

## AirSpace Season 2, Episode 12

### Every Rose Has Its Thorn

Nick:

Welcome to Airspace, I'm Nick.

Matt:

I'm Matt.

Emily:

And I'm Emily.

Matt:

Today on the show we're going to talk about Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

Emily:

The author of The Little Prince.

Matt:

The Little Prince is a short illustrated French story of a crash landing and a young fair-haired boy who lives alone, with a single red rose on a planet all his own.

Emily:

The story of the author's life is even more colorful.

Stacy Schiff:

There are great stories about his refusing to land the aircraft because he was reading a novel in mid-air and he didn't really want to land until he'd figured out who the culprit of the particular mystery he was reading was.

Nick:

Today on the show, how a distractable pilot became a hero of French aviation and authored one of the most famous and widely read stories of all time.

Matt:

Plus crash landings, wartime spying, loneliness and disappearance.

Emily:

And asteroids.

Matt:

That's all coming up next on Airspace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, distributed by PRX.

Nick:

The Little Prince is one of the most successful books in human history, boggles the mind but it's true. It is also based on an actual event. It's based on an experience by the author, Antoine Saint-Exupéry, who was also a really significant figure in aviation history as it turns out.

Emily:

Well, and when you first brought up this subject Nick, to talk about The Little Prince on the podcast, I didn't know that the cool kids called Saint-Exupéry, St. X.

Nick:

If by cool kids you mean fellow aviators of the era, it wasn't really a call sign but don't let anything stop you from a good nickname.

Emily:

It would have been great if he had a call sign like little prince.

Nick:

So have you both read The Little Prince?

Emily:

Yeah but it's been a really long time and I read it in French class. So I've never read it in English, which makes me sound really pretentious, but what it really means is that it's been a really long time since I've read it and I read it in a foreign language which means I didn't get it all.

Nick:

What were your grades in French class?

Emily:

I was a straight A student in school, you should know that about me.

Nick:

[Suckered boo 00:02:12].

Emily:

But... So I'm still pretty rusty on the plot of the story because it's been a while so can you sort of lay out how the story goes?

Nick:

A man crashes in the desert, alone and has to repair his airplane with the dwindling resources he has in order to make it out of the desert alive and is surprised to turn around on the first day and see this child, this Prince, automatically described as a Prince, asking intuitive but perplexing questions about how life works and how it doesn't.

Matt:

The book is really beautiful because it's really about this man who throughout his entire life has wanted to recapture that imagination that he had as a kid. So little Prince helps him to start drawing like a kid again. When asked to draw the sheep, he draws two sheep that the little prince doesn't like it first, right? And then finally he draws what he says is, "This is the box with the sheep inside. You can take the box back to where you need to go." And the kid's like, "Oh yeah, that's exactly what I wanted." The fact that you could see what's inside of something that's just a drawing of a simple box, right?

Nick:

So it turns out I don't think I read it when I was a kid. Going back through my files, through my memory, I realized that my first encounter with it was a Japanese cartoon that aired on Nickelodeon starting in 1985.

Matt:

I remember that one.

Little prince:

I'm the little prince and I just dropped down from outer space for a visit.

Nick:

I remember the illustration of the little prince walking around this little moon that he owned.

Speaker 5:

got a Rose for a pet.

Little prince:

I bring a lots of presents to make him happy and keep him comfortable.

Speaker 5:

He's the little prince...

Nick:

That just stuck with me for the longest time and it wasn't until much later that I figured out it was a book, do you remember that?

Matt:

Yeah. Oh, I remember the cartoon very well. My brothers and I used to watch Nickelodeon all the time and that cartoon was one of our favorites I think, but I really remember this movie that came out a couple of years before I was born. In 1974 there was a musical version that featured some incredible performances like with Gene Wilder.

Gene Wilder:

Underneath the Prince you're a little boy just like a million and a half other little boys, I'm a Fox just like a million and a half other foxes but if you tame me I won't be like all the other foxes, and you won't be like all the other little boys.

Matt:

And Bob Fosse doing this incredibly weird and creepy snake song and dance.

Bob Fosse:

One sting is quite enough to make you happy and free. One sting and you'll discover how relaxed you can be, post posthumously.

Matt:

That movie is really what I think of anytime I think of The Little Prince, especially those two scenes.

Emily:

There's lots of really beautiful visuals for a child, the little prince on his own little planet and the rose and the fox and how Baobabs which is a kind of tree.

Matt:

It's the kind of book that when you're a kid it's usually a book that adults read to you I think. I don't think it's a book that you as a kid pick up.

Nick:

The illustrations play a huge role but it's not a picture book, it's a long kids book.

Matt:

And I feel like it's really a book about the relationship between children and adults and the way that adults need to learn to see the world as children do again. So I think the adult reading the book to the kid gets as much out of it as the kid does.

Nick:

The author essentially wrote a fantastical autobiography. The crash in the desert really happened and the search for imagination and meaning, that was a reflection of Saint-Exupéry's actual philosophy on life. That philosophy was informed by his career as an aviator in an era where there was still a lot of high adventure to be had. Truth, creative license, those things can be really hard to distinguish between when you're talking about The Little Prince so I invited Stacy Schiff to come and talk to us about it. She's the author of a biography of Saint-Exupéry.

Stacy Schiff:

I think it would be a really close match up between life and fiction. The geography is obviously the geography of his life. The details, the baobab trees, these are all things that he'd spent a great deal of time looking at either from the ground or from the air, flying the mail from France down the coast of North Africa, the Western coast of North Africa and then later in South America. The little prince's mission in terms of finding meaning is very much his mission. The little prince's need to protect and to nurture and to tame is very much what he's always talked about and there's very little difference. He had been drawing the little prince on pretty much any piece of paper, tablecloth, dry cleaner's receipt that had come his way for years.

Nick:

And so Stacy, how would you describe the man behind the book, Saint-Exupéry himself?

Stacy Schiff:

I guess you would say he's one of the first real heroes of aviation. He is one of the pioneers of early aviation when airplanes are still in their infancy and very primitive, which is to say have very small outside ranges, can fly 400 miles at most before they break down, tend to go 80 miles an hour and have no instruments. He is one of the first masters of those aircraft and he makes his name flying the mail for the French which is really how the French conquered the skies early on after world war one and he'll write about those tales which are all of them hyper dramatic and full of crashes and danger and the call of duty. And he'd write about them in a way which is extraordinarily compelling and very poetic, and he's a huge best-selling writer on both sides of the Atlantic by the end of the 1930s, well before *The Little Prince*.

Nick:

He was a very successful writer, he was a very careful writer, a very precise writer, was he a good pilot?

Stacy Schiff:

Depends on your definition of good. He's an immensely intuitive pilot and he's an immensely creative one which in the early days when an aircraft was a very elastic contraption which you could basically hobble back together again with a hammer and nails and a pot of glue. He was immensely talented but as one of his colleagues would say of him later during the war, in fact when aircraft have become much more sophisticated, "When the flight is normal, St. X is dangerous but given complications he's brilliant." He tended to be distracted which for a pilot is a somewhat unforgivable sin and there are great stories about his refusing to land the aircraft because he was reading a novel in mid-air and he didn't really want to land until he'd figured out who the culprit of the particular mystery he was reading was. So it really depends on how you want to define great piloting, of the romance of the air no one speaks more eloquently.

Nick:

Tell us about the 1935 crash, something that may have been reflected in his later writing, right?

Stacy Schiff:

In the 1930s he's no longer flying the mail and still thirsting very much for adventure and he takes on the challenge of essentially a para Saigon flight, a timed para Saigon flight with his longtime mechanic and he does it for the prize money at this point because he doesn't have steady employment. And he over Egypt somewhere, actually it's the Libyan desert, loses a sense of where he is and he will crash at a mighty speed into a sand dune in the Libyan desert and that's a crash which he and his mechanic think is probably going to be the end of them. They wander around the desert for several days, the mechanic leaves a message to his wife on the side of the airplane.

They really think that they're pretty much done for. They have no idea in which direction they might find help and they're ultimately rescued by a Bedouin family and ends up in Cairo where the news quickly makes its way back to France, that the celebrated Saint-Exupéry has been found wandering aimlessly in the desert and of course he turns this immediately into extraordinary literature. He turns the adventure of crashing into this dune into something that is just a thrilling, today is still a really thrilling account.

Nick:

And this was not the first big crash that would have an impact on his life or his work. What were some of the other highlights, is it wrong to call a crash a highlight? What were some of the other dramatic moments in or out of the air that we should know about going into the era in which he wrote *The Little Prince*?

Stacy Schiff:

Oh my goodness, well, he crashes as a young man, as an early student pilot. He crashes as a test pilot later. Obviously there are some crashes during the years when he's flying the mail and I guess the other most spectacular crash takes place in the course of what he considers a goodwill mission. He's flying, again this is the late 30's and again he's somewhat underemployed which is the reason to undertake the trip, he attempts to fly from essentially Montreal down to South America in a straight line, again with his longtime navigator, longtime mechanic and again somewhat under-prepared and under rather tense circumstances. And he or his mechanic will when they're taking off from Guatemala confuse American and Imperial gallons and overload the aircraft with fuel which means that it's too heavy so that at the end of the airfield as they're trying to take off they have too much weight and they crash at the end the airfield and that's really the crash that has the greatest lingering results for him. His health is al... He's already a rather beat up human being but his health will really never be the same after that crash.

Nick:

So he fell out of the sky a lot, it turns out

Emily:

My impression is that that is much more common in the twenties and 30's.

Nick:

Yeah. There was room for a certain amount of swashbuckling back then.

Emily:

Swashbuckling.

Nick:

Yeah. Obviously we have heard that he was a distractable pilot and that perhaps contributed on some occasions but the other thing to remember is that not only was he flying in really meaningful ways, he was also kind of giving voice and giving shape to the field of aviation. He wrote a couple of really formative books like *Night Flight* and *Wind, Sand and Stars* that are deep meditations on what it means to fly an airplane for the first generation that was experiencing it.

Matt:

So he's kind of like a mix between Charles Lindbergh and Ernest Hemingway's where you're saying sort of the guy who is shaping people's perceptions of what pilots are and what pilots do and then at the same time kind of a swashbuckling, adventure writing sort of guy.

Nick:

Yeah. Until the largest war in human history broke out at the end of the decade around 1939. Around that time St. X who is a very patriotic person wants to contribute, wants to represent France, wants to contribute to the war effort.

Matt:

So Nick at this point he's like 39 years old, he's almost 40 years old, so isn't that a little bit old to be flying in world war II.

Emily:

In the 30s by the way, not now. It's not old now. 40 is not old.

Nick:

No, 40 is not old.

Emily:

Just saying. I want to make that clear we're talking about in the 30's.

Matt:

Yes. As a 43 year old I agree with you, it's not that old. It feels like it sometimes.

Nick:

As a 38 year old I don't know what you're talking about. That'll never happen to me.

Emily:

I will never tell my age.

Nick:

So that's correct, he was a little long in the tooth particularly having sustained injuries in some of these crashes. He was old to be flying aircraft in world war two. He also refused to fly combat, like he would fly combat adjacent, he would fly in combat but he would only fly reconnaissance. He wouldn't carry weapons on his aircraft.

Emily:

So did that make him a spy?

Nick:

Spy adjacent maybe.

Emily:

Adjacent.

Nick:

So you have this national hero and he knows it, demanding to fly really sophisticated aircraft even though he doesn't really like learning about the sophisticated aircraft because he's from a different era, and that he's doing this at the risk to himself but also with the risk to these military assets.

Emily:

Ultimately they let him participate in the ways in which he wanted to participate or was capable of participating in the war effort, did it pay off?

Nick:

I think so, as a larger than life leader of esprit de corps.

Matt:

Boosted morale wherever he went.

Nick:

He was able to ingratiate himself with the units that he was in not just because he was famous. He was just fun to be around. Here's this guy who's almost kind of a bard character who is doing card tricks and telling all of these stories and is really able to transport you for a moment in a way that must have been extremely welcome on front lines and in airfields.

Matt:

So the way you describe him, he's this really charismatic, lovable guy but he also had periods of solitude and loneliness in his life and it feels like that really comes through in the work that we know him best for.

Nick:

Oh yeah, a lot of pain. Not just from old crashes but also from doing work that he believed in but that created real isolation and depression. The kind of isolation that he kind of treasured from being up and free and able to fly across the sky but also being far from your family.

Emily:

And it was really all of that emotion that he kind of funneled into *The Little Prince* as sort of this cohesive story. It was kind of a collection of all that.

Matt:

Yeah. Almost kind of like a way of processing it, maybe.

Nick:

Yeah. If the most lyrical and expressive person that you know is continually drawing this mysterious thing, yeah, I think that's a thread that you want to pull.

Emily:

So he puts together *The Little Prince* and it gets published in 1943 but there was a lot going on in 1943.



Nick:

Yeah. The war was in full swing, the United States was involved.

Emily:

And in 1943 he is 43 years old which makes it even harder for him to continue his participation in the war effort but it seems like he digs really deep though and he sort of manages to convince the powers that be to let him fly and so despite being depressed, despite being not super healthy, he manages to sort of squeeze into that last mission.

Nick:

Yeah. In 1944 St. X, our often distractable but lovable pilot is flying recon for the allies in North Africa and I'll let biographer Stacy Schiff set the scene.

Stacy Schiff:

In North Africa he has I think eight last reconnaissance missions and they go in a series of sort of near disaster, perfectly fine, near disaster, perfectly fine and then his final mission is a mission that he somehow manages to talk his way into on a day when he wasn't scheduled to fly. This is the end of July 1944 that he disappeared, July 31st and he has been kept out of the loop because preparations are being made for the allied landings. No one wanted him to that information in case of any disaster so he was being shunted aside.

Somehow he manages to get himself back into an aircraft, probably by trading off with someone else. Over those weeks he'd been often absent, sleeping poorly, beyond despondent, essentially saying he wanted to die for France. To that statement an American officer essentially says to him, "You're perfectly welcome to die for France but you're not going to do so in one of our aircraft." He goes up that day and he disappears, he doesn't come back.

Martin Buckley:

If you are flying higher and faster than the German fighters, how do you get shot down?

Nick:

Martin Buckley is the author of *Absolute Altitude*, a Hitchhiker's guide to the sky and he is a devotee of Saint-Exupéry and I talked to Martin about St. X's final flight and the theories that circulated about it during the nearly 50 years of complete mystery surrounding it.

Martin Buckley:

Maybe he was losing height, maybe he had an engine problem, maybe he was running out of fuel, maybe he just wasn't paying attention to his altitude which wouldn't have been the first time, maybe he didn't see the German fighter coming and maybe he committed suicide.

Nick:

And tell us about that flight, why did you decide to research it more deeply?

Martin Buckley:

We'll Saint-Exupéry was one of the people who inspired me to learn to fly myself. When you fly a plane in my opinion, in particular if you fly a glider or a paraglider you feel like an angel. There is something simply otherworldly about it, you have slipped the surly bonds of earth. For Saint-Exupéry the modern world was becoming dehumanizing, mechanical. People were being turned into automatons, they were earth bound and flying for him was about slipping those bonds.

Nick:

You dug into that mystery how many years later?

Martin Buckley:

In 2004 I interviewed for the BBC the people who discovered the wreck of his plane.

Nick:

Tell us a little bit about that story, how were the remains of his aircraft found and who were the main players in that discovery?

Martin Buckley:

Well, it took half a century before his silver identity bracelet was bought up in nets by a fisherman. That was '98 and it was immediately denounced as a hoax and when I interviewed the fishermen, his name's Jean-Claude Bianco, he was furious at the idea that he could have hoaxed anything. He was attacked for attempting to sensationalize the death of Saint-Exupéry because there's a sort of St. X industry now, and he's officially enshrined as a hero of the French state so people are very worried and nervous as is his family about anything that might, for example, suggest that he committed suicide. But in 2004, a deep sea diver called Luc Vanrell identified the wreckage. Vanrell, everyone again accused him of lying and being a publicity seeker but he managed to get ahold of the serial numbers from Lockheed. Sure enough they found them on the engines and yes, that was the plane of St. X and at that point there was no longer any doubt Saint-Exupéry's plane had been found.

Nick:

The plane had been found in many pieces from its impact with the water making it virtually impossible to determine what brought the plane down. So there's still a degree of mystery that continues. How do you want St. X to be remembered?

Martin Buckley:

Essentially he's a mystic, he's a philosopher. He's really, I would say, halfway between Hemingway and the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau who wrote Walden, but also a man of action and somebody who had a great war record. And he continues to say things that are optimistic and generous about the human condition and I think that's why people read his books.

Nick:

So the story could have ended a couple of different ways but now we know for certainty some things that happened, that he did crash into the ocean.

Emily:

Well, and it's certainly more of a satisfying conclusion than some of the other sort of great aviation mysteries that are still out there, still sort of clanging around.

Nick:

Right. Like in the case of Amelia Earhart where the mystery of her death sort of overwhelms part of her legacy. I think the French wanted the life and work of St. X to be the central thing, not to be overtaken by the mystery surrounding his death.

Matt:

So we've talked about how St. X was a big figure in aviation history and certainly we should celebrate him for that but as we've already talked about, this little Prince character he comes from what we might call like an asteroid or...

Nick:

Asteroid B612. He calls it asteroid in the book.

Matt:

There are actual asteroids out there now that are named in honor of St. X.

Emily:

So what are the names of these asteroids?

Matt:

46610 Bésixdouze, I don't know how to pronounce that.

Emily:

So six is six and douze is 12, so it's six douze. B six douze.

Nick:

Douze B612 is the name of the asteroid in the book so this is kind of a direct homage to that, naming this asteroid as the one in the book whether or not it's got a single rose and a little person living on it.

Matt:

Right.

Nick:

Three volcanoes.

Emily:

So of course the fictional asteroid, we don't know where that's supposed to really live because that's not part of the story but there is this one that's essentially named after it that lives in the real asteroid belt, in between Mars and Jupiter.

Matt:

And then there's another one. There's another asteroid, 2578 Saint-Exupéry.

Nick:

A fitting duality given how much of himself he put into the story and then the story which had legs of its own. It's nice that there's something out there for both of them.

Matt:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's it for this episode of Airspace. Airspace is produced by Katie Moyer, Jocelyn Frank and Michelle Harvin. Mixed by Tarek Fouda.

Emily:

Special, thanks to Jason Orfanon, Genevieve Sponsler and John Barth. You can follow us on Instagram @airspacepodcast.

Nick:

There are things to see on our Instagram with your heart, not just your eyes,

Emily:

Nick, Nick, Nick, Nick, Nickelodeon.