

Selected extracts from Alain de Botton's foreword to *A Slow Childhood* by Helen Hayward

Helen Hayward's achievement is to have written a book about the most ordinary things and to have located therein the most extraordinary insights and ideas. Her topic is beautifully, unashamedly 'boring'. Almost nothing 'happens' in *A Slow Childhood*. Thank goodness. Yet from the stuff of ordinary life, Hayward has weaved a narrative filled with tenderness, complexity, honest self-reflection and purpose.

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A Slow Childhood gives shape to experiences that will be known yet unknown to almost every parent. Hayward's book is an optical instrument we can use to see what has been lost in plain sight.

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Most of our lives are spent in situations of numbing sterility. We don't in our work generally create anything of particular wonder or interest. We don't know how to paint or play Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor. We can't personally manufacture an iphone; we don't don't know how to extract oil from the ground.

And yet, without being conscious of the specifics, we are at points capable of doing something properly miraculous: we can make another person ... We can choreograph the birth of an organic machine that will probably still be going close to a hundred years from now. Hayward never allows us to forget the supernatural nature of all this and yet at the same time, she is too much of a realist not to remind us that, when the wonder and the ecstasy are past, someone still has to boil the milk and do the laundry. Probably a mother.

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Parenting ineluctably demands that one address the greatest, founding philosophical question: what is a good life? This question lies at the center of *A Slow Childhood*. As each of us goes about answering it in our words and actions over long parenting years, we will at least know - as Hayward acknowledges - that we have been spared the one great fear that otherwise haunts us and usually manifests itself around work: that of not being able to make a difference.

Alain de Botton

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