

Small Pleasures

So often, we exhaust ourselves and the planet in a search for very large pleasures - while all around us lies a wealth of small pleasures, which - if only we paid more attention - could daily bring us solace and joy at little cost and effort. But we need some encouragement to focus our gaze. This is a book to guide us to the best of life's small pleasures: everything from the distinctive delight of holding a child's hand to the enjoyment of disagreeing with someone to the joy of the evening sky; an intriguing, evocative mix of small pleasures that will heighten our senses and return us to the world with new-found excitement and enthusiasm.

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Preface

What This Book Is For

There are many little things that charm us – a favourite old jumper, whispering in the dark or the taste of a fig – when we happen to have the time to notice. They're the small pleasures of everyday life. This book looks at 52 of them in detail, perhaps one for every week of the year. Usually, small pleasures are not widely celebrated or even much talked about. Every chapter puts one such moment of enjoyment under a kind of magnifying glass to find out what's really going on in it and why it touches and moves us and makes us smile. It's a search for the bigger meaning secretly lurking in everything we find nice. Small pleasures turn out not to be small at all: they are points of access to the great themes of our lives.

It can at first sound slightly strange to say that we don't automatically and naturally know how to enjoy ourselves. But the pursuit of pleasure is a skill which we need to learn: it's something that we can get better at. And small pleasures are the things to start with.

Not all the small pleasures in your life will be listed here, of course. We're seeking to build a philosophy of appreciation that encourages us to explore more deeply – and get more out of – the many sources of happiness that are currently a bit neglected. Small pleasures, we believe, are pleasures whose true importance is not yet properly understood. This book is a step in a wider cultural project – to move these small pleasures from the margins closer to the centre of our collective consciousness and our lives.

The Fish Shop



The fishmonger's window display is alluring, yet one doesn't normally go in. But when one does, one wonders why one doesn't visit more often.

Waiting to be served, one is struck by the beauty and strangeness of the fish and sea creatures on offer on the beds of ice: the oyster that somehow generates its own home, rocky on the outside, suggestively smooth and polished within. For a moment one contemplates the destiny of the sole, one of whose eyes has to migrate round its head on the path to maturity, and the monkfish, whose huge, toothy mouth and puny body are repellent to look at but whose flesh is delicious when roasted and drizzled with olive oil.

They seem so alien. But – in a universe composed almost entirely of gas and rock circulating in the endless nothingness of space – we are their cousins, with whom we briefly cohabit the surface zones of earth. In the recent history of the cosmos, we shared common ancestors, whose progeny became diversely the octopus, the sea bream or evolved gradually into solicitors, psychotherapists and graphic designers.

Imagine spending this thing called life embodied in a lobster, encountering the world through its tiny peppercorn eyes, which offer a field of vision much wider but less focused than ours. There would have been the momentous day one dug a burrow beneath a basalt rock in the soft mud of the sea floor in Fidden Bay, off the Isle of Mull. Then there would have been the drama of shedding our

exoskeleton. We would have had to master the laborious process of reproduction, when the male has to pierce the female's stomach to deposit his spermatophores. Finally there was the catastrophic curiosity that two days ago tempted us into a lobster pot.

The fish shop isn't simply a place to pick up calamari rings or some cod steaks, it is also a place of re-enchantment. We suffer a fatally easy tendency to become jaded. Things that are familiar lose their power to entice the imagination. Then, looking into the eye of a mullet, or contemplating the internal architecture of a skate fin, one is reconnected with the elegant and bizarre inventiveness of nature. We've been too hasty; we've overlooked almost everything. The world is full of fascination; there is so much to be explored. And we have been led to this renewed appetite by the head of a fish.

Each item has been gathered from the chambers of the sea, distant rivers, or prised from submerged rocks. The speckled trout were reared in a former gravel pit in Lincolnshire. The mackerel were caught by a trawler on the Dogger Bank and landed at Peterhead. The sea bass were hauled onto the cobbled pier at Crail and speeded in a refrigerated van down the M90 and the A1(M) with a brief halt in the HGV parking lot at Wetherby Service Station.

And here they all are cleansed, gutted, chilled and artfully arranged. Nature has been civilised and made attractive by ice, metal, glass, tiles, slabs of marble and by constant cold water and the sharpest knives. The fish shop hints at an ideal that we would like perhaps to pursue more broadly: the sense that trouble has been rinsed away, and the desirable good bit will be delivered into your life neatly wrapped in delicately glazed white paper.

Visiting the fishmonger leads one to sketch little plans of moral reform: in another, slightly better, life, one would go there all the time. We'd become adept at preparing certain dishes. Being here, one makes fleeting, initial contact with a latent self who poaches salmon, tosses a lobster salad, drizzles olive oil and whose friends come round for bouillabaisse. There is a potential future version of oneself – who starts to come to life in the fishmonger – who lives on light, nutritious fishy meals and whose brain is bathed in their sympathetic briny fluids. Life as a whole will remain radically imperfect, one knows, but if one took slightly more care around eating, even if lots of bits of one's life were bad, if one could come in here and get some sole wrapped up by the man in the blue apron and go home, and take the art of living more seriously, then one would be closer to being the person one should always have been. The fish shop pleasure originates in very small points of departure – the smell of the salt and water, the frigid air wafting from the beds of ice, the silvery skin of an Atlantic salmon – and grows into a large idea: respect for civilisations that have more time for things that are simultaneously delightful and wholesome.

Small Islands



As the plane makes its gradual descent, you see much of the island from your window: the cliffs at one end, the long golden curve of a remote beach, olive groves, an isolated village, a patch of woodland, the ferry wharf constructed in the 1970s, the whitewashed air traffic control tower. There's just one carousel at the terminal. People seem to know each other. It's only a short ride in the hired car into the small main town. You drive past the shopping centre, the villa with the old tree in front, the primary school, the restaurant that specialises in seafood, the town hall ... And there's a strange, instinctive feeling of wanting to live here. You won't really, in all probability, for a lot of reasons big and small. But the thought of being happy here is saying something important – which deserves to be decoded and which might not ultimately involve plans for relocation.

Small islands tap into the pleasing sense of control that comes with a reduced, more manageable scale. It's why Legoland is a great tourist attraction and why the Poppenhuis – a doll's house – is the most popular exhibit in Amsterdam's majestic Rijksmuseum. When the world gets smaller, we get larger – and feel less vulnerable, more competent. A small island offers to fulfill the childhood dream of adult existence. At last we will be big people, like the adults we then admired and felt so reassured by.

You can easily drive out to the highest point of the island – a modest climb from the half-deserted car park. From there you can see pretty much the whole place: the bay where it's great to swim, then, a bit further round the

coast, the harbour with the town clustering round it; in the distance there's the spire of the monastery. The small island has obvious boundaries you can see. You can walk right round the coast road in a few hours. Even when you are in the middle of the town you can catch sight of the surrounding hills, or glimpse the bay, at the end of various streets.

It's an attractive contrast to the mostly unbounded issues we have to deal with in the rest of existence: one of the big causes of stress is that we often face problems that can't be solved in any reasonable period of time or indeed solved at all. It's going to take five more years until we're ready to start the job we really want. That big project at work will take another 24 months before it shows any signs of real progress. The annoying colleague is a daily challenge, with no end in sight. Even now, deep in adulthood, your sibling or parent remains an ongoing source of frustration. You've just had the same argument for the twentieth time with your partner; it always ends in apologies, but a real advance is elusive. Your child has again damaged the sofa. In other words, our longing for control and completion is constantly being frustrated.

It's to this corrosive tendency that the island seems to offer a contrastive antidote: limited, defined, contained – and you can get anywhere in a shortish drive.

We easily forget how much love is connected to being able to look after something. We turn inwards and become what is called selfish when the social problems feel too vast and intractable and our own efforts start to look puny and pointless. The great metropolitan centres are too big to love. They constantly force us to admit that we are nothing. The small island is so pleasing because it raises the vision of another kind of world, in which

public effort and generosity feel logical and productive. The gap between tidying one's bedroom and tidying the little world of the island is not so daunting.

An island foregrounds the particular rather than the general (to put it in a rather abstract way, initially). It turns out there's pretty much only one of everything. There's one high school, one fancy restaurant, one cinema, one good place to buy shellfish, one airport, one bookshop, one museum, one nightclub, the beach where you swim on hot days, the mountain where it's always cool. You go back to the same place again and again – because there isn't always another competing for your attention. Things become familiar, relationships become intimate.

Of course, the reality of any particular small island won't be exactly like this, flaws will always arise. But the feeling of pleasure we experience on arrival is partly the work of the imagination. In fact, the pleasure of the small island rests on qualities that (once we have learned to recognise them) can be found closer to home. A small island is not just a place on the map; it's a psychological destination, a model of simplifying your life and making do with what is immediately to hand. You may not even have to take a plane or a boat to get there.