

AN AUSTRALIAN (OR TWO) IN PARIS: SOME READING NOTES AND PERSONAL REMINISCENCES

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Is there no end to the infatuation of Australians with all things French? Apparently not, not if the recent spate of Australian books about France and French people is any indication. I'm not talking about scholarly books by academics, which, like the poor, are always with us. Learned volumes about the Australian battalions in France during World War I at the battles of Bullecourt, Pozières, Villers-Bretonneux and Fromelles; or the South Pacific explorations of French mariners such as Lapérouse, d'Entrecasteaux, Baudin, Freycinet and Dumont d'Urville. All of which are fascinating in their way, but which are pitched at a restricted elite readership. I'm talking about popular literature here, best-sellers with Australians starring in lead roles in dramas where the backdrop is France—usually Paris—and the supporting cast and the extras are French people. The French! How we love them! Don't we? We even fall in love with them!

Well, Mary Moody does. She spills the beans—more of the beans in fact—in *Last Tango in Toulouse* (Sydney, Pan Macmillan, 2003);¹ and just in case you don't get it, there's a hint on the front cover: 'Torn between two loves'. Which Mary certainly is, having left husband David safely at home in Bathurst, New South Wales, while she's off in Toulouse having a hot affair with a Frenchman whom she refers to only as 'the man from Toulouse'. This is good kiss-and-tell stuff, and perhaps Mary is less disingenuous than she might appear. After all, she is 50 years old, has been married to David for 31 years and at the last count has notched up three best-sellers by harping on her bouts of infidelity. I hope David, in his less than glorious role as complaisant husband, gets a kickback. Not simply this nice dedication: 'This book is dedicated to my husband David, who, in spite of his pain, gave me ceaseless love and support throughout the roller-coaster ride of the last few years.' But a nice cut of the royalties too. Who likes to see their dirty washing aired in public? Mary Moody has obviously struck a chord in many middle-aged Australian female hearts. So that's what it's like to have an affair with a Frenchman!

And if you are an Australian girl a generation younger than Mary and you want to know what it's like to fall in love with a gorgeous young Frenchman, a man from Paris who has a name (Frédéric) and what it's like to give up your job in Sydney for him, to leave Australia to go and live and work in Paris, you will not be disappointed with Sarah Turnbull's *Almost French* (Sydney, Random House, 2002), sub-title 'A New Life in Paris'.² This is a beautifully written and well-judged book by a woman who is a freelance writer. She makes some neat observations about the many differences between French and Australians. For example: 'Where I grew up dogs are dogs... But in Paris, a city of roughly two hundred thousand dogs (an incredible number when you consider there are no backyards and only pocket-sized parks) canines lead lives that are remarkably similar to their masters'. They stay in chateaux-hotels and have expensive haircuts. A night out means dressing up and dining in fine restaurants... (where) dogs are babied and indulged, perched on velvet stools and hand-fed from plates.' As it happens I know a number of (Maltese) dogs in Melbourne who are spoiled in much the same way as their Parisian counterparts but I accept that this is probably not the norm.

Sarah Turnbull does a nice line in comparing and contrasting Australian and French *mores*. Australians are laconic, laid-back, anti-intellectual, casual; the French are verbose, formal, cultured, sophisticated. Or so we are led to believe. Well, things are not quite so cut-and-dried, according to Sarah. On both sides, there is plenty of deviation from the stereotype, plenty of cross-over, especially in the younger generation. And it is a pleasure to read a book which does not portray all expatriate Australians as boors, oafs and morons when set beside their highly polished French counterparts. A small mission of mine is to show the world that for a large number of Australians—not a majority but a large number—there is more to life than swilling beer, watching cricket and shooting crocodiles. Young educated Australians like Sarah Turnbull are interested in and eager for high culture, and this includes classic books and fine literature. I see the evidence of it in my own bookshop, where, I estimate, around half my customers are aged under 35.

No doubt *Almost French* resonates strongly with me because I was married to a Frenchwoman for nearly twenty years. Marie-Cécile came from near Grenoble and after our marriage in 1974 I was folded into the bosom of her family, and of her extended family. Since her father was one of nine children and her mother one of eleven, the extended family was, well, extensive.

Not that I ever considered myself ‘almost French’. If you are not steeped, not to say marinaded, in French life, education and culture from the age of two, I doubt if you ever can be. Especially not if you are English, the old enemy.

It is curious that my mother-in-law persisted for the whole of her life in addressing me formally as ‘vous’. When—after several years—I invited her to use the familiar form ‘tu’, she declined. ‘Voyez-vous, vous êtes mon gendre,’ she said. ‘J’aurai toujours du respect pour vous.’ (‘You see, you are my son-law. I will always show you respect.’). With my children on the other hand, she always used (disrespectfully?) the familiar forms ‘tu’ and ‘toi’. Whether she had an inkling at any stage that I would not be her son-in-law for ever, and was preparing for that day, I am unable to say. My mother-in-law’s mother, ‘Mémé’, treated me with equal respect but did not mince her words. After Marie-Cécile and I were married in a civil ceremony at the Mairie of Le Grand-Lemps on a Friday afternoon (the Mayor decked out in the *tricolore* sash of the Republic), Mémé, a devout Catholic, came up to me and wagged a finger in my face. ‘Souvenez-vous, Monsieur,’ she said, ‘vous n’êtes mariés qu’à moitié.’ (‘Remember, young man, you are only half-married.’) In other words: ‘Don’t try any hanky-panky with my grand-daughter tonight. You can do that after you’re properly and fully married, which will only be when you’re blessed and sanctified at the church on Saturday.’ So we spent our first night as a married couple in separate bedrooms! Many things are still done differently in France. And not always worse. Indeed, I am often of a mind with Laurence Sterne who in the guise of the narrator of *A Sentimental Journey* opens his book with a good one-liner: ‘They order’, said I, ‘this matter better in France.’

A third book, which examines an Australian bibliophile’s life journey from Junee, in country New South Wales, to the heart of Paris is John Baxter’s *A Pound of Paper* (London, Doubleday 2002), sub-title ‘The Confessions of a Book Addict’. I read this book on the long flight from Melbourne to London a couple of years ago and left it behind in my mother’s house in Kent, and have no copy in my shop, so am unable to refer to it now. But I remember it as a jaunty history of a book collector, who cut his teeth on science fiction pulp paperbacks and who graduated to modern first editions, fine art books and remarkable signed or association copies. After transferring from Sydney to Paris, John Baxter discovered the delights of the Paris book trade. As a collector and dealer, he chronicles his many good deals, lucky finds and astute purchases. I sense a mild whiff of self-satisfaction, not to say smugness, about some of

Baxter's yarns. But that is probably due to envy on my part. He ends up married to an aristocratic rich and gorgeous *Parisienne* (for heaven's sake!)—about whom he waxes lyrical in the last third of the book. Some people! But still. He is an Australian with considerable literary skill, with the knowledge, courage and expertise to have gathered up, with modest funds, a remarkable collection of books in the fields of modern art and modern literature.³

The fourth and last book I commend to you wholeheartedly. This is *Left Bank Waltz* by Elaine Lewis (Sydney, Random House, 2006), sub-title 'The Australian Bookshop in Paris'.⁴ I happened to meet Elaine Lewis a few months ago. She now lives in Melbourne and she visited my shop, where we talked briefly. She mentioned that she had owned a bookshop in Paris, a few years previously, but modestly omitted to say what an adventure it was and that she had written a book about it. I stumbled across her book by chance and was—and am—enchanted by it. As I think you will be—even if you have no particular knowledge of or interest in Australian books and literature.

The book tells the story of a dream—its vision and its realization. In 1984, Elaine Lewis, aged 50, newly divorced after a long marriage, visits her son who is a professional musician in Paris. A music teacher herself, with a great love of literature, she hatches the idea of opening a bookshop in Paris which will stock a wide range of Australian books, in both English and French editions, new and secondhand. She dreams of promoting young Australian writers, hosting book launches, organising literary *soirées*, encouraging translations of Australian books, championing the causes of Aboriginal Australians, making her bookshop a focal point for Australian culture in Paris.

Elaine Lewis does not rush into this enterprise. For ten years, working for publishers and booksellers, researching the market, she builds up her book-selling skills, her knowledge of the book trade, her contacts and her potential clientele. She discovers—something I did not know—that more than thirty French universities run some sort of Australian Studies course. During further visits to Paris, she assesses the competition. Not much apparently. 'I find so few Australian books available in either the English or French-speaking general bookshops that I begin to look at second-hand books and find translations of books by Patrick White, Colleen McCullough, Morris West, Arthur Upfield, Nevil Shute and Nancy Cato. White won the Nobel Prize so that explains his popularity but I'm not sure why these particular authors are comparatively well known in France when there are so many other good writers.' Welcome to the

world of bookselling, Elaine. She discovers that another Australian bookshop in Paris has recently gone bust. And when she seeks the advice of an Australian running a bookshop in Bordeaux, he tells her gently but firmly to forget the idea. ‘You’ll lose your money and it will break your heart.’

Faint-hearted never got a bookshop off the ground! And Elaine Lewis is a feisty woman. Late in 1995 she moves from Melbourne to Paris and starts her search for suitable shop premises. After much heartache and disappointment, finally she secures her dream shop on the Quai des Grands Augustins, on the Left Bank, in the heart of St-Germain-des-Prés, the literary centre of Paris and of France (and—the French would claim—of the world). ‘My first visit to the shop is in early May and I fall in love with it. It is spring, the sun is shining on the waters of the Seine, the trees are still wearing their young green leaves and from the doorway of the shop I can see the spire of the Sainte Chapelle and the rows of blossom trees at the side of Notre Dame. Across the road the stalls of the *bouquinistes* look very much as they do in ancient postcards. I feel as though I am in the very heart of Paris... The owner, Monsieur Vinarnic, tells me that the shop was built to serve as a bookshop in the nineteenth century but has more recently been used to sell clothing... The shop is a dream but the rent is at the extreme top of my range. I argue to myself that I would have to pay this amount for a similar-sized shop in Melbourne, and, as I don’t expect to make a profit for at least three years, I can cut corners and live very simply until the business becomes established.’

Which in due course it does. With her charm, elegance and flair Elaine Lewis builds up ‘The Australian Bookshop’: the web of customers interested in Australian books widens and the *salons littéraires* and informal ‘meet-the-writers’ evenings which she organises are hugely successful. Mail order business increases and after two years all seems set fair. ‘The Australian Bookshop has already developed its own atmosphere, which customers say is relaxed and warmly inviting, and people seem to enjoy coming here. French author Christophe Bourseiller writes of the Australian Bookshop in his *Guide de l’autre Paris* that people feel “strangely transported in this unique place”. The French is much more elegant: *On se sent curieusement dépaysé dans ce lieu anglo-saxon à nul autre pareil.*’

The last third of the book, beginning with Chapter 15, ‘The Dream Becomes a Nightmare’, describes the unravelling of this brave and worthwhile enterprise. The French bureaucrats who determine whether or not foreigners

should be permitted to have their business permits renewed decide that Elaine Lewis's business is showing insufficient returns. They will not renew her permit. Why this should be any of their business strikes us Australians as incomprehensible: but there you have it, another gulf between the Gallic and the Australian mindset. The shop's death agony is prolonged and painful and pitiful to read about. But there is no self-pity in Elaine Lewis's writing. She remains strong and quietly defiant. This is a heroic disaster, which is very Australian. Gallipoli—a massive defeat for the Australian army—is our iconic battlefield.

Why should anyone be interested in—much less concerned for—a small bookish business which sprang up and flourished briefly for a couple of years or so in a smart Parisian inner suburb? And—you may think—let's put all this in its proper perspective. The Australian Bookshop wasn't exactly Shakespeare and Company; Elaine Lewis is no Sylvia Beach, nor George Whitman for that matter. Nor could we compare Elaine Lewis with another Australian woman, Louise Hanson-Dyer, who set up in Paris in the 1930s and founded the admirable record company and music publishers Éditions de L'Oiseau Lyre (The Lyrebird Press—named for the Australian bower bird with its remarkable musical ability. A full account of Louise Hanson-Dyer's life and work is given in Jim Davidson's *Lyrebird Rising*, Melbourne, Miegunyah Press, 1994). Well, my interest is in the dream, and the process by which it becomes reality. Goethe wrote:

Was immer Du tun kannst,
 Oder erträumst zu können,
 Beginne es jetzt.
 Kühnheit besitzt Genie,
 Macht und magische Kraft.
 Beginne es jetzt.

Whatever you can do,
 Or dream you can,
 Begin it now.
 Boldness possesses genius,
 And creates magic and power.
 Begin it now.

I have this quotation framed up and hanging in a back room of my bookshop. I have an abiding admiration for thinkers and dreamers who take the bold path and who turn their dream into reality and who—sometimes—see the dream shattered.

Bookselling is not an easy calling. If it were easy, everybody would be doing it. So I feel a particular admiration for booksellers who pick out the difficult path, and spurn the soft option. It is hard enough to sell books written in your own language to your own tribe; why set out deliberately to make things harder? Some people, Elaine Lewis among them, just love the challenge. And here in Australia I admire two Frenchmen who have made Australia their home and who are knowledgeable and successful book dealers in their adopted country and their adopted language: Claude-Henri Dany who is a general bookseller operating from ‘La Maison du Livre’ in the Blue Mountains, near Sydney, and Jean-Louis Boglio, who deals in maritime books from his home in Queensland. Both are well established and, I suspect, both are in business for the long haul.

I have no doubt that Australians’ love affair with France and the French will endure. At the back of the minds of many thinking Australians lurks this fascinating ‘What if?’:

‘What if the French had colonised Australia instead of the British? What sort of place would Australia be today? If established and governed by the French, with their mission to civilise, to beautify, to bureaucratise?’ It was never a particularly near-run thing. The loss of its American colonies focused England’s attention on looking for a new dumping-ground for its convicts and transportees while France had other things on its mind, like getting ready for a revolution. Still, it’s fun to speculate. And day by day, the French are working their way into Australia. Why, Moët et Chandon have bought a ‘champagne’ vineyard in the Yarra Valley, just outside Melbourne; Citroën and Renault and Peugeot are selling cars like hot cakes, and Filou’s Pâtisserie et Boulangerie, only a few hundred metres from my bookshop, is *the* place to be seen buying your *baguette*, your *pain au chocolat* or your *petits fours*.

‘There are only two people in the world of whom I am really envious. My husband’s mistress, and that woman who runs The Australian Bookshop in Paris.’ The words are unattributed by Elaine Lewis but they were certainly uttered by an Australian woman. This *bon mot* is ‘almost French’ in its wordliness and its sardonic humour. Let’s hope that things don’t go any further. While

we love the French, we cherish our distinctive Australian culture too. *Vive la différence!*

Melbourne

Notes

- 1 Reviewed by Edward Duyker in *Explorations* n° 40, pp. 32-34.
- 2 Reviewed by Edward Duyker in *Explorations* n° 36, pp. 19-20.
- 3 John Baxter's œuvre includes, as well as numerous books on film, *We'll Always Have Paris: Sex and Love in the City of Light*, London, Doubleday, 2005.
- 4 Reviewed by Patricia Clancy in *Explorations* n° 40, pp. 35-36.