

## Hello from Heathrow: Alain de Botton's airport writing experiment

By Carolyn Kellogg, *Los Angeles Times* | Books

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Writer Alain de Botton has moved, "The Terminal"-style, into Heathrow Airport. He's living there for a week, as the airport's first (and perhaps only) "writer in residence." He has a desk, is awakened by Air Canada and is charged with writing about life in the airport. His book, "A Week at the Airport: A Heathrow Diary," will be available beginning in September to those traveling through Heathrow.

Gawker slung some snark straight off, writing "Boring Airport Book Contract Better Than No Book Contract," but the proof is in the prose. And some of De Botton's is already online, via the website *The Faster Times*. While the beginning isn't so hot, it picks up when he starts people-watching:

Some lovers were parting. She must have been twenty, he a few years older. Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* was in her bag. They had oversized sunglasses and had come of age in the period between SARS and swine flu. They were dressed casually in combat trousers and T-shirts. It was the intensity of their kiss that first attracted my attention, but what had seemed like passion from afar was revealed at closer range to be unusual devastation. She was shaking with sorrowful disbelief, he was cradling her in his arms, stroking her short blonde hair, in which a hairclip in the shape of a tulip had been fastened. Repeatedly, they would look into each other's eyes and then, as though thereby made newly aware of the catastrophe about to befall them, she would begin weeping once more.

People were passing and evincing sympathy. It helped that the woman was extraordinarily beautiful. I missed her already.... We might have been ready to offer sympathy, but in actuality, there were stronger reasons to want to congratulate her for having such a powerful cause to feel sad. We should have envied her for having located someone without whom she so firmly felt she could not survive, to the gate let alone to a bare student bedroom in a suburb of Beijing. If she

had been able to view her situation from a sufficient distance, she might have been able to consider it as the high point of her life.

Can De Botton write objectively about Heathrow Airport while being paid by Heathrow Airport, for the promotional purposes of Heathrow Airport? He says he can, that he's been given the go-ahead to write whatever he wants, no matter how negative.

But for now, he seems to be having fun (except for the wakeup from Air Canada). "About to join the runway inspection team," he Tweeted Wednesday. "Beats the library."

-- Carolyn Kellogg

*Photo: Alain de Botton in Heathrow Airport on Aug. 18. Credit: Associated Press*