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**Vol. 25
September
2018**

**THIS
EDITION:
Paris in
Literature
(1795-
2018)**



WANDER to WONDER

by MARTINA NICOLLS



**The world will never starve for wonder, but only for want of wonder.
G.K. Chesterson**

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editor's note

Welcome to the 25th edition of WANDER to WONDER

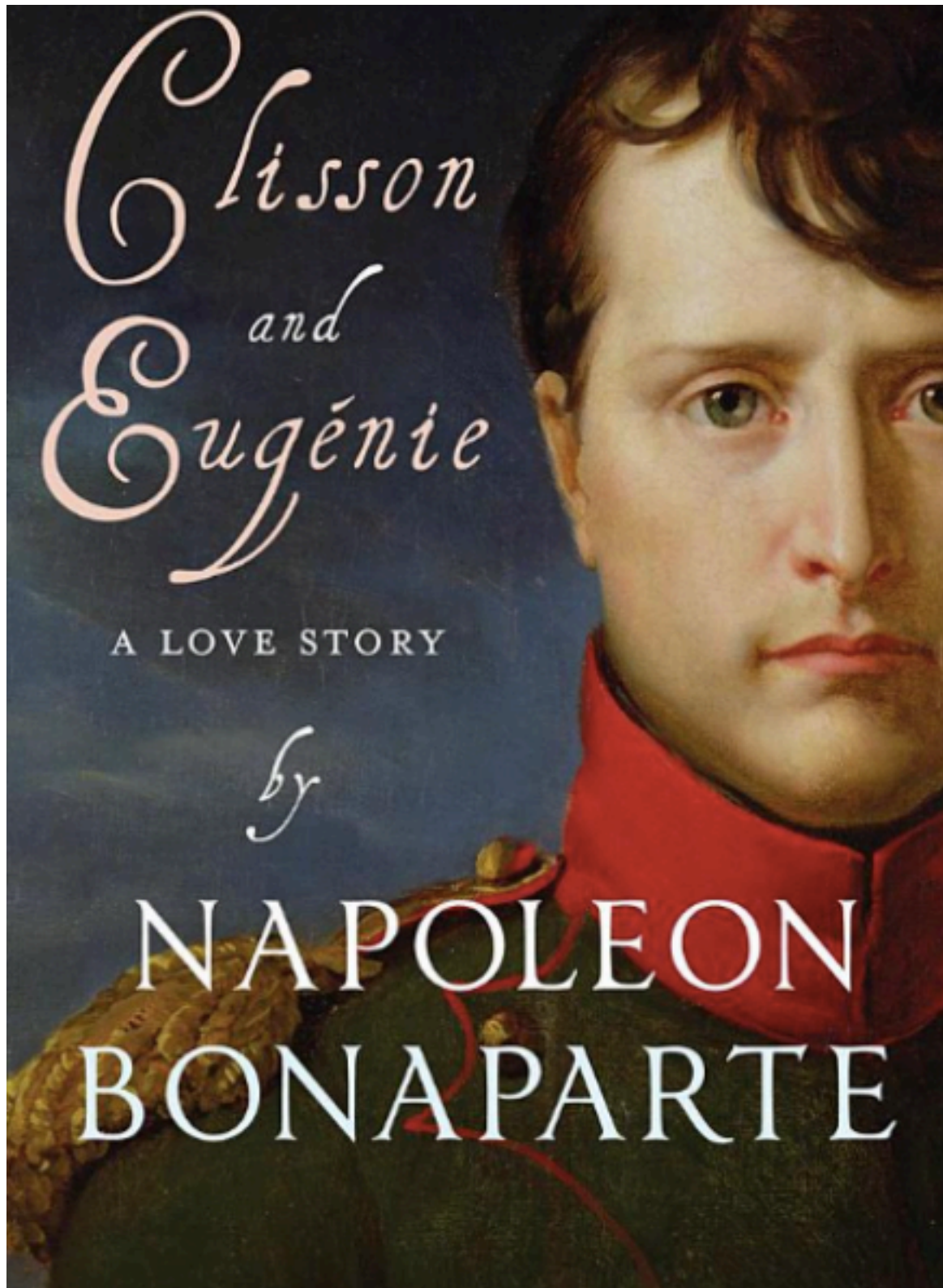
This edition of Wander to Wonder focuses on Paris. I spent 10 days in Paris on vacation at the end of August 2018. Over the past 2 years, I have read books on Paris or set in Paris or by a Parisian author, so I have collected some of the book reviews I have written on my blog for this edition. I start with a love story written by Napoleon Bonaparte.

Until next edition, with another theme,

Martina

MARTINA NICOLLS





clisson and eugenie: a love story by napoleon bonaparte (1795)

Clisson and Eugenie: A Love Story (1795) is written by Napoleon Bonaparte at 26 years of age, before he became Emperor Napoleon I of France. It is a short story, a novella.

In the forward and afterword, Armand Cabasson (author of the Quentin Margont series of thrillers set in the Napoleonic Wars), provides notes from translators Peter Hicks and Emilie Barthet, their interpretation of the meaning of the novella, and a brief history of the manuscript. Six fragments of the novella manuscripts were found in different places at different times, with several versions and edits by Napoleon, which scholars have reconstructed over time.

That Napoleon (1769-1821) wrote the story is not in doubt. Napoleon had previously written several pieces of fiction, such as *On Suicide* (1786), *A Meeting at Palais-Royal* (1787), *Dialogue on Love* (1791) and *The Supper in Beaucaire* (1793). It is only the order, and piecing back together the correct versions – and the translations – that scholars debate.

The 18-page novella commences powerfully: ‘From birth Clisson was strongly attracted to war ... victory was his constant companion.’ Clisson desired happiness, but had only found glory. During a period of introspection the 18-year-old visits a friend in the country. He sees two women: 17-year-old Amelie and her 16-year-old friend Eugenie. He marries Eugenie and they have children, continuing to have ‘the same heart, the same soul, the same feelings.’ When he is 24, the government calls Clisson urgently to Paris, just after Eugenie has painful forebodings of abandonment. He is gone for two years due to the war. At 26 years of age, he dispatches officer Berville to inform Eugenie that he has been injured in battle and that Berville will keep her company until he recovers. Clisson recovers, Berville does not return, Clisson prepares to lead another battle ...

The actions of Clisson, Berville, and Eugenie are open to interpretation. The translators give their versions. Did Berville and Eugenie become lovers? Was Clisson’s battle strategy borne from sacrificial love for country, heroic love for Eugenie, despair at Eugenie’s silence, or hatred for Berville?

This is fiction, but as the translators say, ‘some passages are firmly anchored in reality.’ Bonaparte did, briefly – for less than a year – know a Eugenie: Eugenie Desiree Clary. That was before his love for Josephine de Beauharnais.

The novella is compact, describing events in rapid time through short, bullet-quick sentences. But there is no doubt that there is a love of culture, nature, and beauty in these pages. The way Napoleon describes and compares Amelie and Eugenie like pieces of music is sublime: they both affected Clisson differently – and these descriptions are open, honest, and boldly revealing. ‘She [Eugenie] had a strange effect on his heart,

which disturbed the pleasure of the memory of the beautiful Amelie ... their hearts were made to love each other.'

The plot is intriguing. The characters are interesting. The language is evocative with carefully chosen words. The novella is passionate and intense. This is a tragedy. This is a love story.



therese by francois mauriac (1927-1935)

Therese (1927-1935) is a series of four novels in one compilation, covering the 1920s to the 1930s when Therese Desqueyroux is 30-45 years of age. The four novels are set in Argelouse, near Bordeaux, and in Paris.

Mauriac wrote *Therese Desqueyroux* in 1927, followed by *Therese and the Doctor* (1928), *Therese at the Hotel* (1928), and *The End of the Night* (1935). The English version of the first book was issued in 1928. English versions of the other three books were published in 1947. *Therese and the Doctor* – 20 pages – and *Therese at the Hotel* – 19 pages – are sandwiched between the main volumes – the beginning and the end. Mauriac wrote the remaining three novels to explain what happened to Therese after an abrupt and ambiguous ending to the first book.

The first book begins with Therese, 30 years of age, emerging from the courtroom where charges against her, for attempting to poison her husband, were dismissed. She is in a carriage driving home where she will be reunited with her husband, Bernard, who is recovering. Readers know that she did indeed plan to poison her husband, but her husband is not so sure, though he suspects that she is guilty. She is thinking about what she will tell him. He is thinking about her punishment. Why did she do it? Although her father 'was the only truly remarkable man she had ever known' she thinks that 'when all was said, Bernard wasn't so bad.' She had a husband, a two-year old daughter Marie, and a profitable plantation of pine trees – what more could she want?

The second book begins three years after the poisoning when she is 33 years old. The third book begins when she is 40 years old.

In the last book she is 45. Mauriac says that *The End of the Night* is not a sequel, but 'a portrait of a woman in her decline.' Therese is in Paris – with a heart condition and feeling old and alone. She has not seen her daughter Marie in three years, when Marie knocks at her mother's door. Marie is now 17 years old, in love with Georges who is 22. Her happiness is entirely in the hands of her mother, because if Georges believes, as others do, that her mother is evil, there will be no chance of a wedding. Marie wants to know the truth.

Therese is complex. Is she evil, or mad, or paranoid, or a schemer, or a victim of circumstance? Mauriac's writing is clever, never fully revealing Therese's motives and true character. It is the reader who decides.





letters to a young poet by rainer maria rilke (1929)

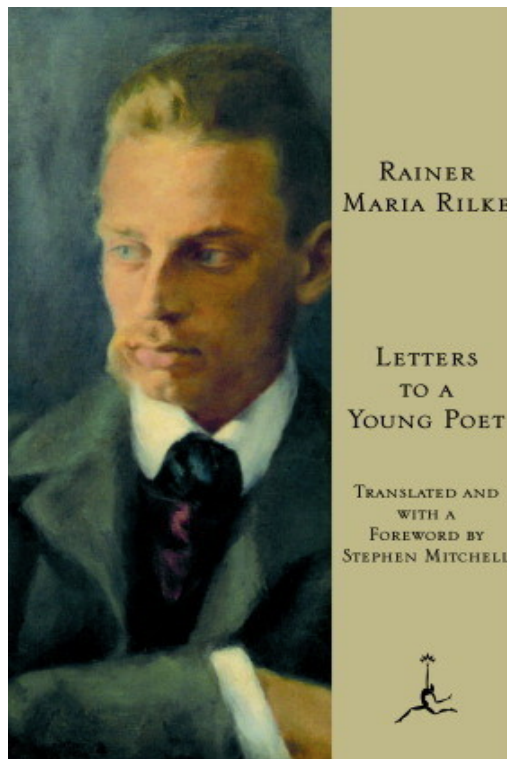
Letters to a Young Poet (1929) is a series of 10 letters that German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) wrote to an aspiring young poet, between the years 1903-1908.

Rilke was in Paris from 1902, writing a book about the sculptor Auguste Rodin (who sculpted *The Thinker* and *The Kiss*).

Rilke was 27 years old when he responded to 19-year-old Franz Xaver Kappus who was asking for poetic guidance. Written to provide hope and inspiration, as well as his own insight of living in a harsh world, the letters continue to provide inspiration to all readers. Nine of the letters were written in the space of 18 months.

The letters are long and cover techniques such as irony, alienation, futility, love, and consciousness pushed to the extreme.

Accompanying the letters, at the end of the book, is a commentary on the letters, that inform readers of the historical context in Paris. This thin book is contextually interesting as well as being a heartening account of being a poet in difficult times.



the beauties and the furies by christina stead (1936)

The Beauties and the Furies (1936) is set in Paris over the period of one year: 1934. This is no lightweight romantic story. It's a challenging, complex novel in the vein of Virginia Woolf, reminding me of the magnificence of Stead's writing. This is Australian author Christina Stead's (1902-1983) second novel, although she is best known for her 1940 masterpiece *The Man Who Loved Children*.

Bored housewife Elvira Western leaves England and her doctor husband Paul to follow a young, charming, but penniless, British student to Paris. Oliver Fenton is writing his thesis on The French Workers' Movement from the Commune to the Amsterdam Congress of 1904.

On the train to Paris, Elvira meets Annibale Marpurgo, an Italian lace-buyer, who inveigles his way into the lives of Elvira and Oliver, influencing their decisions through deceit and subterfuge. He is a master manipulator, a slippery snake, a schemer.

Elvira, the 'broad-bottomed' married woman, five years older than Oliver, with 'pretty eyes' and 'brows that meet' has competition for Oliver's attention. The other beauties and the furies are French actress Blanche D'Anizy and Frenchwoman Coromandel Paindebled. Oliver too has competition for Elvira's attention.

France is in political turmoil and economic downturn, and Paris is the underbelly of society. Amid this setting, Elvira and Oliver have a co-dependent relationship, and one fraught with uncertainty and distractions – political, sensual and sexual.

Elvira is complicated and intelligent, indecisive and frustrating, sick and self-sabotaging – 'she changes everyone' – but it is Mapurgo, the traditional villain, that sucks up the limelight in this novel, slowly and insidiously.

A revolutionary and controversial novel for its time with love triangles that intersect and entangle, it is dense and intense. The characters are unlikeable for their self-indulgence, pretentious intellectualism, pessimism, and self-absorption. But that – and the themes of political, sexual, and emotional emancipation, and all the virtues and vices of Paris in the 1930s – makes this an outstanding novel.



madame de pompadour by nancy mitford (1968)

Madame de Pompadour (1968) is a non-fiction book about the long-time mistress of King Louis XV of France, written by Nancy Mitford (1904-1973), author of the novel, *Love in a Cold Climate*.

Madame de Pompadour was born Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson – often ridiculed because her surname means ‘fish.’ At the age of nine, a fortune-teller predicted that she would steal the heart of a king. This was not possible because she was not from aristocracy – she was from the bourgeoisie – from the rural ‘boroughs.’

Jeanne-Antoinette could act, dance, sing, play the clavichord, and paint. She was an enthusiastic gardener and botanist, and she collected rare and exotic birds. In fact, she had everything except good health. She was pretty, though her looks ‘depended on dazzle and expression rather than bone structure.’ She married Monsieur Normant d’Etoiles.

Nevertheless, she captured the attention of King Louis XV who hunted in the grounds of the forest of Senart, next to the d’Etoiles residence. This is the account of her growing up and meeting the king. It is also about her 20 years in the king’s court.

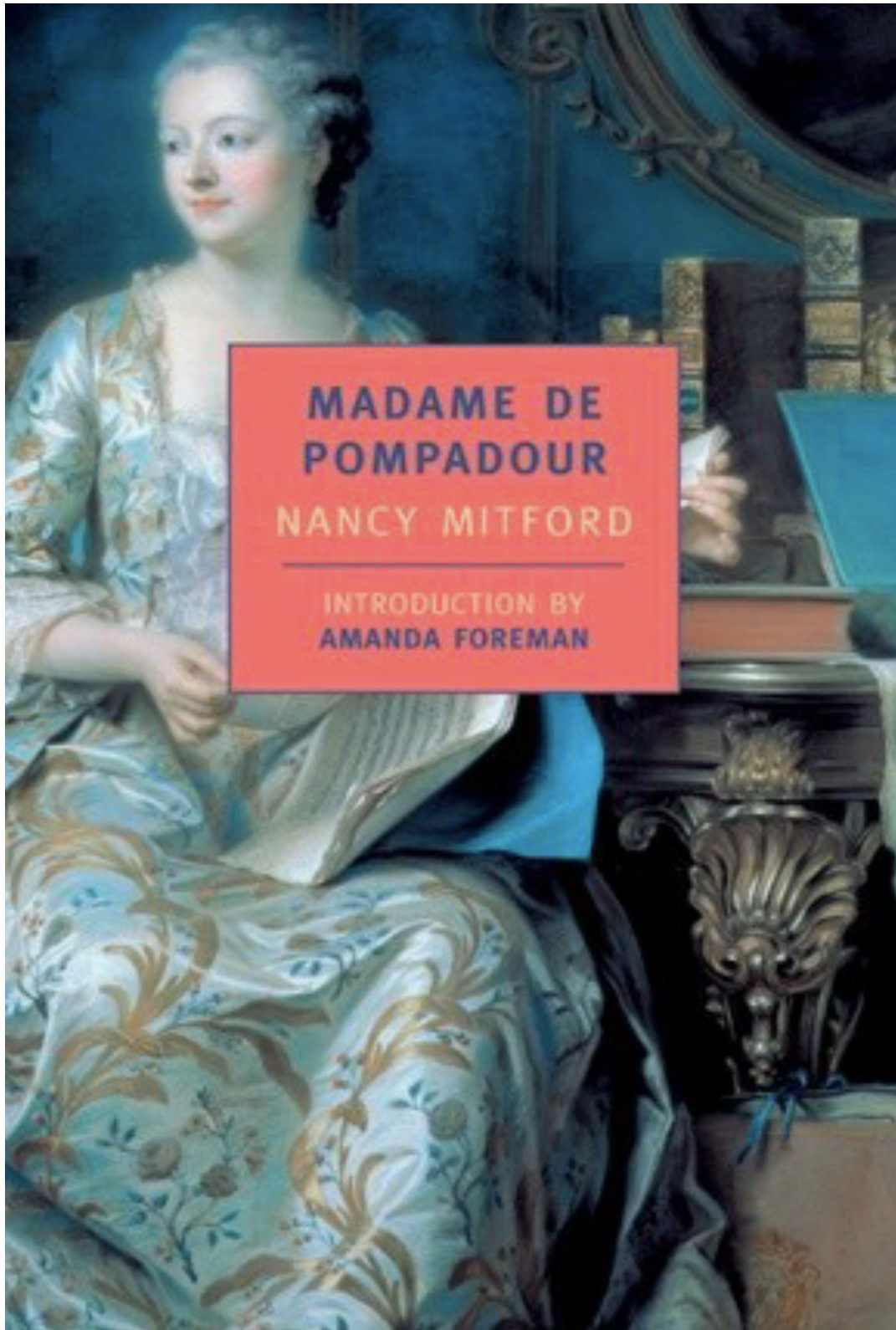
Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764) was influential in the king’s palace, the Palace of Versailles. She was kind to the Queen, but loathsome to the bourgeoisie who resented her rise to power and prestige. The novel tells of the impact of the Seven Year’s War on the court of France, the downsizing of the estate, and its ‘defeats and humiliations.’ She died of tuberculosis at the age of 42.

Mitford’s writing is descriptive, but not convoluted. It is an easy style that neatly categorizes the novel into significant periods. She attempts to minimize interchanging the names and titles of characters to avoid confusion, yet it is often difficult to remember the relatives – brothers, cousins and so forth.

Mitford also attempts to place events in modern day, such as reminding visitors to the Palace of Versailles where to look for the rooms of Madame de Pompadour – ‘the visitor to Versailles, coming into the garden through the usual entrance, should turn left and count the nine top windows from the north-west corner; they were Madame de Pompadour’s at this time.’

The scenes behind the history are fascinating and grippingly told, but also with tenderness and emotion. This is an enjoyable slice of history, even if I did forget to look for the nine top windows when I last visited Versailles. Perhaps another visit is required.





the bathing huts by monique lange (1982)

The Bathing Huts (1982) is a book of recovery, or at least the beginning of recovery. It is set off the coast of Brittany in the seaside town of Roscoff.

A young woman sends herself to Roscoff to recover from an illness, but instead, spends her time reflecting on failed relationships and wasted potentialities. Roscoff is a town of old people and it is here that Anne is haunted by the death of her friends and by the memories of her ex-husband. She reflects, 'that's what life must be about: getting used to people leaving you.'

Anne decides to make a list of all the mistakes and weaknesses that have marked the stages in her life. After writing the list, she goes for a swim: 'it is in the sea that she forgets those things that she doesn't like about herself.'

She awards herself a diploma for having loved 'difficult' people and forgives herself for having made a few mistakes in her life. She is comforted in her hotel room and begins to recover. She likes hotel rooms. She announces to herself that hotel rooms are places special to happiness and unhappiness alike.

In the novel, there is an acceptance that life fluctuates between routine and unexpected events; between choice and destiny; between happiness and sadness; between illness and health; and between wallowing in self-pity and embracing self-recovery.

Lange, a French author (1926-1996), born in Paris, spent her childhood in Indochina, documented in her 1972 novel, *A Little Girl under the Mosquito Net*. The Bathing Huts was her first successful novel, a partial memoir. The 'illness' she is recovering from is a heart condition which eventually caused her death. Some critics say this is a prophetic novel. She died in her home town, Paris.



Monique Lange
**Les cabines
de bain**



simone de beauvoir: a biography by deirdre bair (1991)

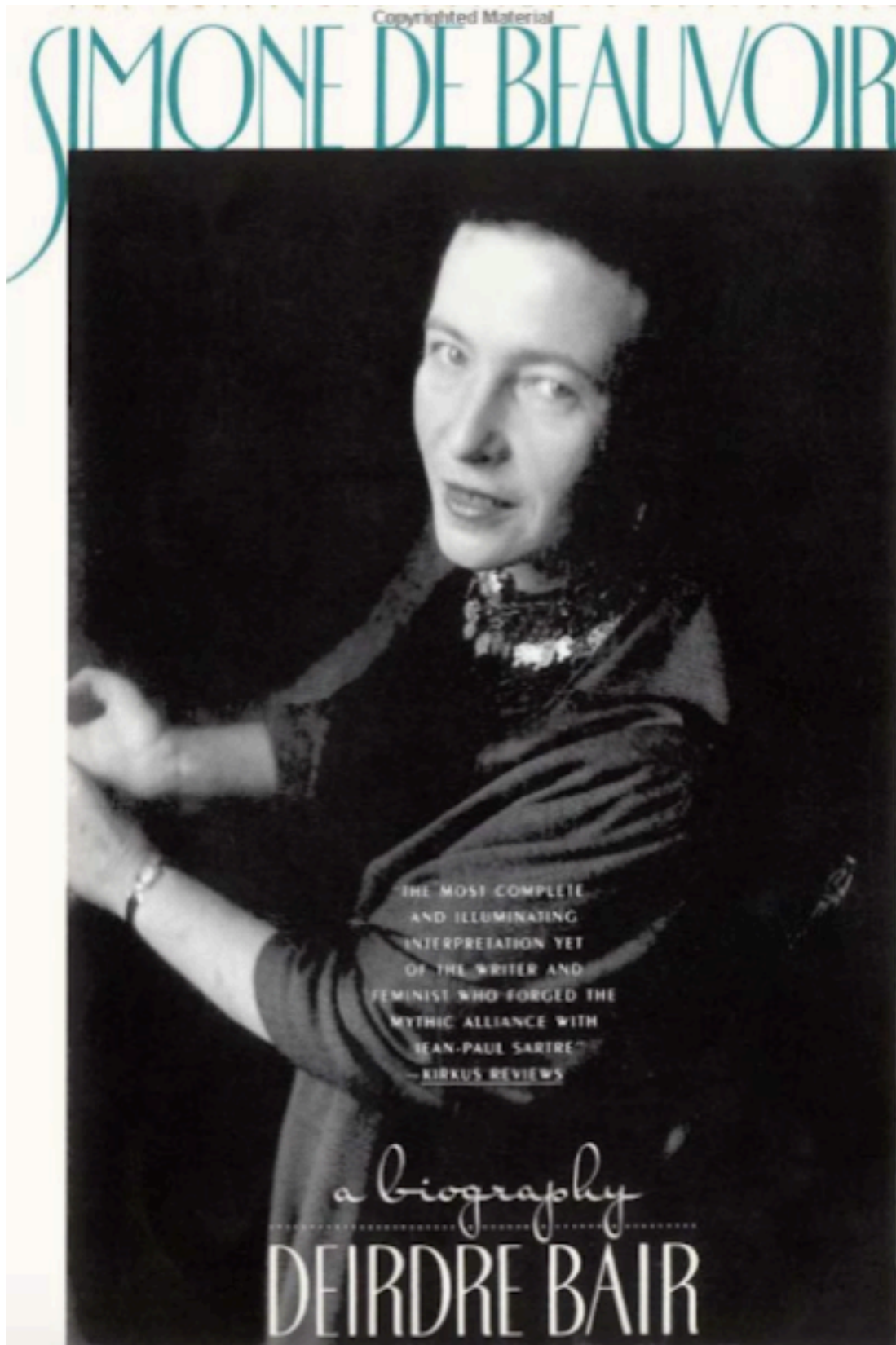
Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography (1991), a large tome, is the definitive biography of French author, philosopher, novelist and feminist, Simone de Beauvoir. Bair had access to Beauvoir's time and co-operation during the last six years before her death in 1986 at the age of 78. Hence, there is nothing left unanswered; all is revealed in a frank expose of her life, politics, work ethic, and relationships.

Beauvoir, the author of the landmark 1949 feminist work, *The Second Sex*, provides Bair with extraordinary insights into the embryonic beginnings of all her literary works, their developments, the public's response and her response to public opinion. It also details her relationship with fellow novelist and existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, whom she met at the Sorbonne in 1929 and remained with for life. It tells of their brief relationships with other writers such as Albert Camus and Arthur Koestler, whom she weaved into her novel *The Mandarins* (1954).

Other relationships emerge as critical in Beauvoir's life: her mother, her sister, her adopted daughter, and other younger women; all of whom shaped her earlier thoughts and philosophies. Considering herself old at forty-four, writing on ageing as cathartic therapy, she surrounds herself with youthful artists and lovers, including Claude Lanzmann and Nelson Algren. However, it is Sartre that has the greatest influence on her life, and she on his. It becomes clear that their relationship was intricately and inexplicably entwined: philosophically, emotionally, physically and spiritually. Working side by side, they were each other's competitor, collaborator, and source of inspiration.

This is an interesting and challenging read for all lovers of Simone de Beauvoir or Jean-Paul Sartre and their literary works.





the front seat passenger by pascal garnier (1997)

The Front Seat Passenger (1997) is set in Paris, France.

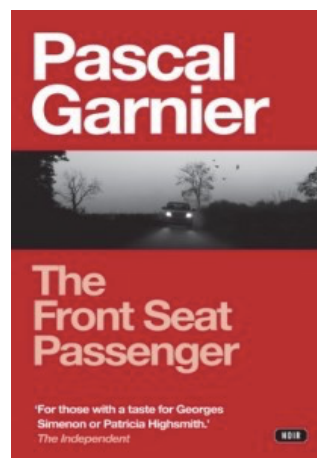
The novel starts with Fabien Delorme remembering hearing of the death of his mother Charlotte, whom he hadn't seen for 35 years. Whenever he visited his father in Normandy for the weekend, he remembered his mother. He returned home to an empty house – perhaps Sylvie is at the cinema.

Sylvie, Fabien's wife, dies in a car accident, in Dijon. What was she doing there? The male driver also died. Who was he? He was Sylvie's lover. He was 50-year-old Martial Arnoult from Paris, married to 31-year-old Martine.

Fabien stays with friends, Gilles, Fanchon and their son five-year-old son Leo, who want to look after him. But Fabien begins stalking Martine – the front seat passenger of the big grey BMW driven by Madeleine. His intentions towards Martine are somewhat vague, but it is something like, 'that man stole my wife; I'm going to steal his.' But Martine's protective best friend Madeleine is like a bulldog by her side. Fabien even follows Martine and Madeleine to Majorca, for their 10-day holiday. And then, one day, he becomes Martine's front seat passenger.

'Misfortune had got its foot in the door ... it would never leave now.' How did Fabien get himself in this predicament, and how is he going to get out of it?

This is a dark tale of revenge and paranoia, of dependency and isolation, of fear and resignation, of subjugation and detachment. There are twists and turns that make this novel interesting and gripping to the end.





the rose grower by michelle de kretser (2001)

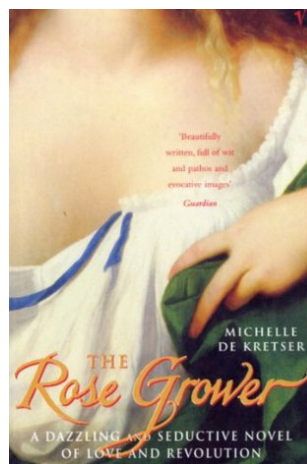
The Rose Grower (2001) is set during the ten years of the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799 in a small farming village. Jean-Baptiste raises three daughters – Claire, Sophie, and Mathilde – amid the isolation of the farming village of Montsignac in Southern France while writing a treatise on the history of French food. There is a day of excitement when an American balloonist, Stephen Fletcher from Paris, falls from the sky into their fields, changing their lives and their world forever.

Claire, the eldest is married to a man in exile as a traitor. She lives with their son. She loves the brash American balloonist but is morally tied to her husband Hubert. The balloonist loves Claire but knows he cannot have her. Instead, he hopes that Hubert dies in the war.

Sophie, the middle daughter and an aspiring rose grower, loves the balloonist too, but her love is unrequited. The local doctor, Joseph, loves Sophie, but she barely notices him. Joseph dislikes Stephen intensely. To Sophie's father, Jean-Baptiste, neither Stephen nor Joseph are suitable partners for his daughter; Stephen is too arrogant and Joseph is too harsh.

Mathilde, the youngest daughter, loves her dog, Brutus. No-one has a problem with that.

Love, jealousy, desire, and rejection are set among the disease and decay of the French Revolution. Malice, unpatriotism, counter-revolution, and the spectacle of execution by guillotine are too strong for fragile love and roses. Humorous, evocative and tragic, it is an intriguing and interesting novel.



the lady and the unicorn by tracy chevalier (2005)

The Lady and the Unicorn (2005) is set in Paris, France, and Brussels, Belgium, from 1490 to 1492 – the two years of the painting, design, and weaving of the series of six wool and silk tapestries for Jean Le Viste, a nobleman of King Charles VII.

Artist Nicolas des Innocents has been commissioned to design the concept pictures for the large tapestries to be hung in Jean Le Viste's Grande Salle (Great Hall) in his residence at the rue du Four in the suburb of Saint-Germain-des-Pres in Paris.

Nicolas is entranced by Jean Le Viste's young daughter, Claude. But Nicolas is a womanizer and has already impregnated Marie-Celeste, a servant working at the Le Viste household. Claude also, mischievously, has eyes for Nicolas. So do most of the women he comes in contact with – both in Paris and in Brussels at the home of the weavers who are employed to turn Nicolas's painting into the tapestries.

This is a work of fiction. Little was known of these famous tapestries that now hang in the Cluny Museum in Paris. Using references and a vivid imagination, Chevalier recreates what could have occurred throughout the creation of this masterpiece – the time series of the seduction of the unicorn – drawing it next to, and closer and closer to, a lady until it rests in her lap. In fact, there is more than one lady and more than one unicorn for they are in each of the six tapestries.

The novel imagines how the concept of the unicorn and the senses originated for each tapestry: Sound (the unicorn is facing away from the lady), Taste (the unicorn is near the lady but not looking at her), Smell (the unicorn is next to the lady and looking at her), Sight (the unicorn rests its front legs on the lady's lap), Touch (the lady touches the unicorn's horn), and *A Mon Seul Desir* (My Sole Desire). The order of the series has never been conclusively determined.

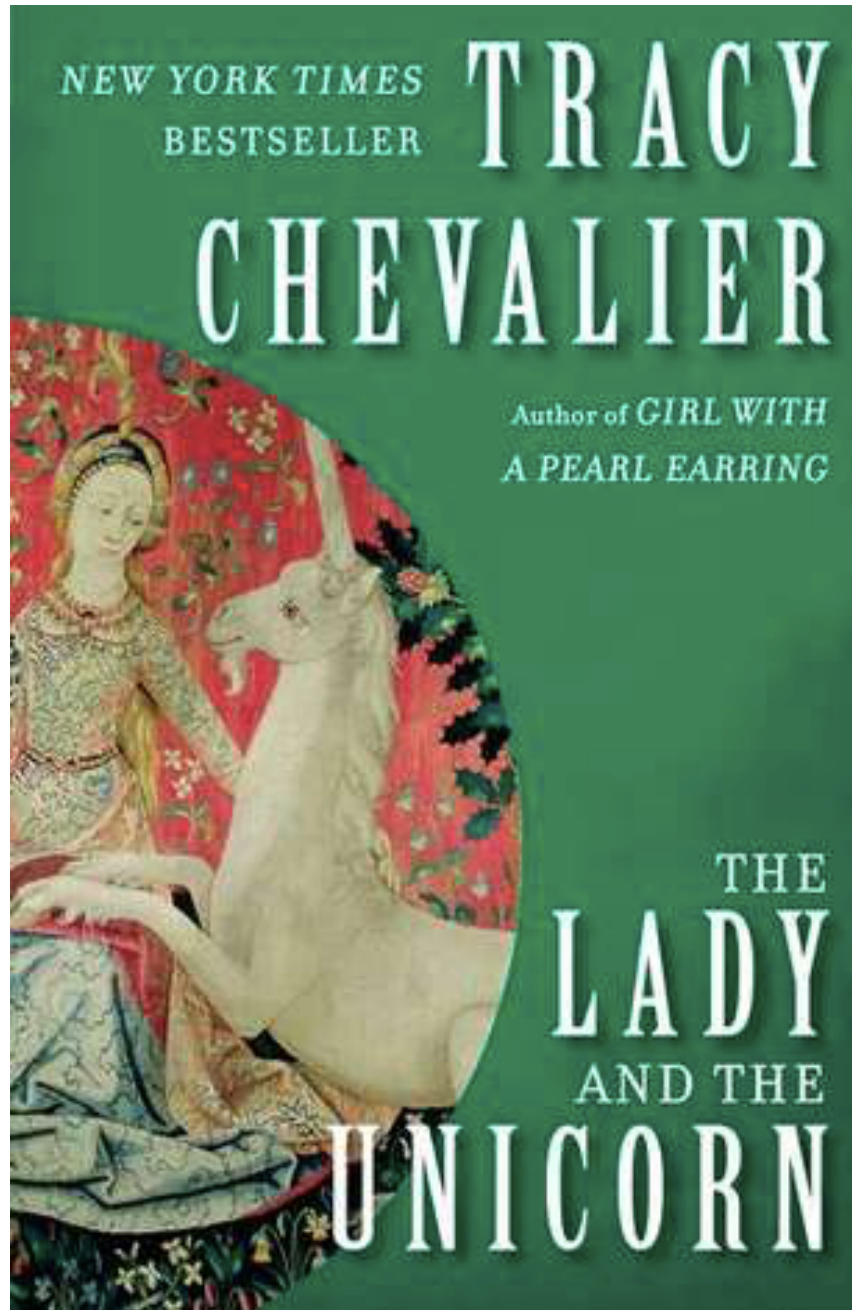
Master weaver – the *lissier* Georges de la Chapelle – has been a weaver for 30 years. With his son, Georges Le Jeune, his family and hired weavers, they work tirelessly on the task, including Le Jeune's blind daughter, Alienor, who tends a garden and is the flower advisor for the floral background. Two years of hard work has given the master weaver 'a head of gray hair, a stoop, and a squint.'

Nicolas makes subtle changes in the design to reflect the relationships he has with women during the two years – such as Claude and Alienor. So why, when it's finished and hung, does he feel that he had 'got all the Ladies wrong?' The unveiling of the tapestries is during the party celebrations for The Feast of St. Valentine – and the announcement of Claude's engagement.

The novel has multiple narrators, such as Nicolas des Innocents, Claude Le Viste, Genevieve de Nanterre (Claude's mother), Georges de la Chapelle (master weaver),

Philippe de la Tour (artist working for the weaving family), Alienor de la Chapelle, and Christine du Sablon (Georges Le Jeune's wife).

The novel is interesting for its creative assumptions, the work of a commissioned painter and designer, the life of a weaving family, and the expectations of the tapestry owner – all woven together to culminate in a series of scenes, rather than a total masterpiece.



monsieur montespan by jean teule (2008)

Monsieur Montespan (2008) is set in Paris from 1663 to 1707. In January 1663, eight aristocratic men, in four pairs, are involved in simultaneous duels with swords 'at the slightest provocation.' One is killed, six are executed for his death, and one (the Marquis de Noirmoutier) flees to Portugal. Eight days after the six are executed, the Marquis de Noirmoutier's fiancée, Françoise, marries Louis-Henri de Pardaillan de Gondrin, known as the Marquis de Montespan.

Montespan announces to Françoise that he is poor, and will borrow a lot of money to finance a battle near the city of Lorraine to fight King Louis XIV, and become a captain, which will 'rescue him from obscurity.' Françoise thinks this is a silly idea since three of his brothers have already died in battle. Montespan, nevertheless, goes off to battle, but the opposition surrenders immediately. He is horrified because he wanted a long war. With no medal, no title, and more in debt, he returns to Paris. His wife is pregnant, and she has a girl, little Marie-Christine.

Montespan looks for another battle and finds one further afield – at Gigeri on the Algerian coast. This time he returns in shame and deeper in debt. Françoise is pregnant again, and has a boy, Louis-Antoine.

Montespan hears that France and Spain are fighting in Flanders. Meanwhile, King Louis XIV – the Sun King – has fallen in love with Françoise, and keeps her in the Versailles Palace as the Queen's Lady-in-Waiting. Montespan is mortified. He loves Françoise madly. In reality – for Françoise did exist - Madame Montespan (1640-1707) becomes the most famous of the Sun King's mistresses, and bears him seven children.

And so, for the rest of the novel, Monsieur Montespan devises devious and silly ways to win his wife back, while he is looking after the two children. On one occasion, he draped his coach in black, with a pair of stag's antlers wobbling on the roof, and drove to the Palace of Versailles.

But Montespan is mocked by society. People sing songs about his losses in battle and his folly. He is ridiculed and ridiculous. Twenty-four years later, he is still trying to capture his wife's heart again. And the King has his own strategies for keeping her in the Palace.

In witty and comical twists of fate and bad fortune, the story is told in the bawdy, frolicking style of seventeenth century France. The insults are clever, the antics are ridiculous and frivolous, and the schemes of the broken-hearted Montespan are absurd and desperate. What a delightful novel! I love it!





the widow clicquot by tilar j. mazzeo

The Widow Clicquot: The Story of a Champagne Empire and the Woman Who Ruled It (2008) is an oenobiography (wine biography) about Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin Clicquot of the Reims and the Champagne region of France. A champagne empire developed in times of war, Napoleon Bonaparte, and the French Revolution. The Champagne region was (and still is) limited to 323 villages with a close-knit, but competitive, community.

Ponsardin (1777-1866) was 16-years-old when her father, a textile merchant, prospered during the peasant revolt that led to the French Revolution. At 20, she married Francois Clicquot, who was a small-time wine broker distributing the wines made by local growers. He had an idea to make champagne for the international market. It was a time when wines were sold in wooden casks – not bottles – and champagne was sweet and unpopular – in fact, Dom Perignon, a local wine maker, worked at eliminating the bubbles from wine because no-one wanted ‘wine gone wrong.’

The early life of Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin Clicquot is unclear, and Mazzeo’s text is therefore at its weakest. In the first chapters, Mazzeo uses the term ‘perhaps’ excessively because facts are limited and the author is speculating about Clicquot’s actions and feelings. Mazzeo also uses the terms ‘surely’ and ‘certainly’ as if she knew exactly what happened, but there is limited evidence.

At 27 years of age, in 1805, Clicquot’s husband died, leaving her to raise her daughter, Clementine, alone. She was known as *Le Veuve Clicquot* – the widow Clicquot. Alexandre Jerome Fourneaux partnered with her for four years, but withdrew his investment to establish his own company – Champagne Taitinger – although it was Jean Remy Moet who was their greatest competitor.

Except for the author’s brief intrusion in chapter 11 when she talks about herself, by chapter 8 the narration improves due to the availability of letters and company documents, which show the progress and challenges of Clicquot’s company as she partners with Louis Bohne, her international marketer and salesman. In 1814, Bohne writes from Russia, ‘your judicious manner of operating, your excellent wine, and the marvelous similarities of our ideas, which produced the most splendid unity and action and execution – we did it ...’ – and finally, they have a measure of success.

By 1819-1820 the story is interesting. In a few years, all the men who have influenced Clicquot’s career are dead – her husband, her brother, her father, and her father-in-law – it was the end of the Ponsardin family line. Louis Bohne died too. At the age of 64 (when the average age for a woman in France at that time was 45), Clicquot had to make decisions about her legacy. She was reluctant to leave her legacy to her daughter Clementine, because she married an unlikeable man.

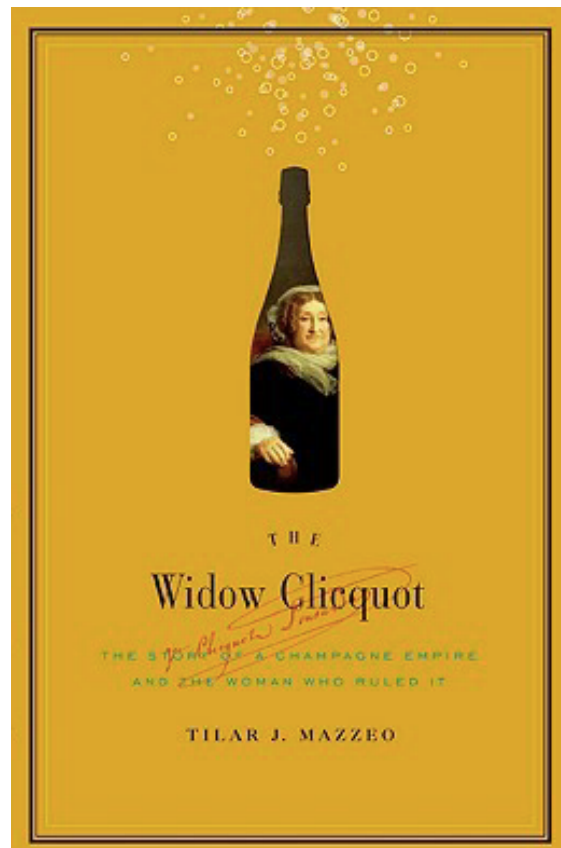
While the personal history of the Widow Clicquot is scant, Mazzeo’s best writing appears when she writes of the history of champagne and how it is made: the explosions of glass bottles, the corks that don’t fit, the boats that don’t arrive, the bad weather that spoils

the harvest, the lack of sales, the sediment that won't disgorge, the changing palettes for less sugary wine, the complaints about the size of the bubbles (the *yeux de crapard* – toad's eyes), the financial difficulties, and the many times she was 'alone and on the brink of ruin.'

What the French Revolution taught Clicquot was that anyone could be anything. This is the story of her determination, persistence, experimentation, forward thinking, inventive marketing, and ingenuity.

The distinctive yellow label came much later. Throughout her life, the Widow Clicquot lived and dreamed champagne – 'Le vin, c'est moi' – the wine, it's me! She lived a long, active life, dying at the age of 89 – outliving her daughter and two great grandchildren.

The hard-cover book is well presented with the iconic colours of Le Veuve Clicquot. It can't be called a true non-fiction biography because the facts are sparse and there is much speculation, and it can't be called fiction in the style of Tracy Chevalier's *The Lady and the Unicorn*, but there is enough about the birth of a champagne empire to be entertaining and quite fascinating.



eat him if you like by jean teule (2009)

Eat Him If You Like (2009) is set in rural France in the Dordogne region on 16 August 1870. It is based on a real event in history during the Franco-Prussian war.

Nobleman Alain de Moneys is almost 30 years old, but still living with his parents on their estate. On this hot August, day he wants to go to the fair, three days before he will fight in the war, even though the medical board exempted him from battle due to his limp leg and weak constitution.

He travels on horse for the two miles to the village Saint-Roch (population 45) near Hautefaye, where there is a bustling crowd of 600 to 700 people.

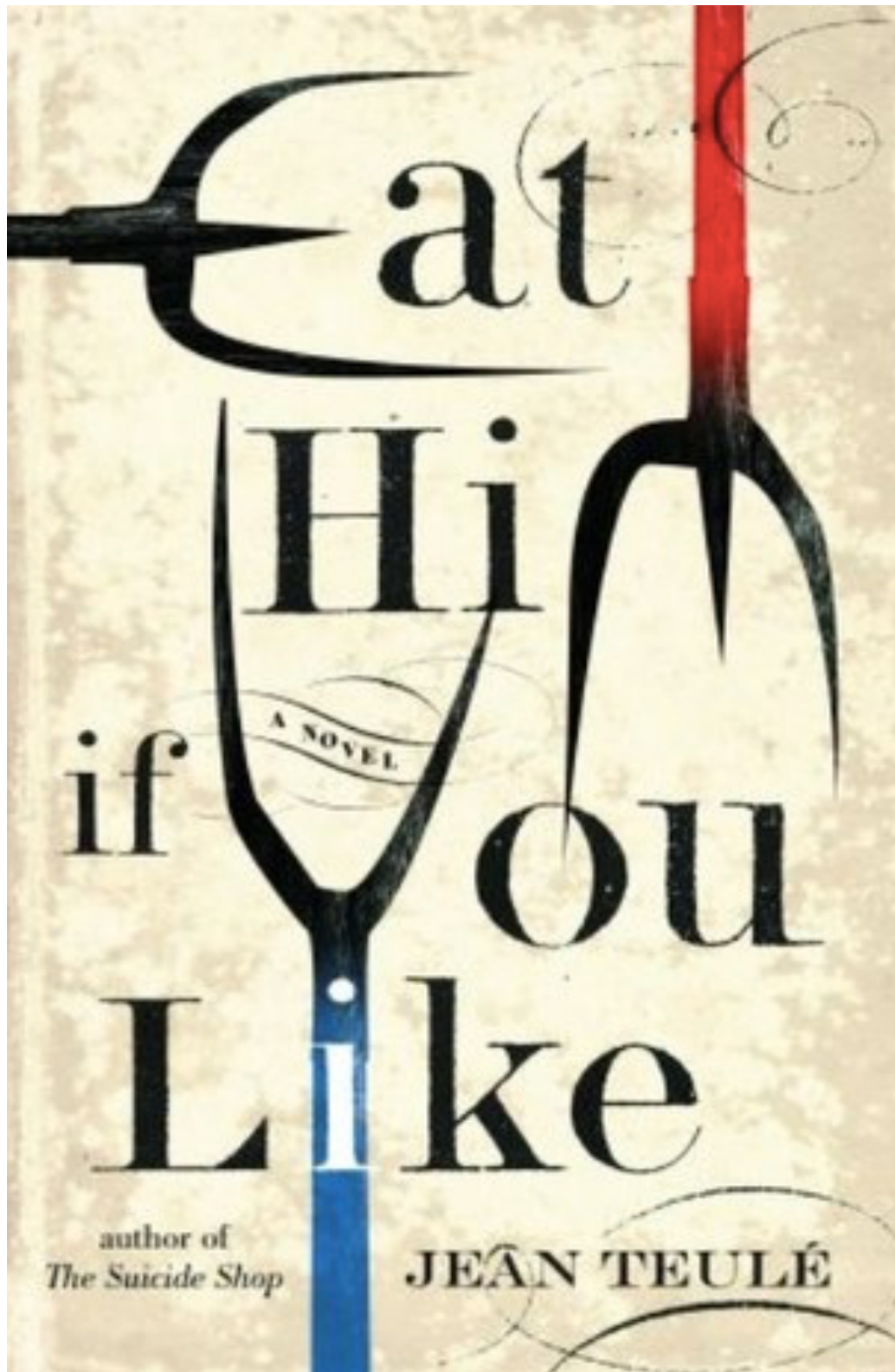
A mis-heard conversation is exaggerated, blown out of all proportion, and travelling fast. It stemmed from an argument about the war, when the phrase ‘Down with France!’ incites anger. There is a traitor, a Prussian, an enemy in their midst. A one-hundred person mob goes berserk. Friends become enemies, and strangers support strangers, in an irrational scene of mayhem in a community of farmers, traders, and noblemen.

The intensity of the anger only wanes during brief diversions – one by Father Saint-Pasteur who shouts that his home-made wine is free in order to dispel the crowd. And another by 23-year-old Anna Mondout, one of the few people in the village who wanted to learn to read.

The result is barbaric. The police arrive, but there are only twenty-one detention cells in Perigueux prison. But who were the main perpetrators? The verdict is announced on 13 December, three months after Napoleon III surrendered and France was declared a republic. The local government wants more than a verdict and a sentence – it wants to forget the whole incident. And it has an idea how to erase the brutality of that day from the history books forever.

The 112-page novella manages to detail senseless savagery and its aftermath. Quite astoundingly written, and accompanied by a small, simple map at the start of each chapter to show the extent of the murderous melee. Each sentence cuts deep into the psyche of herd mentality to depict the marauding mob, where a few good people are not enough to mitigate the carnage.





napoleon ceo by alan axelrod (2011)

Napoleon CEO: 6 Principles to Guide and Inspire Modern Leaders (2011) is one of a series, including *Winston Churchill CEO* and *Gandhi CEO*. Categorized under Business Books, it focuses on six principles of Napoleon's war-time successes: (1) audacity and character, (2) vision and strategy, (3) knowledge and preparation, (4) tactics and execution, (5) motivation and communication, and (6) Napoleonic Synergy, after an introduction called *The Life of a Necessary Man*.

Known to have a photographic memory, an attention to detail, and a genius for mathematics, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) was the second child of eight children and 'the product of a strong mother, who was in equal parts, formidable and loving.'

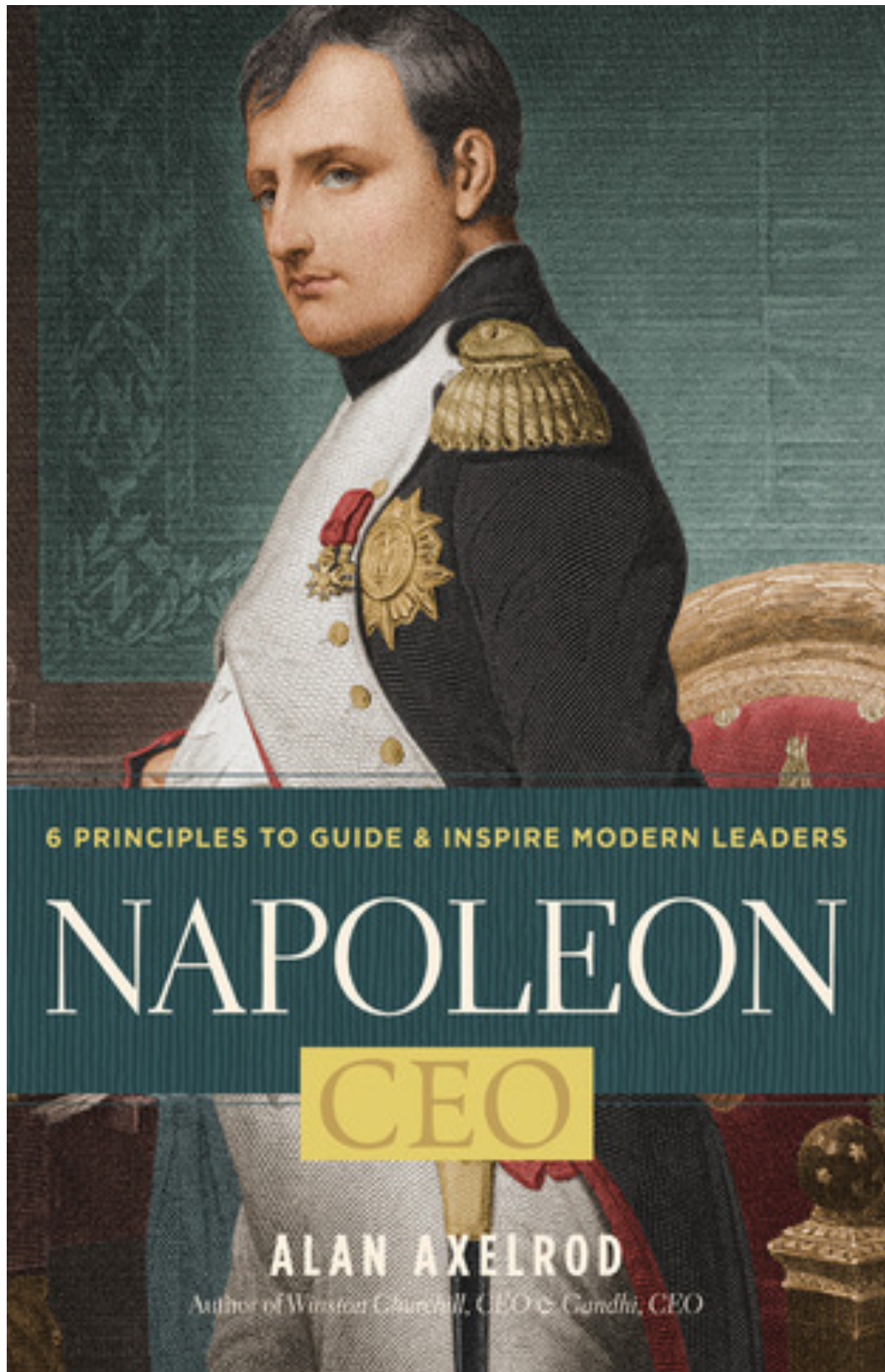
He rose to prominence during the French Revolution as a military leader. 'Napoleon was alternately condemned as a tyrant and oppressor and hailed as a reformer and liberator. Both assessments have claims on validity,' says the author. Axelrod turns Napoleon's perceived negative personality traits and actions into positive ones. He also explodes some myths. For example, the myth that Napoleon was short and had an inferiority complex that spearheaded his decisions on the battlefield is debunked. Napoleon was 5'6" when the average French man was 5'4." Axelrod documents many arguments that show Napoleon's strength of character and his 'tactical mastery, charismatic command presence, and great personal courage.'

Readers become familiar with his victories and his defeats, and the lessons he learned from both, through his personal letters and published works, and the views of other political and military leaders of his time. In his letters and works, Napoleon writes of his strategies, methods, principles, and tactics on why he won and why he lost – not accusing others, but by honestly assessing his own strengths and weaknesses.

Although Napoleon's tactics weren't innovative, Axelrod says what was unprecedented was his 'skill, speed, ferocity, and tenacity with which he executed his attacks.' Moreover, he was a reformer. Under his leadership, the government subsidized education, promoted the sciences, introduced a program of public works (such as sewerage and a road network) and established a Civil Code – known as the Napoleonic Code.

Axelrod documents 156 clearly defined 'lessons' that readers can learn from Napoleon. Each lesson is short with a standardized format: (1) lesson number, (2) title encapsulating the lesson, (3) a quote, usually from Napoleon, (4) the lesson on the battlefield from Napoleon's perspective, and (5) the lesson for modern day corporate leaders. The lessons are practical and applicable, not just for Chief Executive Officers of corporations, but also for anyone managing a business, working as a manager or supervisor, or managing one's own life.





the paris wife by paula mcclain (2011)

The Paris Wife (2011) is about Hadley Richardson, the first wife of American author, Ernest Hemingway. Written in the first person — as if by Hadley's own hand — the author wrote the novel 'as accurately as possible' because 'the true story of the Hemingway's marriage is so dramatic and compelling, and has been so beautifully treated by Ernest Hemingway himself, in *A Moveable Feast*, that my intention became to push deeper into the emotional lives of the characters and bring new insights to historical events, while staying faithful to the facts.'

At 18 years old, during the First World War, Hemingway was wounded in the legs when he was stationed at Fossalta in Italy. Elizabeth Hadley Richardson met Hemingway in Oaks Park near Chicago, after the war in 1920, when Ernest was 21 and she was 28. A year later they married.

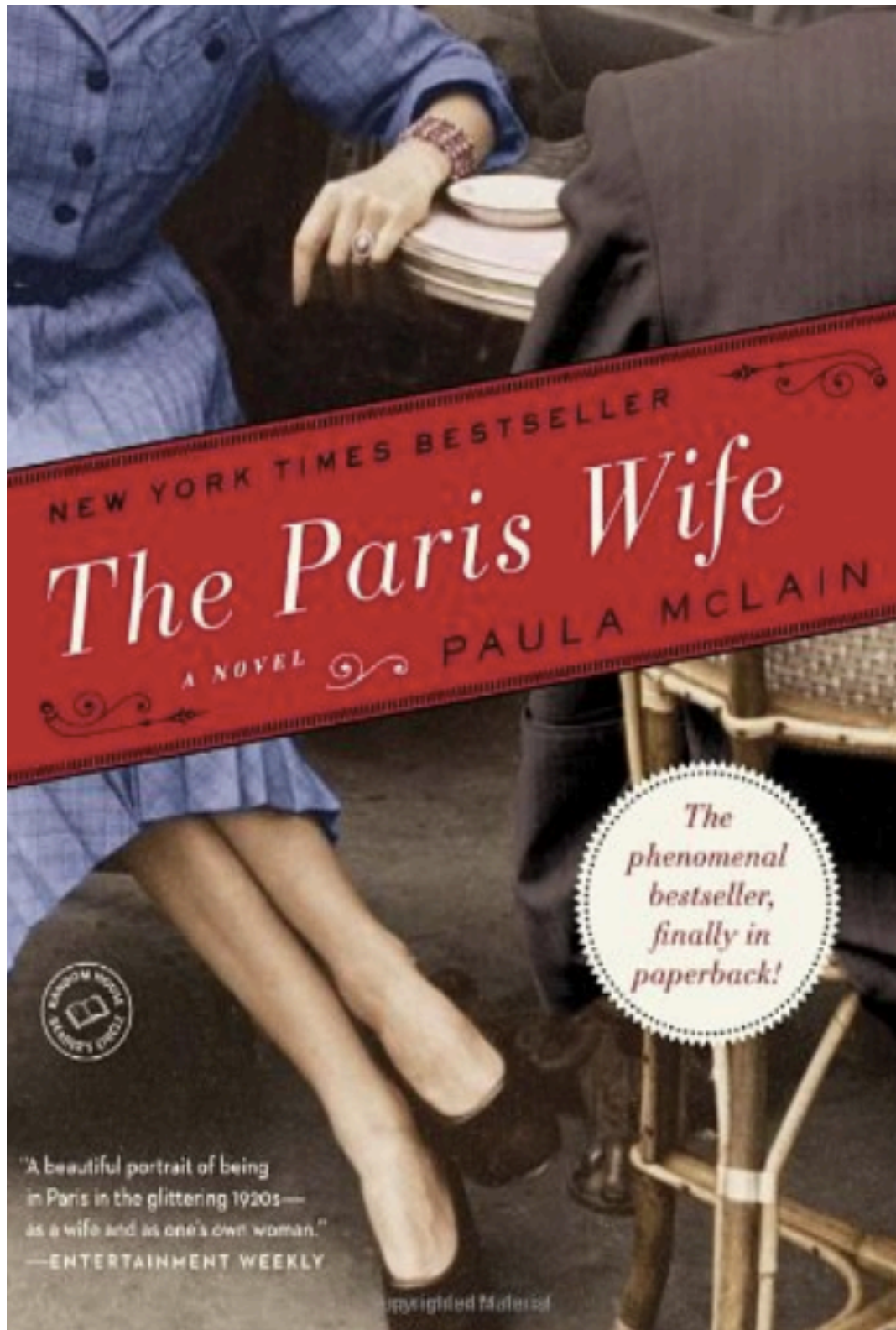
Planning on returning to Italy when he had money, Hemingway was talked into going to Paris. When Hadley inherited money from her uncle, they did. 'If you want to do any serious work, Paris is the place to be. That's where the real writers are now,' he was told. Yearning to be a serious writer, Hemingway took his new bride to live in Paris where the American intellectuals were — such as Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Sylvia Beach. They set sail on December 8, 1921, leaving Prohibition America behind. The novel is the Paris years—with Hadley known as 'the Paris wife' and the first of four wives in Hemingway's life.

While Hadley cooked and cleaned, her husband rented another room to write without distraction. Virtually alone, Hadley's persona writes: 'If all the women in Paris were peacocks, I was a garden-variety hen.' They head to Toronto for four months so that Hadley can give birth to their first son, John Hadley Hemingway, known as Bumby.

Returning to Paris in January 1924, family life was 'very much at odds with bohemian Paris.' Their new rental apartment on rue Notre-Dame-de-Champs, near the Luxembourg Gardens, and a stone's throw from the best cafes on the Boulevard Montparnasse, had 'no hot water, no bathtub, no electric lighting.' Before their fifth wedding anniversary, Hemingway began an affair with Pauline (Pfife) Pfeiffer, a wealthy American working for Vogue magazine in Paris. It was the beginning of the end for Hadley, just as Hemingway's star was rising.

From Hadley's point of view, the novel touches on Hemingway's well-documented charm, but it also focuses on his vulnerabilities and insecurities. It is, in essence, about Hadley's conjectured thoughts, reactions, and responses to Hemingway's ambition, writing routine, bouts of drinking, holidaying, reporting assignments, times with money, and—most often—times without.





dreaming in french by alice kaplan (2012)

Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis (2012) is the triple memoir of three iconic American women during their one year as a student in Paris – all in their 20s, before they knew their career pathways, before they became public figures. In Paris, they were young and virtually unknown – they could be themselves.

The years span 1949-1964. The college years are spent with a large group of other college girls, under the supervision of the host college and host families, or on their own initiative – but in different times in French history and with different social norms.

Kaplan begins with Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy's 1949-1950 junior college year in Paris and Grenoble. Susan Sontag was in Paris in 1957-1958, and Angela Davis from 1963-1964: 'If you reduce them to identity labels, they are the soul of diversity: a Catholic debutante (with upper-class connections), a Jewish intellectual (with European opinions), an African-American revolutionary (with a sense of justice and fearlessness), from the East Coast, the West Coast, and the South.'

For 20-year-old Jackie Bouvier (1929-1994), Paris was physically challenging (the wretched toilets and lack of toilet paper), but culturally rich. After the war years, and with little communication with family back in America (letters were sent by ship), she could read French literature, expand her knowledge of art history, attend the theatre, go to nightclubs, set her own rituals, and begin to explore romance. What aspects of Paris would influence her when she married John F Kennedy in 1953 – and became First Lady in 1961?

For 24-year-old Susan Sontag (1933-2004) on a university fellowship, Paris was cheap hotels and smokey cafes, as she left her husband and five-year-old son behind. In the time of France's crisis during Algeria's struggle for independence, and an explosion of cinemas, she could explore her own sexual freedom and discovery, and attend Simone de Beauvoir's lectures. What inspirations does Sontag include in her writing, films, and political activism post-Paris?

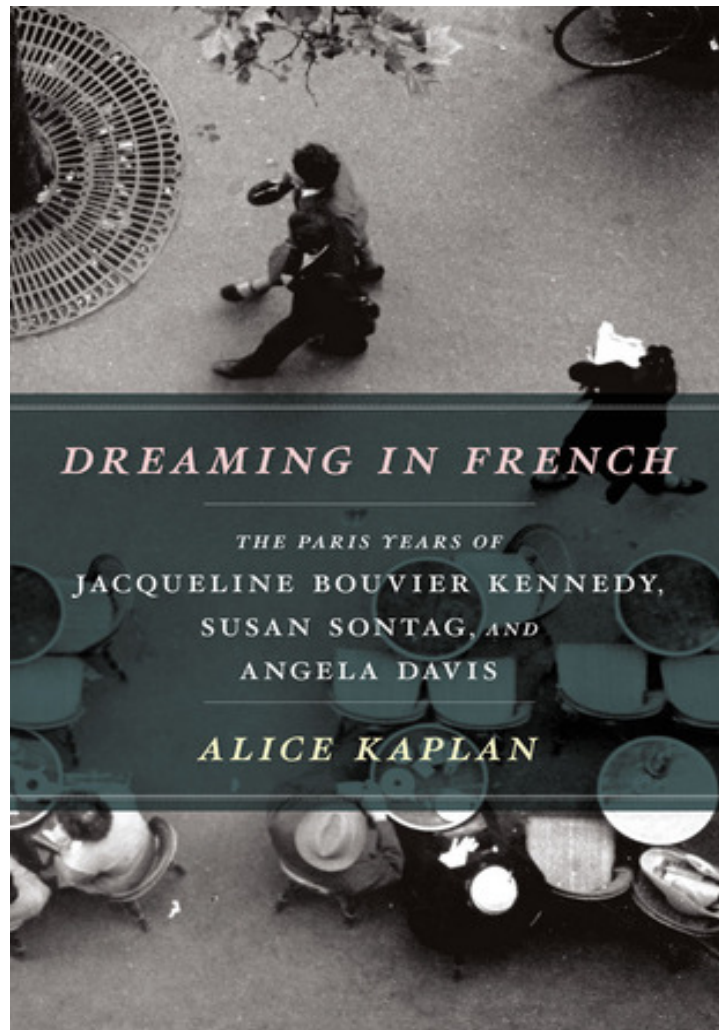
Nineteen-year-old Angela Davis (1944-), with two other students staying with a host family in Paris, sought intellectual sophistication after 'lifelong exclusion from civil society' in her hometown of Alabama. It was the time of racial diversity in Paris with the arrival of workers from Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania – and many other immigrants. It was also the politically-charged 1960s and the assassination of President John F Kennedy. How does her year in Paris affect her view of civil rights as she rises to prominence in counterculture activism and becomes the leader of the Black Panther Party?

Kaplan focuses on how the college year transformed the lives of Jacqueline Kennedy,

Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis. From the single year in Paris, the City of Light, to their lives back in America – Kaplan continues post-Paris to describe the city's influence on the rest of their lives, hopes and ambitions: intellectually, socially, culturally, politically, and independently.

Does Kaplan draw a tenuous line from Paris to post-Paris? Did one year in Paris when in their 20s really change 'their relationship to their bodies, to their words?'

What is known is their ongoing relationship with France, to the arts, and to 'liberty, equality, fraternity.' They were loyal to Paris, and Paris remained loyal to them. Readers can draw their own conclusions through Kaplan's final chapter in this excellent, thought-provoking and unique biography.



the president's hat by antoine laurain (2012)

The President's Hat (2012) begins in Paris in November 1986.

Accountant Daniel Mercier is at the train station to greet his wife and son who have been on holiday in Normandy. Mercier is wearing President Francois Mitterand's black felt Homburg hat. The day before he was at a restaurant when the president sat at the table next to him. When the president left, he had forgotten his hat. Instead of trying to return it, Mercier stole it.

The hat turns the quiet Mercier into a more confident man. Even his work colleagues notice his 'calm demeanour, air of assurance, the extraordinary way he had of saying the unpalatable with the utmost tact ... true class!' Wearing the hat, touching the hat, and even having it close to him gives him a feeling of authority and 'immunity to the torments of everyday life.' It sharpened his mind and gave him the ability to make important decisions.

But one day he leaves it on the train. Fanny Marquant, a secretary in a regional tax office, boards the train. She is on her way to Paris for her regular meeting with a married man. It is raining and she sees the hat. Inside the hat are the initials F.M. – her initials. She wears it with her demin mini-skirt, high heels, and silver jacket. Wearing the hat made her feel powerful with an air of distinction.

Grey-bearded 52-year-old perfumier Pierre Aslan sees a black felt hat on a park bench. He is on his way to see his psychotherapist for his depression. The smell of the hat is familiar – one scent is a man's aftershave and the other is a woman's perfume: the perfume he created eight years ago.

Bernard Lavalliere is at a restaurant with his friends, where they argue about Francois Mitterand and politics. The cloakroom attendant gives him the wrong hat. If it weren't for the hat he would never have spoken to his neighbour and accepted an invitation to an art gallery. But one morning as he is buying his daily newspaper the hat is stolen right off his head.

Each story links the characters together through the hat. And each person feels like a changed person, just by wearing this hat. 'It had the power of destiny' and each person's destiny is changed – for the better.

Laurain's writing is easily readable and wholly engaging, painting a picture of each character's life and lifestyle as they undergo personal transformations that impact their fate and fortune. The narrative dips in the middle as Daniel Mercier continues to find the – *his* – lost hat. But the beginning and the ending are solid and enjoyable. Overall, it's a wonderful novel about the sequence of decisions and actions that lead to important events in people's lives.

an englishman abroad by charles timoney (2013)

An Englishman Abroad – Discovering France in a Rowing Boat (2013) is set along the Seine river, from the source to the sea. This is the author's third travelogue – living in France for more than 20 years. Charles took six months to build a 7-foot rowing boat from a kit, with a sudden plan to travel along the Seine in a variety of river transport, with stops and starts throughout the year, taking in the sights, museums, and the French cuisine.

The book is written in three parts, representing the three parts of the Seine: (1) source to Paris, (2) the Paris area, and (3) Paris to sea. The Seine is 'very bendy' and 776 kilometres (470 miles) long – twice the length of The Thames in Britain.

His French wife, Ines, accompanies him on his journey. He begins in his rowing boat from Burgundy on the plateau de Langres (the source of Le Petit Seine). His rowing boat is classified as a *menues embarcations* – a very small craft – which is banned on Parisian waters, so in Paris he begins with a shuttle-boat from Maisons-Alfort to Parc de Bercy, a catamaran, and a Batobus (boat-bus). He gets back into his rowing boat from Bougival 'shaken, but not stirred' by passing barges.

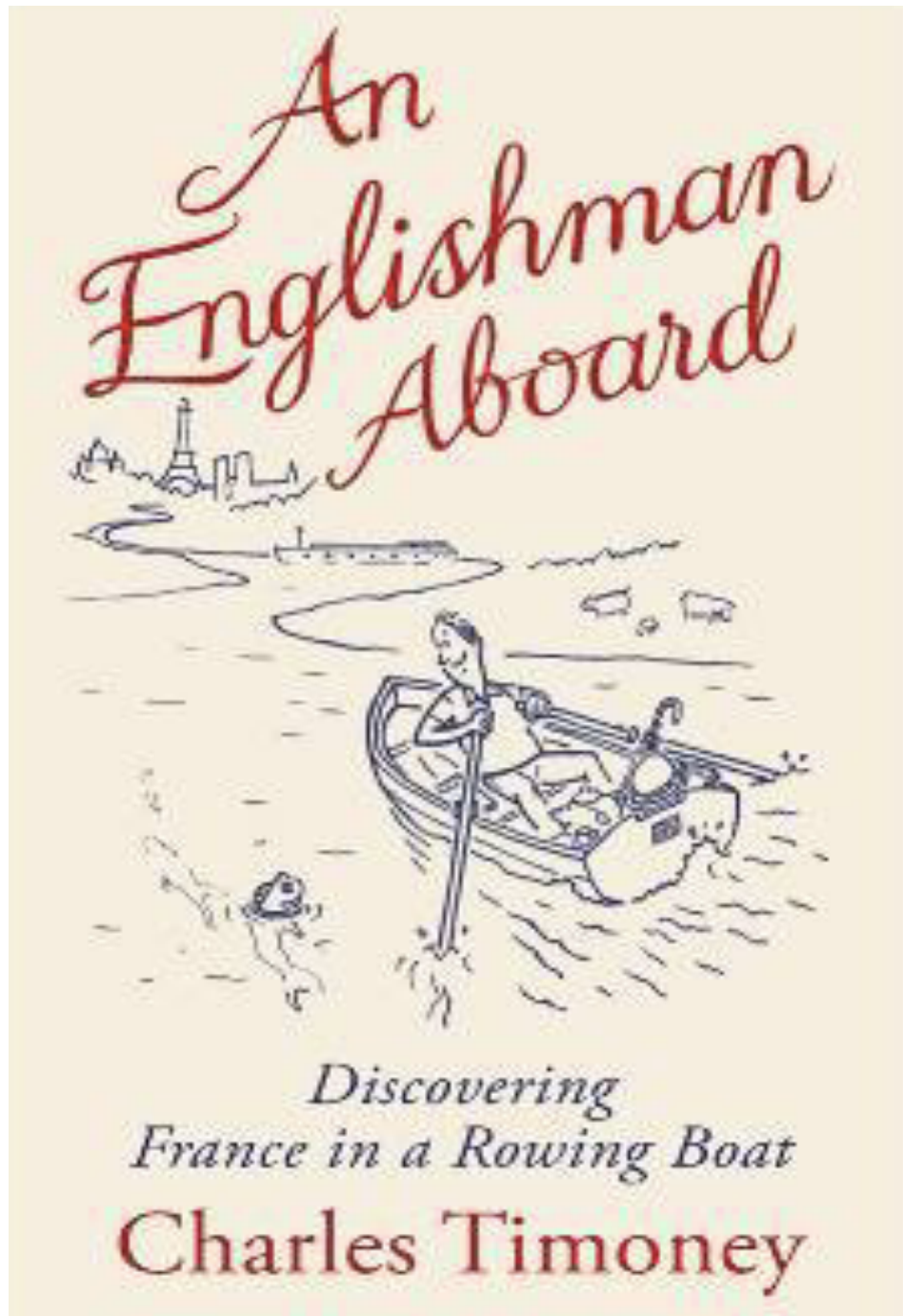
On the third leg to the sea he travels on Serge's barge, Dimitri's small cruiser with a 'whopping great outboard motor on the back', Christophe's 1963 amphicar (that looks like a convertible with propellers), Dominique's large cabin cruiser, Jean-Francois' sailing boat, then a *bac* (river ferry). For the last part he rows to the seaside city (and UNESCO World Heritage Site) of Le Havre and Le Pont de Normandie – the 257th and final bridge over the river Seine.

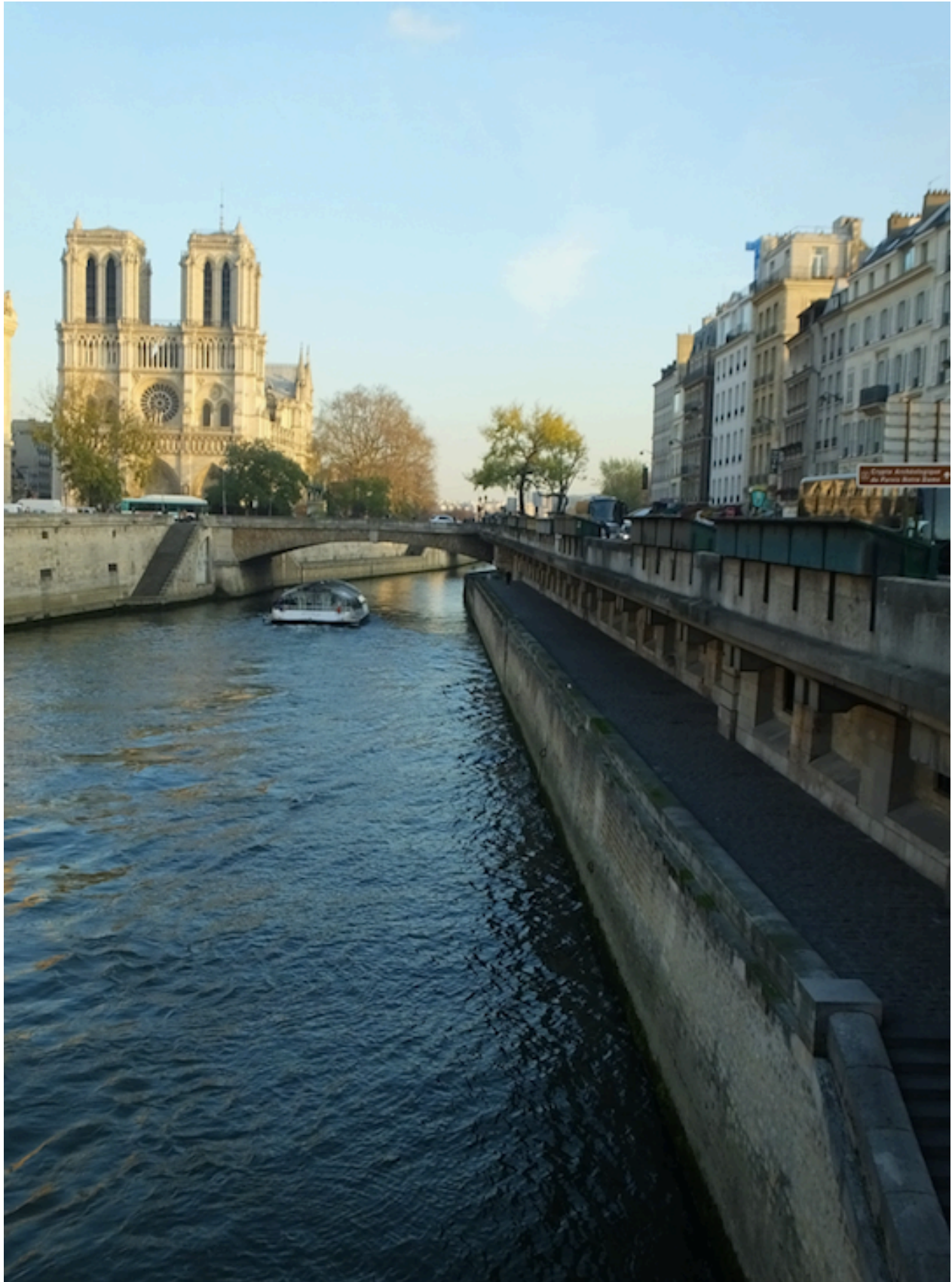
I think the title is long and misleading. It is not about discovering France, but about discovering the Seine – a very small part of France. And it is not in a rowing boat, but in any seaworthy vessel he can find. Perhaps the title of the book should be Discovering the Seine by Boat.

It is not an arduous adventure – it is more like a Sunday frolic in a row boat, interspersed with standing on a boat watching the scenery. The most interesting part is Part 3, from Paris to Le Havre, even though there is minimal rowing. Most of the rowing is in Part 1, from source to almost Paris. The Paris section is disappointing for there is nothing new nor interesting. Neither is it remarkable literature – it is a random set of news and views on what he sees, eats, does, and meets along the way. Like the Seine, the book can be long and rambling, but I think the river is more interesting.

Nevertheless, for Francophiles and Timoney fans, there is some worthwhile reading. Readers learn about the confluence of the Aube river and the Seine, river vocabulary, the river level, the coypu (a beaver-like creature), French cider, the Bayeux Tapestry, and '*dragees*' (sugared almonds). Along the way readers learn about Sequana – the Roman

goddess of the Seine (from the word 'squan' meaning serpentine) – smelly Epoisses cheese, how to choose Champagne, the difference between 'égorger' and 'degorgier' and why English children only ever read books about rivers.





paris reborn by stephane kirkland (2013)

Paris Reborn: Napoleon III, Baron Haussmann, and the Quest to Build a Modern City (2013) is the remarkable history of the reconstruction of the city of Paris in a mere 22 years – 1848-1870 – during the Second Empire from the tiny *Île de la Cité* (where the Notre-Dame cathedral is situated) to the city we know today, within the confines of the Periphery.

Kirkland commences in 1749 in Versailles, the ‘jewel in the crown of the Kingdom of France’ 10 miles southwest of Paris. He shifts to the Pereire brothers in 1837 to discuss the rail system. Paris has major problems with sewerage, drinking water, lighting, crime, public transport, unpaved streets, and a growing population.

But it is from 1848 where the real story begins. Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, 40 years of age, enters Paris after 33 years in exile, with a vision – to become a politician with the power to rebuild Paris into a modern city. He has a plan: a coloured map he created to visualize his dreams. In the next four years implementation is frustratingly slow.

The turning point is 1853. Napoleon becomes emperor and he appoints the ‘true Parisian’ Georges-Eugene Haussmann to be the Prefect of the Seine – the town planner.

The first task is to modernize Paris in readiness for the 1855 Paris Universal Exposition, similar to the 1851 Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in London. The *grands travaux* – grand works – commence with the Right Bank and the construction of the Les Halles, the continuation of the rue de Rivoli, and an east-west route through Paris, linking grand, wide boulevards to the railways.

Kirkland’s description of Queen Victoria’s successful visit to the Paris Universal Exposition from 18-27 August, 1855, is delightful – marking it as a critical moment in the history of Paris for it ‘asserted that the city was now a center of modernity and sophistication.’ But it was also the start of mass tourism. The city registered half a million stays, with 128,000 foreigners, and more than 4 million travelers on Paris trains that year.

The Left Bank was next – with the construction of a north-south link – the Boulevard Saint-Michel, as well as further work on the Right Bank and central Paris, such as the construction of the *Académie Impériale de Musique* (the *Opéra de Paris* – or Opéra Garnier, after its designer Charles Garnier) and the restoration of the Notre-Dame cathedral.

In 22 years the pair – Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann – established 85 miles of new paved roads and elevated sidewalks, more than 17,000 gas street lamps, the planting of 46,000 trees on the avenues, and the construction of 100,000 new apartment buildings (known as the Haussmann style, although Haussman ‘played no part in its conception’ –

strong horizontal lines of the balconies and cornices). Other housing constructions occurred too, and these were greatly regulated to ensure 'harmony' with the rest of the street. However 27,000 buildings were knocked down and 117,553 families representing 350,000 people were relocated. The cost of expropriation was high.

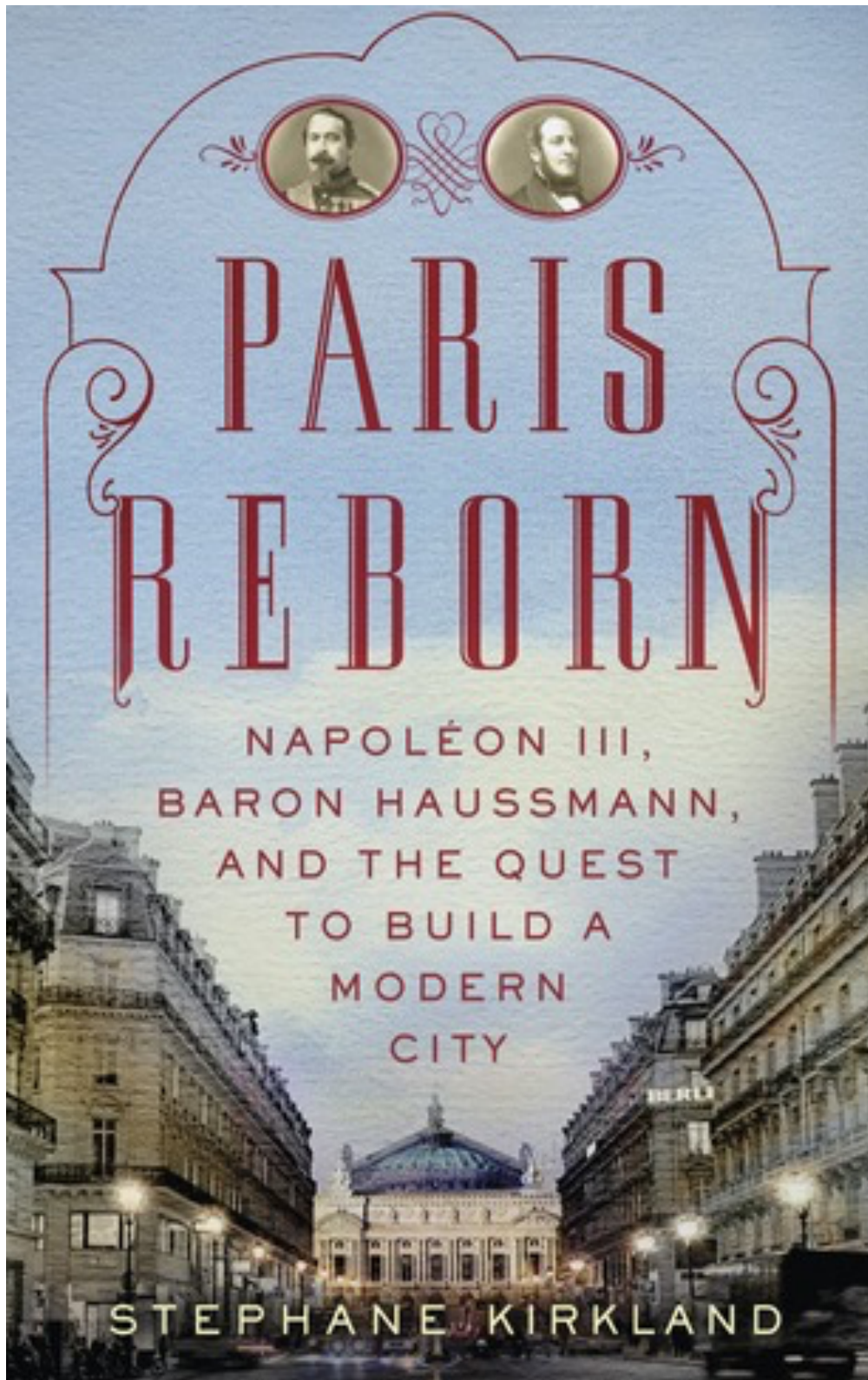
Villages such as Montmartre (population 33,000) become subsumed into Paris through annexation laws, immediately increasing the population of the city to 1.5 million.

Then Haussmann wanted to take part of the Jardin du Luxembourg (the Luxembourg Garden). In March 1866 a petition of 12,000 residents opposed the move, shouting 'Sack Haussmann.' This was the beginning of the fall. 'Haussmann was controversial and, at times, a political liability to the emperor, but he was diabolically effective ... a remarkable administrator.' Kirkland adds, 'Haussmann has everything in large: qualities as well as faults.' He was also fiscally irreprehensible. His budget blew out from 180 million francs to 410 million. The total cost of the reconstruction in 22 years was 2.5 billion francs, with roadworks alone accounting for half the amount.

Haussmann was sacked in 1870. Napoleon III died in 1873. It was the end of an era. That era is remembered as the Haussmann era, but in reality it was the emperor's vision and Paris should be remembered as 'the Paris of Napoleon III'. Haussmann was the executor. Haussmann was the right man at the right time.

The reconstruction of Paris was not a democratic, consensual project. Its implementation was despotic, socially regressive, financially irresponsible, and controversial. But it was also swift, radical, amazingly bold, audacious, immense, sophisticated, elegant, harmonized in its uniformity and order, and visionary. The Paris of the Second Empire has also proved to be long lasting and long loved.





in montmartre: picasso, matisse and modernism in paris by sue roe (2014)

In *Montmartre: Picasso, Matisse and Modernism in Paris, 1900-1910* (2014) is an account of the beginnings of the cultural revolution in France – not in the 1920s but earlier, among the cafes and cabarets of rural Montmartre. Montmartre was not a suburb of Paris then; it was its own community of windmilled vineyards and farms, with emerging cafes and nightclubs, such as the Moulin Rouge in an artificial windmill.

The book is in four parts: (1) The World Fair and Arrivals, (2) The Rose Period, (3) Carvings, Private Lives, 'Wives' and (4) Street Life. It primarily focuses on Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, but it also includes Rainer Maria Rilke, Georges Braque, Andre Derain, Amedeo Modigliani, Henri Rousseau, Gertrude Stein, Alice B Toklas, and Maurice de Vlaminck in a fusion of painting, writing, textiles, music, fashion, and dance.

The Society for Independent Artists had been established in 1884 with many exhibitions in Paris; and the annual art exhibition, Autumn Salon, commenced in 1903.

When Picasso arrived in Paris in October 1900 from Barcelona at the age of 19, Matisse, aged 30, had already been there for 10 years, and poet Rainer Maria Rilke had already spent two years writing a monograph on sculptor Auguste Rodin. Van Dongen had been in Paris for three years as an illustrator for a satirical magazine, and Paul Poiret would change the course of fashion design. Paul Cezanne, at 50, was still in Paris, with writer Emile Zola. Gertrude Stein was writing a novel, arriving in 1903, and there is a chapter on Stein with Picasso in 1905-1907. Not all were successful – they were mostly starving artists.

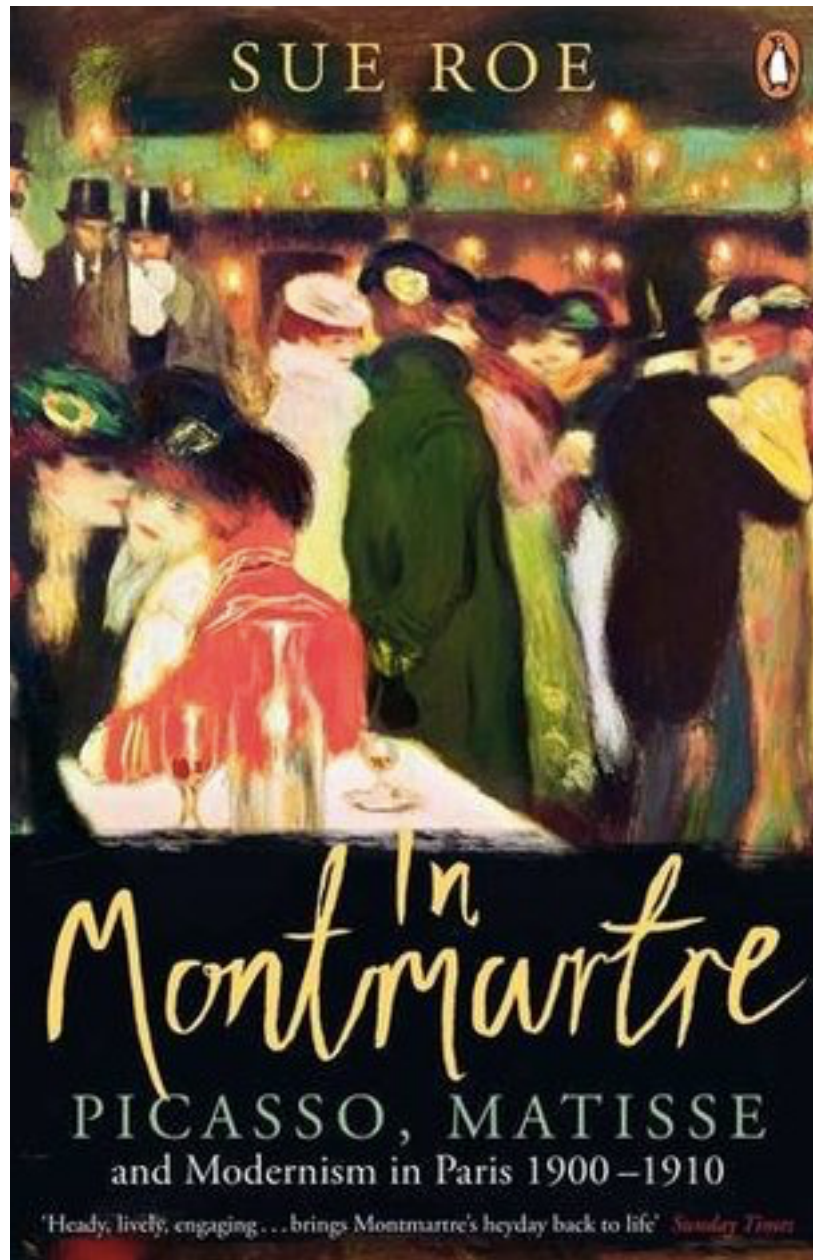
Roe describes Picasso's Paris apartment and his early paintings and muses. She describes the opinions, views, and influences of the creatives in the region – where they went, what they saw, where they lived, and what they painted or sculpted or wrote. In Paris, the City of Light, it is the light that stirs the creative imagination of the artists. And 'la joie de vivre' – the Joy of Life – everyday people doing everyday things.

There are references to the political and economic situation in Paris – and across Europe – and their effects on the artists. By 1907, cinemas were popular in the French capital, bringing jobs in production, photography and art, stage sets and designs, posters and advertisements, as well as entertainment. Russian ballet was a great source of inspiration in 1909 and 1910 with Vaslav Nijinsky, but moreso with set designer Leon Bakst.

'Foreigners would come, go or stay; and through it all France would remain herself ... they lived as they pleased, painting, writing or dancing, for what the French really respected were art and letters.'

Roe concludes in 1911 with the opening of the Café Rotunde in Montparnasse, 'marking the definitive removal of artistic café life from Montmartre to Montparnasse.'

This is an interesting comprehensive examination of culture, art and artists, and the economy in which they lived, in the first ten years of the 20th century, from 1900 to 1910. In an easy-to-read style, and well-structured, it is amazing who was in Paris, and the closeness of the artistic community. It's an enjoyable read.



flaneuse by lauren elkin (2015)

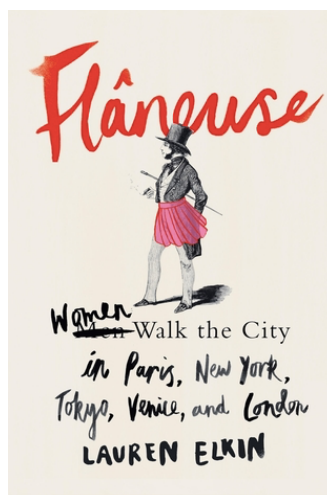
Flaneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London (2015) is set on the streets of well-known global cities.

What is a flaneuse? A flaneuse is a female ‘idler, a dawdling observer, usually found in cities.’ The author is the flaneuse – as she walks the streets of cities, observing, dawdling, enjoying, being, and occasionally getting lost, although it doesn’t matter how lost she is because she is always somewhere. It all adds to her imagination, inspiration, and creativity. A flaneuse is not walking aimlessly. She is taking a cultural walk, exploring streets, paths, lanes, and alleyways: ‘I walk because it confers – or restores – a feeling of *placeness* ... I walk because, somehow, it’s like reading.’

The author begins in Paris from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s, to New York in the 1970s, and back to Paris in 1999 with the books of Jean Rhys. In London, the author is attending a conference, and walks the streets of Virginia Woolf’s Bloomsbury days.

As the author walks the streets, she places herself in the shoes of previous female walkers – famous and celebrated female walkers – George Sand, Martha Gellhorn, and Sophie Calle, to mention a few. Virginia Wolf, in 1927, didn’t call it flaneusing or street walking – she called it ‘street haunting.’ Elkin writes of revolution, the Occupy Movement, obedience, disobedience, observation, fitting in, and being a fish out of water. She writes of curiosity and commitment to a place, independence, inspiration, and insight. But she writes mainly of Paris.

The author focuses on the feminine flaneuse. She criss-crosses cities – going somewhere and coming back again ‘for these roads are not straight, but have several revolutions’. It is not orderly and not chronological. Readers can dip in and out of the narrative, and take what they want from this rambling travel memoir.



shocking paris by stanley meisler (2015)

Shocking Paris: Soutine, Chagall and the Outsiders of Montparnasse (2015) is about the foreign-born immigrant painters in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. 'Most came from the Russian empire, almost all were Jewish, and they made an impact on the history of art before most Parisians realized they were there.' These include Amedeo Modigliani, Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine, and Jules Pascin. The area was Montparnasse in Paris.

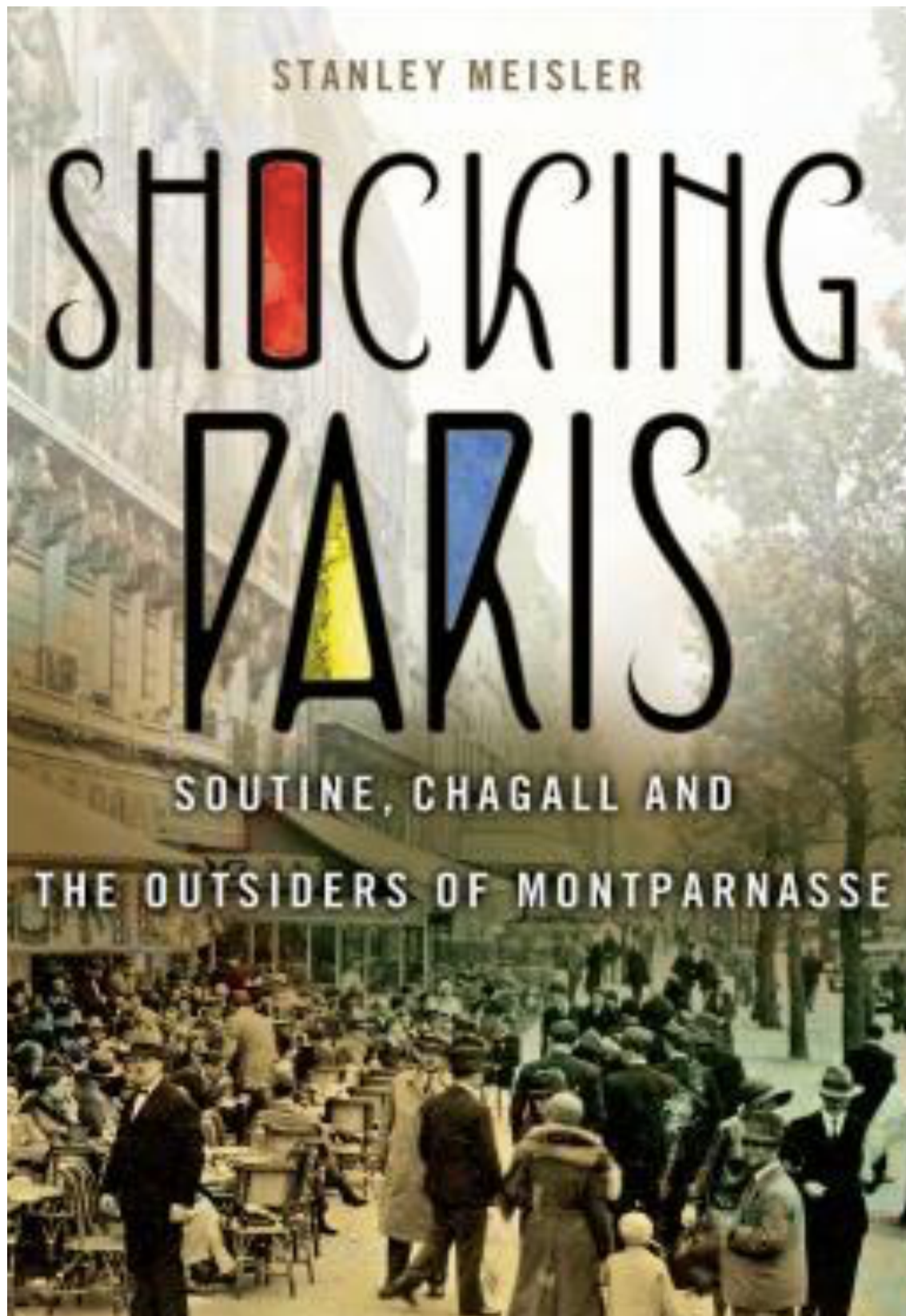
Meisler begins with Soutine (1893-1943), the tenth of eleven children, who moved to Paris in 1913 in extreme poverty, but was regarded as the most talented of foreign artists of the time. Then Soutine's close friend Italian-born Modigliani (1884-1920), who died at the age of 35 – and whose painting *Nude Sitting on a Divan* (1917) sold at auction on 14 May 2018 for \$157 million – arrived in Paris.

Not much is known about Soutine, because he was so secretive – even his partner of three-years, Gerda Groth, had not seen his work. Although Marie-Berthe Aurenche who moved into Soutine's apartment in 1940 did see his work, she thought his portrait of her was ugly. Chagall, on the other hand, was more outgoing. Chagall (1887-1985) had written his own memoir at the age of 35 and was a prolific letter-writer.

Meisler also writes of the impact of World War I and World War II, which affected the lives of the French, and the foreign artists. Continually nervous and in fear of the German Gestapo, and the French police, took a toll on Soutine's health, already an intense painter with bouts of depression. After the war, the tight community of foreign artists disbanded and were not a large presence in Paris again.

While the author sub-titles the book 'Soutine, Chagall and the Outsiders of Montparnasse' there is a heavy concentration on Chaim Soutine, even though Marc Chagnall lived for another 40 years. The author has 'ties' to Soutine, although is not related. Nevertheless, the book brings to light the lives of the three greats of the time – Soutine, Modigliani, and Chagall – particularly the short lives of the first two, and their influences and muses, set before and during the Second World War. It's interesting.





van gogh – a seething power by julian bell (2015)

Van Gogh: A Seething Power (2015) is a biography of artist Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) based on the artist's letters to his brother Theo and others.

After Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith's 953-page biography Van Gogh: The Life (2011), what else is there to say? This 176-page book skims through everything.

Quickly readers see van Gogh in 1877 in his early 20s, quitting his studies to become a pastor, as he says in a letter: 'One sometimes gets the feeling, where am I? what am I doing? where am I going? and one starts to grow dizzy.' Dashing to 1883 'the ever-hard-up, ever-fractionous edge-of-town loner with the benefactor brother shuttled between various lines of artistic research.'

Descriptions of the artist's days in Antwerp and Paris provide more of the author's passion, if not detail, and more interest for readers as van Gogh experiences challenging brotherly ties with Theo, a deep friendship with fellow artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and tempestuous nights with Paul Gauguin.

To 1888 and the solitude of the sea brings about van Gogh's 'colourist' period, but also his troubles, as he cuts off part of his ear. Bell briefly elaborates on the breakdown years. Enter Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, his brother's wife in 1890, who 'more than any single person aside from Vincent and Theo themselves, was responsible for the iconic status that van Gogh now possesses.' And so the biography becomes more interesting.

There is still the question: why another Vincent van Gogh book? Julian Bell wrote the book because he loved 'the letter writer of heart piercing eloquence.'

Bell's premise is that there were three facets to Vincent van Gogh: the painter, the letter writer, and the social misfit 'tearing a ragged course through the late nineteenth-century Netherlands and France.' Bell's objective is to present an interpretation of why van Gogh's letters were often 'at odds' with what he 'actually painted and with the record of his actions' – the gap between the three facets of the man.

Given that this biography gets rapidly to the point, it's a quick read, like a sprint: quick out of the blocks, a period of slow motion, then the most exciting part at the last 10 metres – and it's all over before you know it. Nevertheless, for van Gogh lovers, this is another perspective in understanding the man and his paintings.



you must change your life by rachel corbett (2016)

You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin (2016) is about German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who went to Paris in 1902, at the age of 26, to write a book about the sculptor Auguste Rodin (who sculpted *The Thinker* and *The Kiss*).

When they met, young Rilke (1875-1926) was a loner and a poor, unknown poet, whereas Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), in his 60s, was revered, outgoing, and famous. The two polar opposites in status and personalities developed a deep friendship.

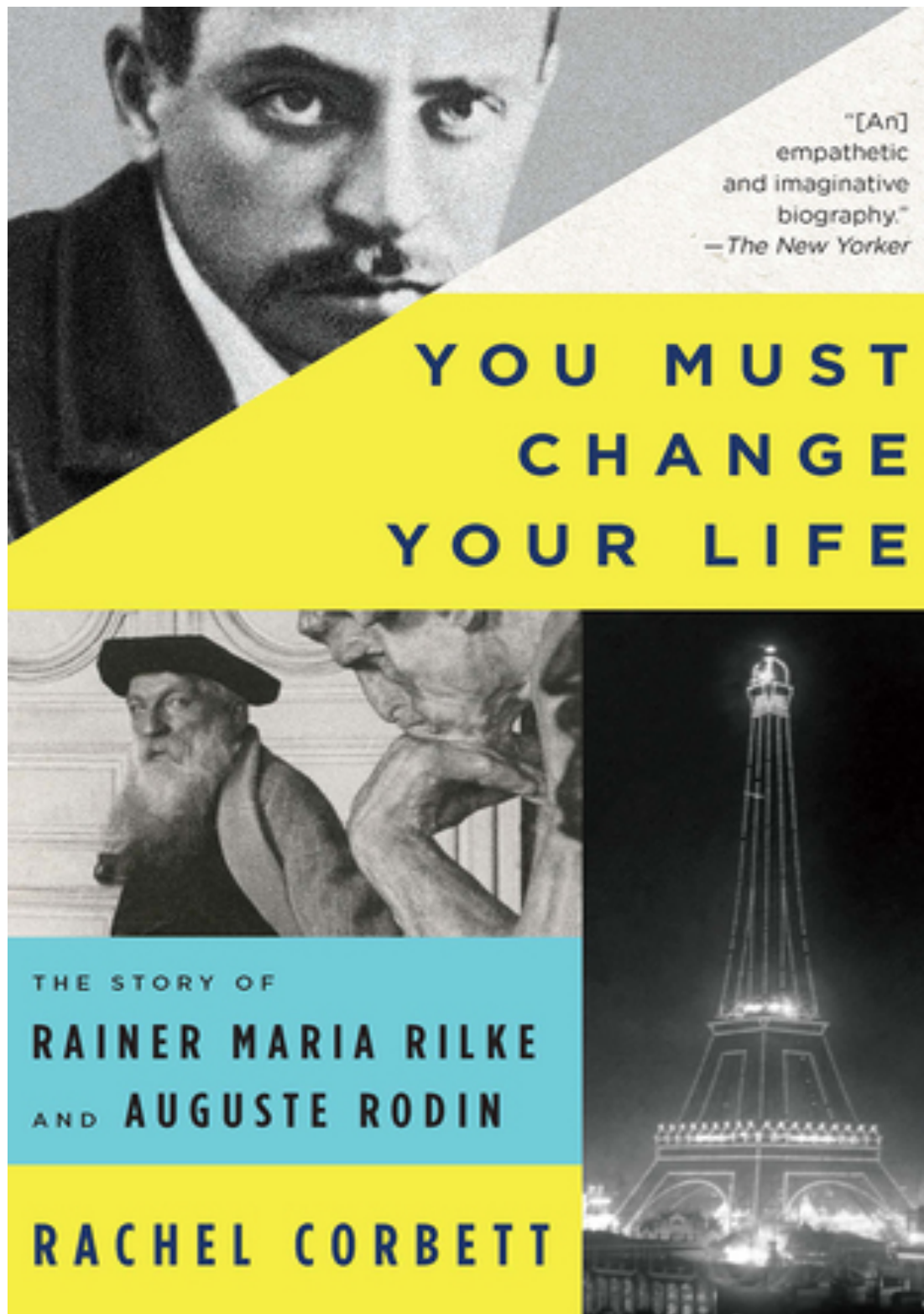
Rodin was a master at rendering the human form. At art school, he passed drawing, but failed sculpting, due to his 'disproportionate, heavy-limbed figures' (for which he would later become famous). The author details Rodin's rise to fame – his models, his power of observation, how he highlights flaws in the human body, and his acceptance as an artist.

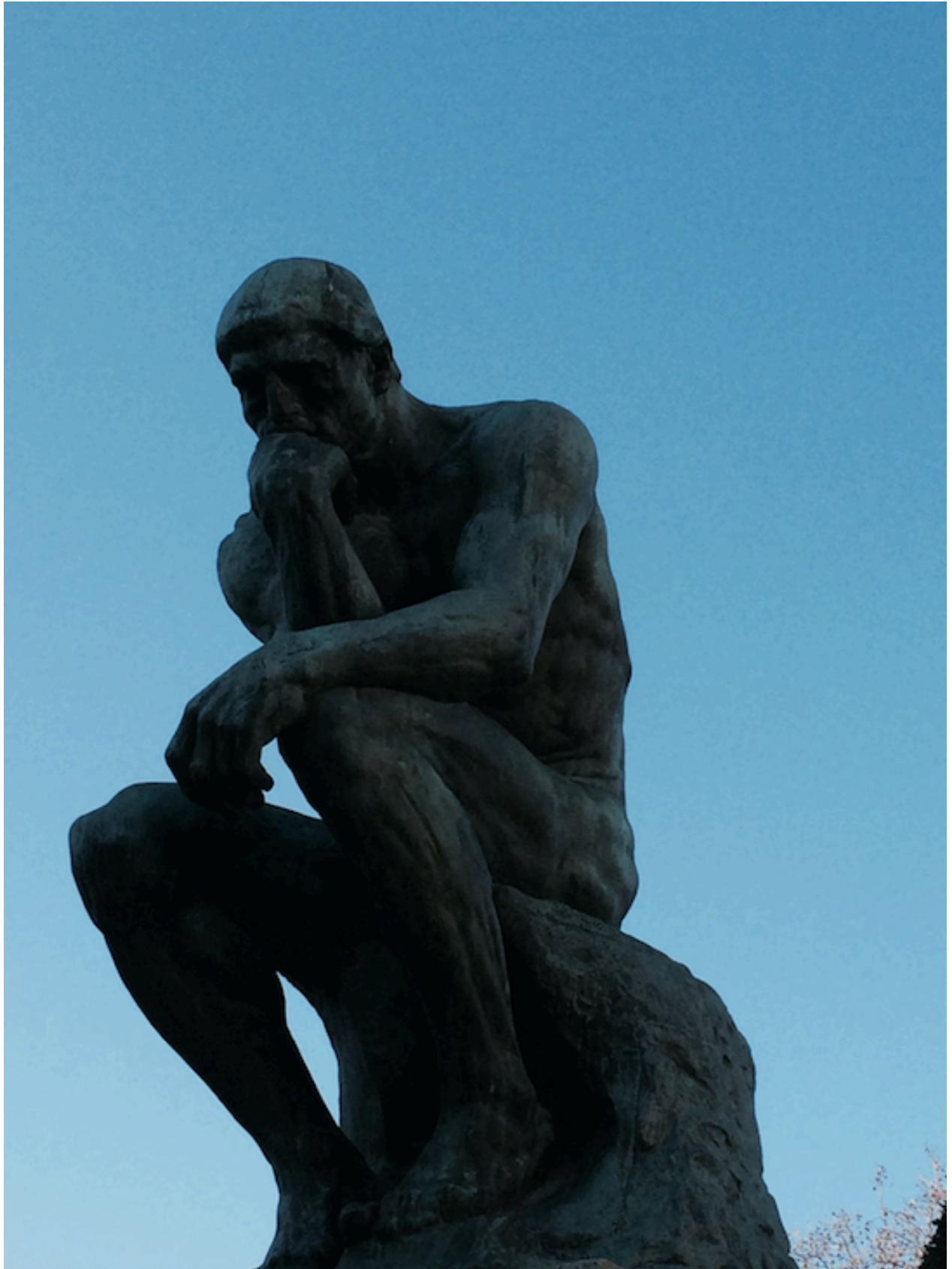
Rainer Maria Rilke arrived in Paris after the 1900 Paris World Fair during the influx of artists – local and international – Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Vincent Van Gogh, and Amedeo Modigliani. Poor, and eating oatmeal every night, he wrote to Rodin in the hope of documenting the artist's compulsive devotion to his craft. Corbett also writes of the young aspiring poet, Franz Xaver Kappus, who sought advice and inspiration from Rilke, just as he did from Rodin.

Rilke and Rodin – their friendship, their rupture, the reversal and renewal, their marriages, and then Rilke 'no longer a sapling cowering beneath the shade of Rodin.' World War I followed, and both left Paris, but by then Rodin's ideas about art and creativity had already influenced Rilke's work.

This is interesting account of two artistic men in Paris over a period of 15 years, and their interconnectedness, personally and professionally.







paris postcards by guy thomas hibbert (2018)

Paris Postcards: Short Stories (2018) is a collection of 11 short stories set in Paris, with the central theme: a postcard. Each postcard in each story has a message – for good or bad. The stories span from 1925 to the present day, in a snapshot of history. They are all linked in some subtle way, through time or character or place.

From a Russian Count in 1925 to a middle-aged woman in the present day, the stories are of young and old, Parisienne and foreign, and rich and poor.

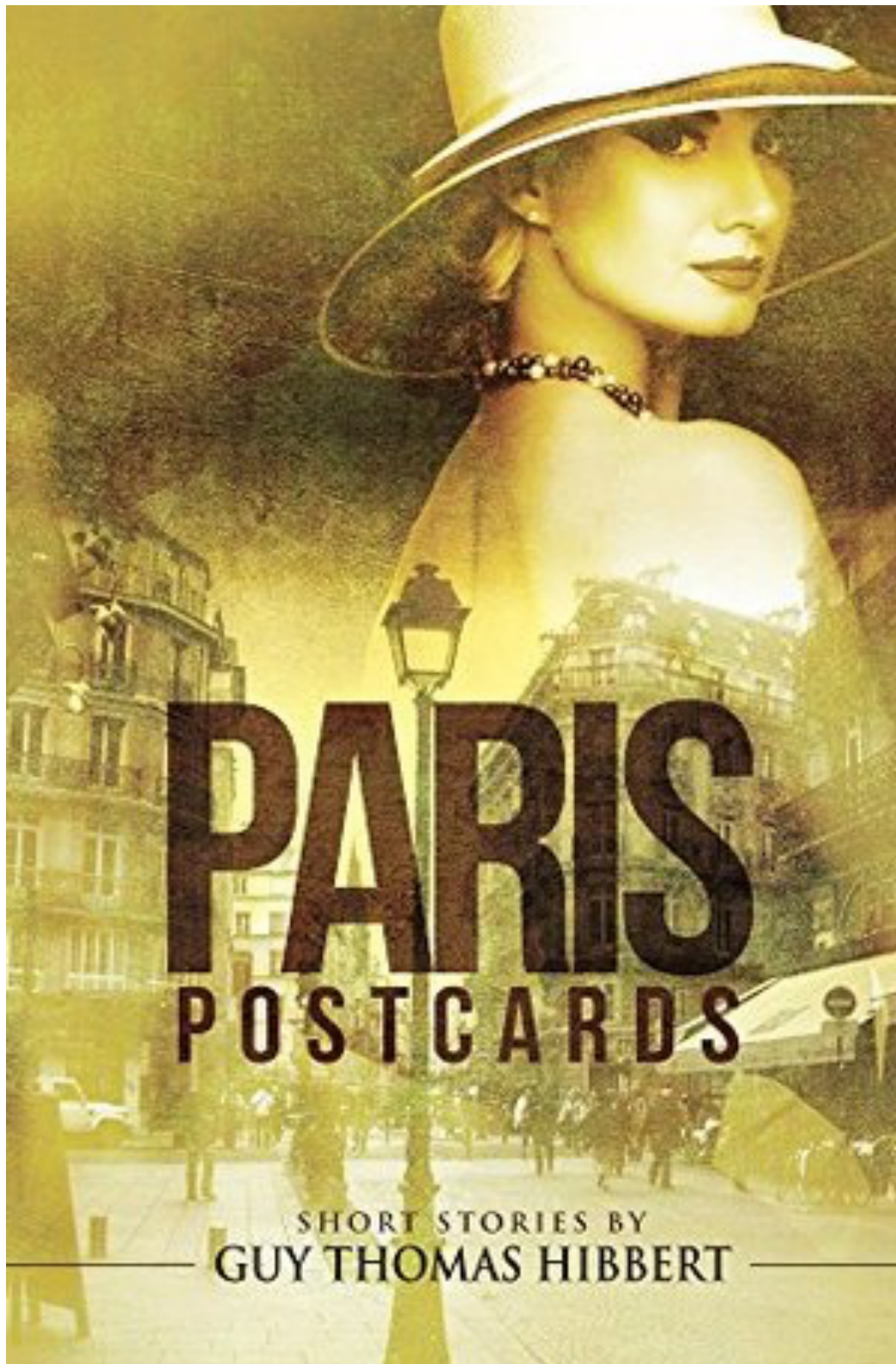
The collection begins with the mysterious Count Stanislaw Kerensky, exiled from Russia after the Revolution, leaving in receipt of the knowledge that his old comrade Petrovich is alive. Stanny promised to send his friend Andre a postcard with a coded message.

Hermione's party in 1937, Lucienne in German Occupied Paris in 1943, Elodie and her son in 1963, Didier and Jules in 1997, Jeanne in 2000, Hank in 2006, and Li Ling and Christopher in the present day, it ends with a fifty-year-old divorced woman, off Citalopram for two months, visiting the bouquinistes along the river Seine with their old books and postcards.

The Blue Dress, February 2006, is my favourite story, and the shortest – Hank, and his 'a little forgetful' wife Lilian, are in Paris for their wedding anniversary. She has a collection of vintage Valentine's Day postcards.

There are various narrators – Andre, Daisy, Serge, George – and it is interesting to find the linkages and connections between stories. The stories are full of secrets and subterfuge, love and loss, and the search for a change of life and fortune. There is much hope, desire, and dreams in the streets of Paris. It's an enjoyable read.





the author: Martina Nicolls

I am an author and humanitarian aid consultant with over 30 years' experience in the management, implementation, and evaluation of international aid development projects, particularly in post-conflict environments and countries with transitional governments, such as Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Darfur, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Pakistan, Iraq, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Georgia, Kosovo, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka, and also Mauritius, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia – and others. I provide technical advice on areas such as peace-building and conflict mitigation, education, poverty reduction, human rights, child labour, data quality and financing models.

But mostly I am a wanderer. Wherever I am and wherever I go, I take photographs and I write. My books include:

Similar but Different in the Animal Kingdom (2017)
A Mongolian Lament (2015)
The Komodo Verses (2012)

Liberia's Deadest Ends (2012)
Bardot's Comet (2011)
Kashmir on a Knife-Edge (2010)
The Sudan Curse (2009)

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