

“Rarely have an author and a character been so intimately bound together as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and his little Prince.”

When Stacy Schiff, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s biographer, wrote that in the year 2000, the wreckage of his fatal plane crash had just been discovered off the coast of Marseille. Up until that point, France had endured decades without knowing the fate of one of its national heroes. Like his titular Prince, he had simply, silently disappeared.

This final, unintentional parallel is just a coda on how much of himself Saint-Exupéry poured into his book. He was an aviator, learning to fly in 1922 with the French Armed Forces. He was also a veteran of many plane crashes, including a notable one in the Sahara Desert.

In December of 1935, while attempting to win a Paris-Saigon air race, Saint-Exupéry (or St.-Ex, as he occasionally styled himself) and his co-pilot, Andre Prevost, crashed in the Sahara after almost 20 straight hours of flying. They had no maps, no water, some grapes, two oranges, a madeleine, a pint of coffee, a half-pint of white wine, and a little medicine. On day one, the fluids ran out. On day two, they began hallucinating. By day three, they were so dehydrated, they stopped sweating. On day four, they were rescued by passing Bedouin.

The whole ordeal affected him deeply, and while Saint-Exupéry’s many brushes with death didn’t deter him from further adventures, his days in the Sahara seemed to become a font of creativity for him. He wrote the experience into *Wind, Sea, & Stars*, his first bestseller, and returned to it when, in 1941, he was asked by his publisher to write a children’s book to compete with P.L. Travers’ popular *Mary Poppins*.

By then, war had broken out across Europe, and Antoine had already seen his beloved France fall to the Nazis. He fled with his wife, Consuelo, to North America where, unable to do more for the war effort, he focused his frustrations into his writing.

Upon reflection, it seems almost no part of Saint-Exupéry’s life was left out of his *Little Prince*. His fiery wife Consuelo became the Prince’s capricious Rose; her homeland of El Salvador, where he had a view of three volcanoes out of his hospital window (while convalescing after yet another plane crash), became the Prince’s home planet, and the insidious Naziism he’d seen claim his own home became its unruly baobab trees. His friend and sometimes-lover, Silvia Hamilton Reinhardt, became the Fox who could not be tamed, and it’s believed she even coined the book’s central phrase: “One sees clearly only with the heart.” Even St.-Ex himself appears, in the form of the aviator.

But what of the *Little Prince*? Rumors suggest several possible identities: Land Morrow Lindbergh, son of Charles Lindbergh, who St.-Ex met in 1939; Thomas De Koninck, offspring of a Belgian philosopher who he knew in Quebec. Some suggest the Prince’s innocence makes him a Christ insert, while others point to descriptions of children in St.-Ex’s other writings as evidence that he embodies the concept of childhood itself.

But there is another, more personal, possibility. In 1917, Antoine's younger brother François caught rheumatic fever. The two were attending the Villa St. Jean International School in Switzerland together at the time, and his deathbed care fell to Antoine. Clearly aware of his older brother's worries, François' last words to Antoine, recorded later in his *Airman's Odyssey*, were, "Don't worry. I'm all right. I can't help it. It's my body."

Regardless of where he came from, the Little Prince's message is clear: we must sustain our inner child through our whole lives. Indeed, even the most mature among us occasionally need to be reminded to look at the world with a childlike sense of wonder. Only by doing this can we remember what's important: that this world, and everything in it, is beautiful.