

French-Australian Encounters

Number 3: A French Literary Connection

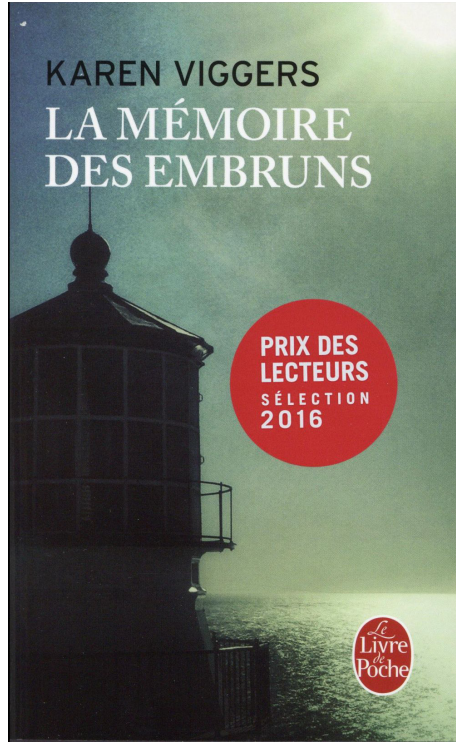
Karen Viggers

My love of France and the French language began at high school. In the midst of a science-laden timetable, French was my outlet and relief—a break from equations, scientific theory and facts. A few years after graduating, I travelled in France, then went on with my veterinary and wildlife conservation career. Thirty years later, an unexpected pathway brought me back to France. A novel I had written became a bestseller over there, and my French publishers wanted me to visit.

I have been a writer since I was small. From age eight, I wanted to be an ‘authoress’, but it’s a tough way to make a living, so for many years I followed a scientific journey, and wrote just for fun: journals and bad (but satisfying) poetry. After a PhD in wildlife health, a post-doc on kangaroos, and then having two children, I reassessed my scientific pathway, and, with the support of my husband, decided to work two days a week as a veterinarian, spend time at home with the children, and write in my spare time.

It was my second novel *The Lightkeeper’s Wife* that became popular in France. It had been a bestseller in Australia, and then a small French publisher, *Éditions les Escales*, translated the book, changed the cover and title (*La Mémoire des embruns*) and set it loose in the French-speaking world. With the support of French bookseller, Gérard Collard, and his bookshop *La Griffé Noire*, the pocket version (*Livre de poche*) sold 100,000 copies in the first month after its release (going on to sell more than 500,000 copies).

From my quiet and secluded writing desk in Canberra, this success was an enigma to me. Why had French readers connected with my book?



Was it the distant, exotic location? Lighthouses? The narratives of nature, relationships and family secrets?

A trip to France a year later, to launch two more of my books, was my first opportunity to find out. In 2017, my family (husband and two teenage children) took off for Paris.

France in April can be sunny or cold; we experienced both. Prior to my publicity engagements, we spent a warm week in the Dordogne, staying in a stone cottage in the lovely medieval hilltop village of Belvès. My daughter was learning French at school, and it was delightful for us both to use the local language ordering baguettes and pastries in the bakery. We drove the rolling green hills, descended into the troglodyte caves beneath Belvès, visited medieval Château Castelnau, and wandered around small towns and regional markets. In canoes, we paddled down the Dordogne River, stopping for a picnic on the grassy green banks.

The next week, in Paris, my books were in all the bookshops. They were in railway stations alongside J. K. Rowling and other famous names. It felt surreal.

Then began a whirlwind of interviews, book talks and videos. I tried to speak French as much as possible, which was exhilarating but exhausting. People were patient and, I think, assumed I understood more than I did. Immersion, however, is fabulous for confidence and improvement. And having a go is what counts, not how well you do it.

French bookseller, Nathalie, at *Mots en Marge*, organised a lovely intimate event at her tiny but diverse bookshop. There, I read a talk I had prepared in French (edited by my tutor at the Alliance Française de Canberra). Then I threw the paper away and tried to wing it in French. People helped, smiled, and encouraged. We got along. We connected.

It was the same when I did a book-signing at *La Griffé Noire* with Gérard Collard. Customers came up and chatted as I stumbled along in broken French. We talked about Australia. I told them about my books. We drank champagne and ate macarons. And, as I talked to readers, I began to understand a little more about what the French saw in my novels.

I write contemporary realist fiction set in wild Australian landscapes. I'm interested in the baggage we inherit from our past and how it shapes us into who we are, how we engage, interact and create bonds with people, how we heal and move forward from grief or trauma. Connection to nature is also important to me. I want to take readers into the landscape—to the sea, forest or mountains—so they can feel as if they are there, and experience the smell of the bush, the touch of the wind, the sound of birds in the canopy. In my writing, I tackle contentious issues by hovering above them and exploring different perspectives—not to judge or assert my opinion, but to understand the minds and lives of others, the challenges they face, how it is for them to live, love and suffer in this magical world.

My first novel, *The Stranding* (*La Maison des hautes falaises*) is about recovery from loss, healing in nature, and the ethics of wildlife rescue in the form of a whale stranding. *The Lightkeeper's Wife* (*La Mémoire des embruns*) is set in Antarctica and on Bruny Island off southern Tasmania. It explores the impacts of isolation on lives and relationships. *The Grass Castle* (*Le Murmure du vent*) delves into connection with the land, the Indigenous past of the Brindabella Range near Canberra, and the complexities of kangaroo

management and culling. My most recent novel, *The Orchardist's Daughter* (*Le Bruissement des feuilles*) is about three outsiders struggling to belong in a small Tasmanian timber town. It's a story of freedom and friendship, small towns, power, and forestry.

The Orchardist's Daughter has only recently been released, both in Australia and France. In April 2019, my daughter and I took a quick trip to France to help with publicity. It was an interesting time to be there. On our second night, Notre-Dame was on fire. On the way to dinner with my publisher, we could see smoke above the cathedral, spreading across the city. Near the Seine, our taxi became ensnared in immovable traffic. Bridges across the river had been closed and the taxi couldn't reach our destination, so we had to jump out and walk with the hordes across the Carrousel bridge.

At dinner, the mood was sombre. How could something like this happen to a national monument, especially Notre-Dame—the symbolic and religious heart of Paris? Why hadn't sprinklers been installed to prevent such an event? What was the extent of the damage?

My publisher, Sarah, was sad. The head of the publishing house, Vincent, had taken photos of the fire from his office. In his photos, you could see flames, and a bright orange glow, streamers of smoke snaking into the sky. Over dinner, we talked life and politics, but everything kept circling back to Notre-Dame. Money was already being pledged by the French government and the wealthy to fix the cathedral. Millions of euros were flooding in. The best thing that could come of this was a better plan to protect national monuments and buildings, Sarah said, so nothing like this could happen ever again.

During the next few days, while Notre-Dame was all over the media, I was busy with my schedule of radio interviews, book talks and a supper for bloggers at a beautiful restaurant on Rue de Bretagne in the Marais. With the help of a translator, lovely Marguerite from *Les Escales*, I enjoyed conversing about my book with discerning bloggers who were all passionate about books.

I have learned that the French love books and enjoy discussing them. This love of literature, however, is changing. Newspaper and magazine sales are declining, and social media has become an increasingly dominant force. Book sales are still good compared with many other places in the world—the French still want to read books. And they talk about them on

TV too— something that has died in Australia when Jennifer Byrne’s *The Book Show* came to an end. But there’s a hesitant feeling in France about this shift in culture. Globalisation creates connections, but also a sameness across the world, a kind of homogenisation. The French have always been strong about protecting their culture. I hope they can maintain their values and identity in the future world.



Karen Viggers with her publisher from *Les Escales*, and the radio presenter from Radio Europe 1.

Another aspect of French culture revealed itself on our last day in Paris. My daughter and I were staying in the eleventh arrondissement and we wanted to walk into the city for some final shopping. On the way, we encountered crowds clogging the streets: people wearing yellow vests. It was Saturday, the day of demonstrations, and people were protesting against the government and lack of social support for workers. This had been going on every Saturday for the past six months, and so it was expected, but nobody ever knew exactly where the demonstrations were going to take place. Mostly, it had been along the Champs-Élysées, but that day the demonstrators had crept up along Rue Oberkampf and into our arrondissement.

Seeing the crowds flowing towards us, my daughter and I elected to head north towards our hotel and try the next street. But the yellow vests were there too. And in the next street. And the next. We slipped into our hotel, and soon the demonstrators were in our street. They wore goggles and face masks as protection from police capsicum spray.

Our hotel manager locked the front doors and, across the road, a restaurant locked its patrons in too. There was yelling in the street. Some loud bangs. Surely not gunshot? Had a car windscreen been broken?

A herd of police trotted past wearing black uniforms and helmets, and carrying transparent shields. Were they the riot police? Or was this usual in Paris? I had never encountered anything like it before.

That day, 127 arrests were made, and we later learned that the demonstrations had been even more passionate than usual. People were angry because so much money had been mobilised so quickly to restore Notre-Dame, while long-term inertia prevailed when it came to listening to workers and their needs. I realised the French have always been fighters, stemming back to the French revolution and maybe beyond.

Later that day, when the streets had cleared, we saw more people launching into arguments, seemingly without provocation. Down near the Place du Carrousel, two men started yelling and shoving at each other. A little further along, a police car emerged far too fast from a side-street, siren blaring, and swung into traffic, smacking into another car. As the policemen got out to confront the car driver, a chorus of loud boos issued from the passing crowds. My daughter and I had never seen police treated with such dislike and disrespect.

That day, some of the cultural differences between Australia and France became clearer to me. I admire the French passion for standing up for workers' rights, even though I dislike the violence. As a non-confrontational person, seeing interactions like these was unsettling. In white middle-class Australia, we mostly hide in our comfortable worlds, thriving on our high-level lifestyles, trundling happily along, or buried in our own perceived problems. Now I am wondering how our culture might evolve as the world changes.

Over these past few years, since the success of my novels in French, my engagements with France have been rich and rewarding. I've seen good weather and bad, both in terms of climate and culture. But what I appreciate most is the French passion for thinking and speaking out. Through sharing my novels with France, I have learned not only about French culture, but also my own.

People often ask whether, one day, I will write a novel set in France. And I think this is unlikely. Not because I don't love France and its landscapes, but rather because my writing comes from a deep knowledge of my own country and place. It would be presumptuous to believe I could know France well enough through a few short visits to create a credible narrative and convincing characters in a French setting. That's the yardstick of realist fiction, I suppose. Could this happen? Does it seem real? If you read any of my books, hopefully they will show you an Australia you know. The great joy for me is being able to share my country internationally.

Connections sometimes come in unusual ways. I'm very happy to be part of a French-Australian interaction.

Canberra