discovers that the “little prince” has traveled to several planets and lives on an asteroid. As the pages unfold, the wise boy describes the universe from a child's perspective, highlighting adults' lack of imagination and absorption with greed, work, and power. Much of the elegance of this book comes from Saint-Exupery's writing style and word choice; the book is written as a children's book, yet hidden behind the words are extremely profound, philosophical observations about life and friendship.

When I read this book for the first time, my young mind could completely relate to the little prince's perspective. After all, every child knows that “grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is exhausting for children to have to provide explanations over and over again” (p. 2). Even though it has been 15 years since I first read *Le Petit Prince*, this passage still speaks strongly to me. During my current training to become a child psychologist, I often feel that the simplicity and honesty of children's views are purer and more enlightening than ours as adults.

One of my friends knew of my love for this book, and during her trip to Italy six years ago, she bought me *Le Petit Prince* in Italian: *Il Piccolo Principe*. Overjoyed with this gift, I began researching the translations of *Le Petit Prince*. I discovered that *Le Petit Prince* has been translated in over 180 languages. At that moment, it became a mission for me to collect *Le Petit Prince* in as many languages as possible. However, I did not want to simply go online and purchase the translations. There was something particularly magical about my copy of *Il Piccolo Principe* coming from Italy. I decided that I wanted each of the books in my *Le Petit Prince* collection to physically be purchased in its native country. As a result, I would have a story about how each of my books was acquired.

Even though it was 15 years ago, I vividly remember purchasing that first copy of *Le Petit Prince* with which I fell in love. Because of my father's job, my family moved to France for one year when I was in fifth grade. We lived in a small apartment in Paris, right next to a subway station. Every day after school, I walked to the bakery across the street via the underground subway tunnel and asked the baker for "une baguette s'il vous plaît" [one baguette please] to accompany our dinner. There was a small used bookstore next to the bakery, and I would often quickly run inside after picking up my baguette. I would greet the bookstore owner with a shy "bonjour" and then stare wide-eyed at the rows of French books stacked from floor to ceiling, wishing I could understand more of them than I did. It was in this store that I purchased *Le Petit Prince* for my French class. Whenever I hold this book, I remember the lovely smell of old books and freshly baked bread wafting through the small Parisian bookstore.

My mission to collect *Le Petit Prince* in several languages has inspired me to travel abroad as much as possible. Over the past five years, I have had the opportunity to acquire *Le Petit Prince* in Chinese, Lithuanian, and Thai. As with my first French copy, I can

visualize each of the shops in which I found these other translations. I know the journeys – some of which were quite difficult – involved in finding *Le Petit Prince* in each of these countries, and each book has its own story of how it became mine.

After acquiring *Le Petit Prince* in French, Italian, Lithuanian, Chinese, and Thai, I researched the English translations to decide which English version I wanted to own. I selected an older, rare translation that I felt best represented Saint-Exupéry's voice in his original story, and I purchased this book from a small bookstore in Boston. I gave this English translation to my father to read, and he developed a similar love for *The Little Prince*. Throughout our conversations, my father taught me to always keep in mind the messages of *Le Petit Prince*: remember what is truly important in life and always continue learning by being open-minded to new experiences. With his encouragement, I challenged myself to be able to read all of the books in my collection, and thus far I have been learning to read *Le Petit Prince* in Italian.

As my father and I discussed *Le Petit Prince*, it became clear that there were several potential layers of meaning behind the story. To better understand Saint-Exupéry's initial intentions when writing his story, I purchased the biography *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: His Life and Times*. In reading this biography, I realized that there were several resemblances between Saint-Exupéry and my father – no wonder my father loved *Le Petit Prince* as much as he did. Both Saint-Exupéry and my father had a distinct passion for aviation, travel, and the stars. When I was young, my father and I used to watch airplanes take off and land at the airport, and when there weren't any planes in the sky, we stared up at the stars while he taught me the Greek myths behind the constellations. Likewise, Saint-Exupéry shared similar loves of aviation, travel, and the stars to the extent that he was a nighttime international postal carrier at a time when air flight was so unreliable that 40% of the planes would crash during the long journeys. Saint-Exupéry survived several plane crashes with

many miraculous rescues, including a plane crash in the Sahara Desert that bears strong resemblance to the pilot's plane crash in *Le Petit Prince*. Saint-Exupéry was clearly an avid adventurer, and both he and my father believed that everyone should follow their heart in life. This sentiment is expressed in *Le Petit Prince* when the boy says, "One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes" (p. 73).

I believe that my book collection has led me to do exactly what Saint-Exupéry was promoting throughout his life and *Le Petit Prince*: travel to foreign places, learn about different cultures and languages, and remain open-minded throughout life. I have tried to bring the story's lessons to life by collecting the story itself.

In addition to teaching me about life, *Le Petit Prince* also offers reflections about death. Four months and two days ago, my father passed away unexpectedly. Whenever I read *Le Petit Prince* I think of him – his passion for travel, his love of the stars, and his genuine ardor for life. During these difficult months, I have found comfort in *Le Petit Prince*, particularly in the passages where the little prince tries to console the pilot as he prepares to return to his home asteroid. I am forever indebted to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry for writing *Le Petit Prince*. Not only has my book collection provided me with lifelong ambitions for travel and learning foreign languages, but it continues to guide me regardless of my life's circumstances with profound words about life, love, and death.

In one of the stars, I shall be living.

In one of them, I shall be laughing.

And so it will be as if all the stars were laughing when you look at the sky at night...And there is sweetness in the laughter of all the stars.

And when your sorrow is comforted (time soothes all sorrows) you will be glad that you have known me. You will want to laugh with me.

I shall not leave you. (de Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 89)

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