NOTES FROM: *The Baron in the Trees,* by Italo Calvino

SUMMARY: Okay, so follow me on this one, because the premise of *The Baron in the Trees* sounds ridiculous (and it is), but the book itself is *wonderful.*

It all starts with a young, eighteenth-century nobleman named Cosimo who, at dinner, refuses to eat the snails served at his parents' table, and rebels against them by climbing into the trees outside their estate and living there for the rest of his life. I think it was *this* sentence that hooked me right from the beginning:

"A succession of scoldings, spiteful acts, punishments, obstinacies began, until the day Cosimo refused the snails and decided to separate his lot from ours."

I had previously been absolutely *astonished* by Calvino's more famous novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler,* and while *The Baron in the Trees* is *nothing* like that literary masterpiece in ten parts, I still loved it. Cosimo is one character who has stayed with me for *years* and *years,* and *only* Italo Calvino could have told a story that's so hilarious, wise, thoughtful - again, I just loved it.

It's also not *just* about some spoiled kid who won't eat snails and runs away from home. It's really about independence, freedom, self-determination, individuation…about going your own way. *The Baron in the Trees* isn't a "serious" novel by any means, but *life* doesn't have to be so serious all the time, either. We have a *lot* more freedom of choice than we usually allow ourselves to consider, and even though the "real" world may be real to *some* people, that doesn't mean that *we* have to live in it.

"A succession of scoldings, spiteful acts, punishments, obstinacies began, until the day Cosimo refused the snails and decided to separate his lot from ours."

"'Now he'll fall, poor thing!' exclaimed our mother anxiously, who would have happily seen us charging under cannon fire but meanwhile was in agony at every one of our games."

"Cosimo climbed up to the fork of a large branch where he could sit comfortably, and there he sat, legs dangling, arms crossed, with his hands in his armpits, his head pulled down between his shoulders, the hat low on his forehead. Our father leaned out the window. 'When you're tired of sitting there, you'll change your mind!' he shouted. 'I'll never change my mind,' said my brother from the branch. 'I'll show you, as soon as you come down!' 'I'm never coming down again!' And he kept his word."

"'The swing is yours,' Cosimo confirmed, 'but since it's tied to this branch, it's my dependent. So if you sit there touching the ground with your feet, you're in yours, but if you rise into the air, you're in mine.'"

“I went to bed, but I didn’t want to blow out the candle. Maybe that light in the window of his room would keep him company.”

“I say ‘he would have liked,’ but in fact we saw him constantly turning up again above our heads, with that busy and very rapid quality of wild animals, who, though they are seen crouching motionless, always seem to be on the point of taking off.”

“We saw him run (if the word ‘run’ makes sense removed from the surface of the earth and transported to a world of irregular supports at different heights, with a void in between), and at any moment it seemed that he might miss his footing and fall. It never happened.”

“That need to enter an element difficult to possess which had driven my brother to make his the ways of the trees was now working in him again, unsatisfied, and communicated to him the desire for a more detailed penetration, a relationship that would bind him to every leaf and scale and feather and flutter.”

“She had already closed the window, the coachman was on the box, and Cosimo, who still couldn’t admit that departure, tried to attract her attention, to make her understand that he dedicated that gory victory to her, but he didn’t know how to explain except to shout at her, ‘I vanquished a cat!’ The whip cracked, the carriage left amid the waving of the aunts’ handkerchiefs, and from the window was heard a ‘Bravo!’ from Viola, whether of enthusiasm or of derision one couldn’t have said.”

“Just because I’m a few yards higher up, you think good teachings won’t reach me?”

“Now, my brother could have given some other lofty response, maybe a Latin maxim - none come to mind now, but at the time we knew a lot by heart. Instead, he had grown bored sitting there acting serious; he stuck out his tongue and cried, ‘But from the trees I can pee farther!’ - a phrase without much meaning, but which cut off the matter cleanly.”

“That necessary presence that man is for dog and dog for man never betrayed them, either one; and however different they were from all the men and dogs of the world, they could call themselves, as man and dog, happy.”

“Understanding the character of Enea Silvio Carrega helped Cosimo in this: that he understood many things about being alone that were useful to him later in life. I would say that he always carried with him the troubled image of the cavalier avvocato, as a warning of what a man who separates his fate from that of others can become, and he was successful in that he never came to resemble him.”

“The abbe, of course, had that submissive and accommodating disposition that came to him from a superior knowledge of the vanity of all things, and Cosimo took advantage of it.”

“Cosimo was still at the age when the wish to tell stories generates the wish to live, and one believes that one hasn’t lived enough to tell stories.”

“So their love began, the boy happy and amazed, she happy and not at all surprised (nothing happens to girls by chance).”

“Ottimo Massimo didn’t return. Cosimo sat in the ash tree every day, gazing at the meadow as if he could read in it something that had long been consuming him inside: the very idea of distance, of the gap that can’t be bridged, of the wait that can last longer than life.”

“For Ottimo Massimo, on the other hand, happiness now had no shadows.”

“I resorted then to a family of wild cats: I hurled them by the tail after spinning them in the air, which enraged them beyond all description.”

“Seeing Bonaparte’s restlessness, Cosimo asked politely, ‘May I do something for you, mon empereur?’ ‘Yes, yes,’ said Napoleon. ‘Move a little more this way, please, to shelter me from the sun, there, like that, stop…’ Then he was silent, as if assailed by a thought, and turned to the Viceroy Eugene: ‘Tout cela me rappelle quelque chose - quelque chose que j’ai deja vu…’ Cosimo came to his aid. ‘It wasn't you, Majesty, it was Alexander the Great.’ ‘Ah, but of course!’ said Napoleon. ‘The meeting of Alexander and Diogenes!’ ‘Vous n’oubliez jamais votre Plutarque, mon empereur,’ said Beauharnais. ‘Only then,’ Cosimo added, ‘it was Alexander who asked Diogenes what he could do for him, and Diogenes who asked him to move.’ Napoleon snapped his fingers as if he had finally found the phrase he was searching for. Making sure with a glance that the dignitaries of his escort were listening to him, he said, in excellent Italian, ‘If I were not the Emperor Napoleon, I would have liked to be Citizen Cosimo Rondo!’”

“If youth vanishes quickly on the earth, just imagine in the trees, whence everything is fated to fall: leaves, fruits. Cosimo was becoming old.”

“The officer turned from melancholy to nervous. ‘Alors,’ he said, ‘je dois m’en aller.’ He gave a military salute. ‘Adieu, monsieur...Quel est votre nom?’ ‘Le Baron Cosimo de Rondeau,’ Cosimo shouted after him, for he had already left. ‘Proshchaite, gospodin...Et le votre?’ ‘Je suis le Prince Andrei…’ And the horse’s gallop carried off his surname.”

“I follow the newspapers, I read books, I rack my brains, but the things that he wanted to say aren’t there, it’s something else that he meant, something that embraced everything, and he couldn’t say it in words but only by living as he lived. Only by being as ruthlessly himself as he was until his death could he give something to all men.”

“It was supposed that the dying old man had disappeared while he was flying over the middle of the gulf. So Cosimo disappeared, and didn’t even give us the satisfaction of seeing him return to earth dead. In the family tomb there is a stele that recalls him with the words ‘Cosimo Piovasco di Rondo. He lived in the trees. He always loved the earth. He ascended into the sky.’”

“Every so often as I write I break off and go to the window. The sky is empty, and to us old people of Ombrosa, habituated to living under those green domes, it hurts the eyes to look at it. One would say that the trees didn’t bear up after my brother left, or that men were seized by the fury of the ax.

Then, the vegetation has changed: no more holm oaks, the elms, the oaks; now Africa, Australia, the Americas, the Indies extend branches and roots here. The ancient trees have retreated upward: on top of the hills the olives, and in the mountain woods pines and chestnuts; down on the coast it's an Australia red with eucalyptus, elephantine with ficus, enormous and solitary garden plants, and all the rest is palms, with their disheveled tufts, inhospitable desert trees. Ombrosa is no longer there. Looking at the empty sky, I wonder if it really existed. That ornamentation of branches and leaves, forks, lobes, feathers, minute and without end, and the sky appearing only in irregular flashes and cutouts, maybe existed only because my brother passed there with the light step of a long-tailed tit, was an embroidery, made on nothing, that resembles this thread of ink, as I've let it run for pages and pages, full of erasures, of references, of nervous blots, of stains, of gaps, that at times crumbles into large pale grains, at times thickens into tiny marks resembling dotlike seeds, now twists on itself, now forks, now links knots of sentences with edges of leaves or clouds, and then stumbles, and then resumes twisting, and runs and runs and unrolls and wraps a last senseless cluster of words ideas dreams and is finished."