



Sweet Words and Wise Words From Sophie Paine

Text: Polly Ho
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S: Sophie Paine **P:** Polly Ho

P: You are French and have married an English man. Did your sensitivity and interest in multi-languages or multi-cultures stems from your marriage?

S: It dates back from my very first English lesson. I still remember... I was absolutely mesmerised by learning new words and new sounds - it was like discovering a new universe, reality could be named differently! I came back home and repeated all the words I had learned that day. My enthusiasm never faltered since then. Words are only a small element of my passion; they are tools trying to capture different ways of thinking, appreciating what surrounds us, or other cultures.

P: You compare language with food - each language has a different flavour. What is the flavour of English, French and Chinese?

S: Pronouncing languages have definitely a "taste". This is part of the pleasure of learning and speaking a language - babbling and pronouncing new words. English has a round and melting flavour to me - it has no harsh sound, "r" and "w" make it soft and fluffy. Consonants are strong; bubbly and vowels offer a large range of combinations and lengths. All the verbs English uses also boost it. Chinese sounds more disjointed than English - each character has its own tone and carries a whole world of references with each part of which it is made of. A bit like building bricks putting together. As for French, since I have learnt other languages and live abroad, I have to start tasting French again! The absence of stress and the nasal sound make it sound like a long whisper.

P: What is your most favourite language? Why?

S: None - it would be like asking a mother who her favourite child is! They are all different, challenging to learn and conveying different cultures. In restaurants, what I like best is small bites of different starters; same with languages, I love getting a flavour of many different ones!

P: You are learning Putonghua and Persian, what other languages are you learning?

S: I am also learning Arabic and Spanish. Both are widely spoken and are the keys to huge cultural areas. Arabic's grammar and its writing are absolutely fascinating and gracious. It is also the gate to an extremely rich cultural heritage. Spanish is close to French and Italian, but all the Latin languages sound very different; Spanish has harsher consonants and brighter vowels than French - it is a burning sun while French is more like a foggy day.

P: What makes you interested in learning Putonghua and Persian?

S: Both (like Arabic too) are languages of very ancient cultures and poetry. Putonghua is the most spoken language in the world and when I lived in Hong Kong, I travelled as often as I could to Mainland China. So I first learned it to be able to communicate while travelling. It is also a good deal - two languages in one, the spoken and the reading/writing! As an illustrator, characters are amazing to draw! Persian is one of the main languages used along the Silk Road. It is more approachable for me than Chinese or Arabic because of its Indo-European grammar. It has integrated many words from other languages (in particular Arabic, but also some French words, like "merci"). And I have the chance to use it professionally on online courses for Afghans.

P: Would you recommend a book list that inspired you the most?

S: *Citadelle* (Saint Exupéry), *The Crusades through Arab Eyes* (Amin Maalouf), *The Three-arched Bridge* (Ismail Kadare), *The Cairo Trilogy* of Naguib Mahfouz, *The Baron in the Trees* (Italo Calvino), *The Periodic Table* (Primo Levi), *Memoirs of Hadrian* (Marguerite Yourcenar), *The Blue Flowers and Exercises in Style* (Raymond Queneau), *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (Akinari Ueda)...

P: Would you also recommend a book list for children?

S: *The Little Prince* (Saint Exupéry), French author and illustrator Claude Ponti's books (all of them - they are absurd, funny, imaginative), Eric Carle's books, the Forest Mice stories of Iwamura Kazuo, *Winnie the Witch* (Valerie Thomas and Korky Paul), *The Man who Counted* (Malba Taban), *Tistou of the Green Thumbs* by Maurice Druon, Mulla Nasreddin's stories and *Nasreddin* by Odile Weulersse and beautifully illustrated by Rebecca Dautremet, *Wish* by Roseanne Thong, *Mystery Bottle* by Kristen Balouch, and a French/Arabic picture book called *mon miel, ma douceur* (my honey, my sweet) which is about a second generation immigrant girl who loses her grandmother. And plenty others!

P: Do you see people who embrace cultures and languages having a worldview which is different from those who don't?

S: I hope so. This may not be always the case as some people travel, learn languages and live abroad but keep their own culture as the unique reference point. But learning a language definitely teaches patience and humility, so hopefully softens and opens one's heart and mind to others.

P: Do you see if more people having a worldview is a step towards racial equality?

S: Hopefully, in the long run. But this is complex. We have extraordinary exposure to many different cultures and languages compared to one or two generations ago. Even without travelling, people learn of other cultures through news, the internet, or immigrants living in their neighbourhood. But it does not necessarily instill openness and tolerance. We should encourage learning languages (the very first step to understanding one another, it seems to me) and intercultural dialogues at a very local scale so that people with "worldview" as you say, are not just an elite of intellectual people. I believe learning about others is the first step to fight preconceptions, irrational fears and intolerance.



P: Can you describe yourself with five adjectives? Can you describe your books with five adjectives?

S: Tricky question! The name my parents chose for me is the first challenge. "Sophia" means wise and learned. I am not sure about wise, but learning is definitely something I love doing. A few months ago, as I was teaching a business course to students in Cambodia, one of the students came to see me at the end of the session and explained Sophie (pronounced with "p" and "h" separate) is a Cambodian name which means "very active". That sounded just like me! I would also add curious and versatile: I can't just do one thing! As for my books, that's even trickier! The first adjective which comes to my mind is simple - they don't tell complex plots, just simple stories: a boy whose father doesn't speak the same language as his mother, a firefighter who is too shy to speak, mothers putting their babies to bed... They are connected to daily life. They are positive, I hope they convey optimism. I try to instill imagination and poetry into the stories too - such as the French mother becoming a magician when she cooks and turns ingredients into extraordinary food.

Sophie Paine

Sophie Paine has moved from her native France to sunny Italy, snowy Minnesota and the monsoons of Hong Kong, and married an Englishman. On her way, Sophie left behind accounting and financial reports, taught English to Somali refugees and picked up paintbrushes and crayons. She enjoys learning languages, educating people around the world about finance, and playing with her two bilingual boys. She has published *Es-tu Mon Papa?* *Are you My Mummy?* In 2006 and her two new titles *Sweet Words* and *Olivier the Quiet Firefighter* will be published in mid-March 2010. www.sophiepaine.com

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