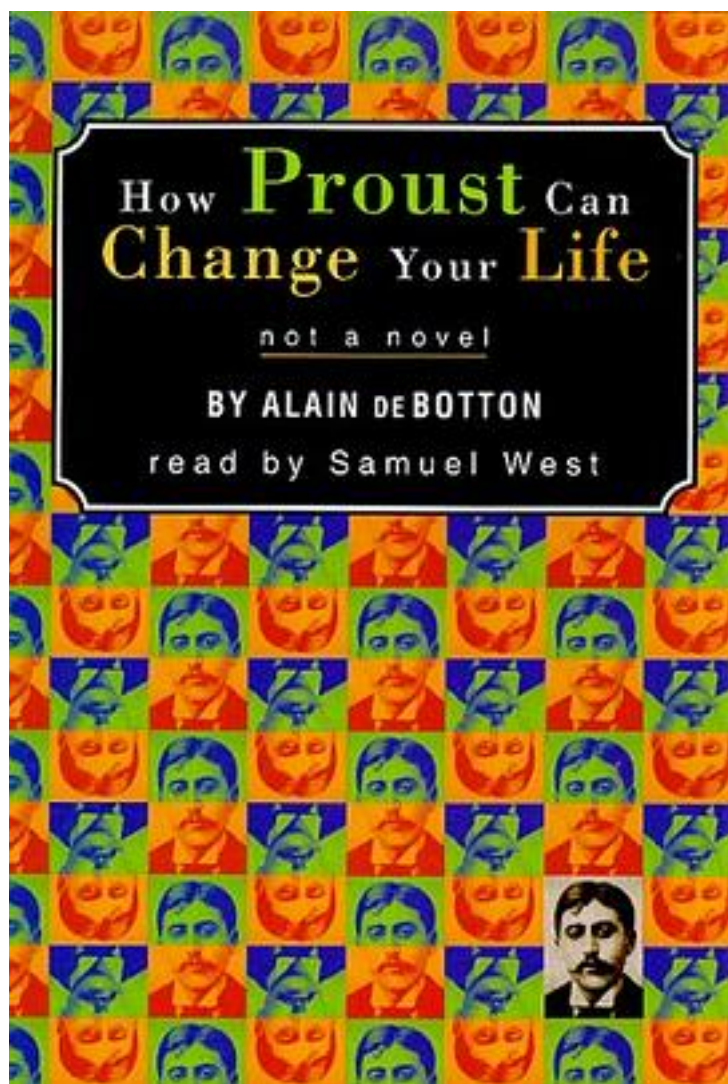


How Proust Can Change Your Life



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Generally writers fall into one of two camps: those who feel that one can't write without having a firm grasp on Proust, and those who, like Virginia Woolf, are crippled by his influence. De Botton, the author of *On Love*, *The Romantic Movement* and *Kiss and Tell*, obviously falls into the former category. But rather than an endless exegesis on memory, de Botton has chosen to weave Proust's life, work, friends and era into a gently irreverent, tongue-in-cheek self-help book. For example, in the chapter titled "How to Suffer Successfully," de Botton lists poor Proust's many difficulties (asthma, "awkward desires," sensitive skin, a Jewish mother, fear of mice), which is essentially a funny way of telling the reader quite a lot about the man's life. Next he moves on to Proust's little thesis that because we only really think when distressed, we shouldn't worry about striving for happiness so much as "pursuing ways to be properly and productively unhappy." De Botton then cheerily judges various characters of *A la recherche* against their author's maxims. At the beginning, when de Botton drags his own girlfriend into a tortuous and not terribly successful digression, readers may be skeptical, but they will be won over by his whimsical relation of Proust's lessons?essentially an exhortation to slow down, pay attention and learn from life. Is it profound? No. Does this add something new to Proust scholarship? Probably not. But it's a real pleasure to read someone who treats this sacrosanct subject as something that is still vital and vigorous.

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