7

What's culture got to do with it?¹

One might hypothesise that the success of books about living in France is indicative of a strong desire among readers to know more about French culture, and to understand it better, and yet intercultural understanding tends not to be a major theme in the Australian memoirs. This chapter explores the difficulty of harnessing the genre of the life-in-France memoir to the task of facilitating cultural understanding. Certainly some of the authors endeavour to impart what they have learnt about France and the French through the time they have spent there. As might be expected, of course, what they have learnt has often been absorbed through an Australian filter. As discussed in Chapter 3, some of the authors encounter few Francophones, preferring to mingle with other Anglophone expatriates, perpetuating what Donald Morrison (referring to British books about the French) characterised as 'a foreign literary industry that reduces the French to comic walk-on parts in the larger Anglo-Saxon narrative' (2009, 15). A few, however, have gone so far as to allow their own worldview to be put into question as a result of a close and prolonged engagement with French cultural ways and beliefs. Among these is Sarah Turnbull, whose bestselling *Almost French* is interesting as much for its cultural lessons as for its strategies for imparting them.

Turnbull's memoir attempts to subvert some of the discursive elements identified in the previous chapters. It participates in a play of genres, whereby the lure of the travel memoir is used to entice readers towards

1 Chapter co-authored with Barbara Hanna.

a position where they read the book as a guide to French culture. Whilst the Australian edition's jacket publicity promises a tale of love in 'a magical city', Turnbull attempts to draw the reader towards an understanding of aspects of French culture that initially appeared unfathomable to her. The particular form of hybridity attempted is, however, a delicate enterprise, as the reception of the book demonstrates, in that the intercultural lessons on offer risk being overshadowed by the expectations readers bring to the genre of the memoir-of-life-in-France. The chapter examines the competing seductions operating throughout the text and the positioning of the reader, along with reader reactions.

A tale of two genres

Published in 2002, Sarah Turnbull's *Almost French: A New Life in Paris* was one of the first in the corpus to appear, and has been the most successful in terms of sales figures and readership, dominating Australian bestseller lists before being released in US and UK editions. It followed on the heels of Mary Moody's *Au Revoir* (2001), also an Australian bestseller, but marked a generational shift in perspective. Whereas Moody, and indeed Peter Mayle a decade earlier, took up residence in France when approaching the age of 50, Sarah Turnbull was 27 when she arrived in Paris and 35 when her book appeared. Her book thus marked a clear departure from tales of midlife crisis or downshift, and her relative youth is a possible reason for the wider demographic appeal of her memoir.

From the start, Turnbull saw her book as drawing on more than one genre: interviews indicate that Turnbull felt she could 'fill a niche between the "renovating a house in the countryside" genre and more serious cultural studies' (Wyndham 2003). To what extent then does *Almost French* align itself with these templates and what uses does it make of them?

Travel memoir: 'Renovating a house in the countryside'?

Almost French: A New Life in Paris is marketed as a travel memoir, as its title suggests. The appearance of the US edition (Turnbull 2004) reinforced this categorisation with its revised title—*Almost French: Love and a New Life in Paris*—emphasising romance. Adding 'love' to the title allowed it to sit even more comfortably amongst other bestselling memoirs of France

of the time by American and British authors such as Jeffrey Greene's *French Spirits: A House, a Village, and a Love Affair in Burgundy* (2002) and Carol Drinkwater's *The Olive Farm: A Memoir of Life, Love and Olive Oil in Southern France* (2002). Despite detailed descriptions of different ways of life, these entertaining narratives do not lend themselves in any obvious way to intercultural learning. Narrator and reader are invariably positioned as mirrors of each other, and cultural complicity is fostered between them such that there is no need to reassess incidents in terms of values other than one's own. Typified by Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence*, the subgenre trades on the mythical charm of France, a country populated by a stock cast of colourful characters, whose antics in comic adventures and tales of calamity are bound to amuse the decidedly more normal Anglophone reader. Characters are caricatures: more memorable than any insights into different cultural values are the bureaucratic bunglers, eccentric workmen and flirtatious foreigners populating these stories. The conventions of the genre thus work to entrench stereotypes, such that the other remains firmly other.

This then was the publishing backdrop against which Turnbull's book appeared, taking up the challenge of shifting these predictable patterns. For a start, its setting is urban rather than rural: there is no question of 'renovating a house in the countryside', although the author does make a radical modification to the Paris apartment, as we shall see.

A greater—although less obvious—challenge to the conventions of the genre is evident in the positioning of narrator and reader in relation to the local inhabitants. From the account of her arrival at the airport onwards, the established roles are reversed. At cocktail parties, on the phone, in shops and in the street, it is Turnbull herself who is the colourful and bizarre character among the normal French. The narrator thus others herself and invites her readers to do the same: to see the Anglophone as the foreigner, to view Australian norms from another perspective. She attempts to take the reader with her towards a new way of seeing the Australian self.

Furthermore, love is very much a minor theme. As one of the more careful reviews remarks, 'Turnbull tells readers less about love than new life' (*Publishers Weekly* 2003), and the author's description of that new life in many respects defies the book's positioning within the genre of travel memoir. This is particularly evident in the organisation of the book. While the early chapters are chronologically arranged, recounting

Turnbull's arrival, decision to stay, struggle to find work, and move to the centre of Paris, simultaneously each chapter seeks to analyse a perplexing aspect of French culture. And the later chapters abandon the chronology entirely to focus on a theme. Topics include intellectualism, dinner parties, small talk, dress, family ties to place, relations between the sexes, and, throughout the book, communication. Far more important than the narrative of relationship milestones on the way from chance meeting with Frédéric in Chapter 1 to marriage in the epilogue is the story of the passage from incomprehension and ineptitude in a foreign culture to understanding and competence.

Intercultural guidebook: 'More serious cultural studies'

It can be argued then that although the book is labelled a travel memoir, its purpose parallels that of a book Turnbull cites on several occasions: Polly Platt's *French or Foe* (1998). Openly didactic, *French or Foe* (along with other volumes attempting to explain French culture) is sold, not as a travel memoir but as an intercultural guidebook or travel guide,² a genre addressing a more limited readership already actively seeking answers to intercultural questions. Further examples from around the time Turnbull's book was published include:

- *Savoir-Flair: 211 Tips for Enjoying France and the French* (Platt 2000)
- *Au Contraire! Figuring Out The French* (Asselin and Mastron 2001)
- *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong: Why We Love France but Not the French* (Nadeau and Barlow 2003)
- *Culture Shock! France: A Guide to Customs and Etiquette* (Taylor 2003)

Although Turnbull's early chapters in particular are narrative rather than expository, *Almost French* takes an analytical approach to encounters and is peppered with didactic remarks. Emphasising the learning that has marked Turnbull's six years in France are statements that could have come from an intercultural communication textbook, observations about how 'you can't measure your behaviour by familiar yardsticks' (39):³

2 Cf. Paul Fussell on the distinction between guidebooks—which 'are not autobiographical and are not sustained by a narrative exploiting the devices of fiction'—and travel books (1980, 203).

3 All quotations are from the Australian edition (2002).

How do you explain the nuances of the way people interact when you've never questioned them yourself before? How can you construct neat answers for customs and codes of behaviour you have taken for granted since birth? (70)

I was too consumed by the effort of trying to adapt to my new home to see the reaction of Frédéric's relatives within the context of a culture. Instead, I did exactly what you shouldn't do, what I've been doing all along in France. I took it personally. (88)

My eyes don't see what Frédéric sees—or at least they see it differently. (151)

I need to step out of my old rubric and embrace a new one. To forget how I did things in Australia and learn a way of communicating that works in France. (187)

The film forced me to face facts—my style of communicating doesn't work in France. It had to change. (273)

The analytical approach does not mean an absence of stereotypes. The postcard view of France promised by the travel memoir genre is certainly present. Most often, however, we find Turnbull recognising and labelling it as such—'Yes, I admit, I'm carried away on a kaleidoscope of clichés straight out of a trashy romance novel' (22, cf. 128, 170)—in order to provide an alternative view. In fact the 'clichéd visions' (ix) are identified in the prologue as what Turnbull brought to Paris. They are a starting point, assumed to be shared by the reader, who is invited to move on, to accompany Sarah on her journey of discovery of Frenchness from a French perspective. This is not to say that Turnbull's account is always successful in disentangling itself from clichés, nor that her analysis is faultless: despite regular recognition of the diversity of French culture, the book also contains over-extrapolations from Parisian bourgeois circles to Paris in general to France as a whole. Yet the very presence of analysis, even if flawed, encourages the reader to engage with instances of cultural difference as indicative of divergent patterns of cultural behaviour, rather than as a colourful but one-dimensional backdrop to her adventures.

Turnbull's book thus plays between genres, one more clearly flagged than the other. Although the book is pitched as travel memoir, unlike Mayle in *A Year in Provence*, Turnbull is not satisfied to remain bemused by the curious French, but rather seeks to understand perplexing incidents as part of wider cultural patterns. However, in order to impart her new knowledge, she must persuade the reader to exchange ready-made romance for lessons in cultural difference.

Narrative seduction

Turnbull repeatedly invokes *la séduction* (ix, 23, 55, 139, 170, 179) as a French quality to which she is susceptible, as she falls for the charms of Paris and of Frédéric. Ross Chambers' discussions of the workings of narrative, however, allow us to see a further seduction at work in *Almost French*. In *Story and Situation* and *Room for Maneuver*, Chambers views narrative as a seductive enterprise by the narrator aimed at shifting the desire of the narratee. For Chambers, this is how stories can make a difference; ultimately the strategies he identifies explain how we as readers can be altered by our readings. It can be argued that Turnbull's book sets up a narrative seduction that exploits the appeal of the travel memoir genre to present opportunities for intercultural learning. Success is not, however, guaranteed, for it depends on enticing readers away from the powerfully seductive myth of a stereotypical France that attracted many of them to the book in the first place. Analysis of these competing seductions—the allure of the myth of France and the persuasive powers of Turnbull's narration—will reveal the role of genre in determining the intercultural outcome of readings, with implications for intercultural storytelling more generally.

Turnbull's strategies include framing her narrative as an 'adventure' in both prologue and epilogue (ix, 309) such that the learning is a question of 'solv[ing] mysteries' (135) rather than taking instruction; holding out the promise of a rich reality (ix, 118) that eludes the romantic gaze; and, more subtly, manipulating the possibilities for reader identification with her life in Paris, that locus of desire predetermined by the travel memoir genre, through constantly adjusting her speaking position. Nevertheless, these seductive measures are not successful with all readers, as we shall see.

Shifting the positions of narrator and reader

Let us look more closely at the poles of reader identification made available in *Almost French*. The reading position conventionally provided by the genre of the travel memoir is one of identification with the narrator through shared values. The ambiguity of genre in *Almost French*, however, hinders the reader from simply settling into comfortable complicity with the narrator. The reading position is destabilised as Turnbull recalibrates her cultural norms. She becomes a moving target

for readerly identification as she invites the reader to continue to shadow her. This is achieved through frequent variation in the distance between Turnbull as narrator and Turnbull as protagonist (cf. Chambers 1991). While the protagonist steadily evolves from Australian tourist to 'almost French' resident of Paris, the narrator's speaking position repeatedly oscillates between that of the newly arrived and uncomprehending Sarah and her wiser, more reflective avatar. This produces double-edged accounts of incidents: Turnbull explains her incomprehension in a way that arouses sympathy from the Australian reader, but she simultaneously takes an ironic distance from her self-portrait that unsettles the affinity. Thus the tale of a disastrous bourgeois cocktail party shows an almost caricatured Australian girl in Doc Martens attempting to strike up chatty conversations by enthusiastically admiring the décor before encouraging guests to get stuck into the champagne:

For the next ten minutes I practise my best 'people skills', chit-chatting in the friendly, interested sort of way which can always be relied on to start conversation. What do you do? How do you know so-and-so? These people are proving to be much harder work than I imagined, though. While they answer politely enough they don't initiate any questions of their own. Unnerved, I try even harder, filling the silences with embarrassingly inane remarks. *Quel beau salon! Regardez les belles peintures!* [...] Eventually, to everyone's relief, I run out of things to admire. (63–64)

Similarly double is the mocking description of her own propensity to dress down when there is no reason to dress up (130, cf. x), accompanied by a bafflement easily understood by her intended readers: 'Underpinning Frédéric's reaction to tracksuit pants is a concept which to me is totally foreign: *looking scruffy is selfish*' (131).

This ironic distance sharpens into a clear split between Australian and French ways of seeing and the narration glides from one towards the other. At the cocktail party, Sarah articulates her confusion as an Australian: 'Could the rules be so different in France? But then how else are you supposed to get the ball rolling if not with preliminary questions and conversation?' (64). Having marked this point of contact with her intended readers, she leads them elsewhere. She moves towards a speaking position from within French culture, at first giving voice to Frédéric's interpretation, and eventually accepting French rules of social engagement. Thus it is in Frédéric's voice in the first instance that we hear that her behaviour might be interpreted as clumsy, intrusive and uncultured by French standards: 'shockingly forward' and making her seem 'a bit of

a peasant' (65). Eventually, however, it is Sarah herself who 'do[es]n't feel compelled to fill silences' (273), who is able to explain conversation as a game of skill and to recount her wins. The turning point for Turnbull occurs when she sees the film *Ridicule*, in which a provincial baron must learn the art of verbal jousting in order to gain an audience with Louis XVI (271–73). If Frédéric's role in Sarah's transformation resembles that of the kindly aristocrat who coaches the baron, that role is adopted by Turnbull in relation to the reader. The reader receives instruction in the goals of interaction and the criteria for success.

Similarly, while not renouncing her right to wear trousers that make her 'look like a baby elephant' (131), Turnbull guides the reader towards Frédéric's (and by extension a French) perspective on casual Anglo dressing, in a hypermarket in Boulogne-sur-Mer filled with British day-trippers. She recounts her own shift in attitude when, during a weekend trip across the Channel, Sarah reacts to Londoners' eclectic combinations of styles and colours through eyes now accustomed to Parisian norms: "Look what they're wearing!" I exclaimed to Frédéric' (133). But the narrator Turnbull continues to hover between speaking positions, touching base with the reader's world view—"You might think this is ridiculous" (138)—at points during her exposition of French aesthetic principles, and tempting them towards a new view. In this way, she encourages the reader towards a more knowing and culturally aware position from which it is possible to relativise Australian norms and values.

Emblematic of Turnbull's approach to French culture is the episode of the new window. In a significant departure from stories of the loving restoration of traditional homes to their former glory, the home improvements in Sarah's apartment open up an entirely new (and illegal) window. And just as the book shies from perpetuating 'clichéd visions' of Paris, the renovation literally provides a new way of seeing the city. 'It's like a painting' (236) says Frédéric of the view, but its composition differs from that of the Monet painting of their street at the Musée d'Orsay (235). This is highlighted in the jacket cover of the Australian edition (Figure 7.1): 'Sarah' surveys a view of Paris comprising chimney pots *and* satellite dishes, zinc roofs *and* high-rise. But this window does more than provide a room with a view: its installation requires that Turnbull be actively involved in negotiating Parisian rules of renovation, legal or otherwise. Indeed the 'eye-opener' (239) in this architectural adventure has been the revelation that 'In Paris, there is a way around almost every rule' (239).

Figure 7.1: The Australian cover of Sarah Turnbull's *Almost French*.

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'Tunnell[ing]' (231) through a 'blind wall' (227), 'hoping for a glimmer of light' (232), the quest for her window onto Paris reflects Sarah's determination to achieve an insider's perspective on French culture. The blind wall is 'a source of frustration, a solid, sealed barrier' (227), not unlike the cultural barriers she has confronted, and as the effort of tunnelling through suggests, this is not a view that can simply be acquired like a postcard. The reader, like Sarah, is required to chip away at what seemed like rock-solid certainties. As Turnbull explains when she struggles to see beauty in a Blockhaus-strewn northern beach under a leaden sky: 'At heart, it isn't about scenery: it is about who we are, individually, and what we are willing to become' (154). And for those she tempts towards transformation, the reward Turnbull promises is a perspective 'far richer, a thousand times better' than the stereotyped image of France (ix).

L'invitation au voyage

The extent to which readers will be persuaded to share the narrator's vision—to exchange the romantic stereotype for the cultural insights Turnbull proposes—is however uncertain. For many, the easy pleasures of the genre of the contemporary travel memoir set in France tend to obscure the new view available. Thus the window disappears from the cover of the US edition in favour of the tourist's Paris (Figure 7.2): a soft-focus image of le quartier St Michel (with a retro snapshot of a kiss on the Pont des Arts superimposed on the paperback edition).

In parallel fashion, the intercultural import of Turnbull's tale has a tendency to disappear in accounts of the book. Much of the paratext of *Almost French* (publicity, jacket blurb, interviews, reviews) constructs an itinerary through the book that, although a voyage of discovery, is very much the discovery of what Cryle, Freadman and Hanna (1993, 17) term the 'familiar foreign': romance, restaurants, fashion shows, surly shopkeepers and small spoilt dogs all make their appearance. Turnbull's story is therefore often read as simply another evocation of the quaint charm of Paris and those romantic Frenchmen.

Figure 7.2: The US cover of Sarah Turnbull's *Almost French*.

Source: © 2004 Penguin Random House. All Rights Reserved.

As *Almost French* surged through bestseller lists, it was not the intercultural learning narrative that was highlighted in reviews and other reader comment. Indeed, for some readers, the memoir was reduced to a love story, to the exclusion of all else. A journalist breathlessly reports:

Sarah moved around Eastern Europe before settling in Paris—the City of Love!

And the reason she moved—what else, love!

While travelling in Bucharest she met a French lawyer, fell in love and followed him to France. It sounds like the start of a romance novel. Sarah not only married her dream, she's living her dream. (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2002b)

In another summary, romance overshadows the travel memoir to the point where the book becomes a novel: '*Almost French*, the debut novel by journalist Sarah Turnbull, is a love story between man, woman and city: she's Australian, he's French and the town is Paris!' (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2002a). It is as if the mutual inclusiveness of France and romance in the popular imagination means that any tale of travel in France is by definition already a love story.

For many readers, Turnbull's memoir is proof that she is 'living the dream' (Alliance Française Melbourne 2013), prompting the *Sydney Morning Herald* to list her book under the heading 'Most Envied Life' (Wyndham 2003). The romantic reading and the dream reading, however, gloss over the nightmare moments that abound in the book. The readers polled by the *Herald* surely overlooked the miserable marginalisation at dinner parties and the humiliating inability to accomplish simple tasks that marked her early days in Paris. While accounts of culture shock may be characteristic of 'settler narratives' (Beaven 2007), they are not the most salient part of Turnbull's story for many readers. It was Turnbull's fortune (or misfortune) to find herself in a privileged French subculture that corresponded so precisely to the stereotyped expectations of an Anglophone audience. Consequently, in accepting *l'invitation au voyage* offered by the book, readers have not necessarily taken up Turnbull's further invitation to revise these expectations, to arrive at a hitherto unknown destination. Instead, reader reviews show that many have accepted its advertised attractions—the romance in a magical city presented on the back cover—at face value, allowing them to eclipse alternatives.

We might take, as one example, the myth of France as the land of endemic elegance. Paris is indeed a capital of high fashion and readers are duly given accounts of interviews with couturiers and fashion parades that Turnbull covers as journalist. The transformation of her own wardrobe is also recorded: her airport arrival in 'clumpy sandals' and safari shorts is repeated at various points as a kind of 'before' shot. Commentators have highlighted this moment together with the 'lesson in French dress standards' (130) represented by Frédéric's distress at her attempt to wear tracksuit pants in the street. The temptation is to read her subsequent adaptation as, if not exactly a rags to riches story, at least one of sartorial salvation, of deliverance from Australian dagginess to enlightened elegance. This interpretation resembles that of Turnbull's mother, who, in casual sweater and slacks, feels 'hopelessly out of place' on the stylish rue du Faubourg St-Honoré (140). For subsequent visits she packs smart suits and high heels. Lesson learnt? Maybe, but it is not necessarily the one her daughter wants readers to learn as she adds a generally overlooked qualification: the revised holiday wardrobe is 'perfect for Rue du Faubourg St-Honoré but conspicuously inappropriate for tripping through French country markets' (140). This comment is a loose thread in the smooth stitches of the story of the uniformly elegant French, a loose thread we can use to unravel that story. Here is a clue that different contexts within French culture require different clothes, that blanket generalisations about the French fail to take into account even the diversity of clothing requirements within the one subculture. That is, Turnbull again provides the material needed to destabilise the stereotype. Further hints are the various points at which Frédéric is *not* aligned with elegance (for example 21–23). Indeed, if Sarah's dress changes, so does Frédéric's: as was the case with the apartment, the renovation of his wardrobe distances it from a traditional style (his grandfather's cravats), as he buys Country Road designs from Australia (296). Yet how many reviewers and readers tell us that Frédéric is the quintessentially, tautologically, elegant Frenchman? His old school friend, portrayed with a revealing gap between torn tee-shirt and 'slipping shorts' (28), is completely ignored in the reviews (and is perhaps seen only as an idiosyncratic exception). In these readings, only those elements of the story that concur with the pre-existing picture of Frenchness are retained.

This is not to suggest, however, that readers finding confirmation of clichés cannot learn any intercultural lessons from the book:

The two Queenslanders were all dressed up to explore the Paris neighbourhood that's the main setting for [...] *Almost French*. They were excited to spot the author in the street [...] and stop for a chat. 'After reading your book, we thought we'd better make an effort,' said the woman in black high heels and stockings. (Wyndham 2003).

No doubt these well-dressed explorers did not need *Almost French* to tell them about French elegance. However, even if, like Turnbull's mother, they over-extrapolate this dress code to country markets, even if their image of French culture has not changed, they have still learnt something from the book—namely, that their own vestimentary presentation, rather than being neutral, is available for interpretation. So whilst they may not see France differently, they have learnt to see themselves through other eyes. That is, the mirror held up by *Almost French*, rather than simply reflecting an Australian view back to Australian readers, allows us to see what those curious French might think of us.

There is nonetheless a clear division between two quite different responses to Turnbull's book, readings we could characterise broadly as 'starry-eyed' and 'intercultural'. The division is illustrated by the two types of letters Turnbull is said to receive: 'Some say her evocative book makes them want to rush to France; many thank her for expressing the loneliness and confusion of their own expat life there' (Wyndham 2003). How can the same book conjure up such opposing visions of France? More pertinently for those interested in intercultural narrative, what enables some readers to make the interpretative leap towards revising stereotypes and, conversely, what hinders others?

Competing seductions

The discrepancy between readings can be partly explained by the competing seductions at work. As we have seen, *Almost French* harnesses the seductive strength of the myth of France in order to lure readers towards a reassessment of that idealised image. This is a precarious strategy, not in sales terms, but in intercultural ones. The reader's desire is engaged in order to divert it, but the danger is that the pursuit of French romance blinds readers to Turnbull's more subtle seduction.

It is not only the power of myth, however, that predisposes readers to finding romantic clichés in a book where these are challenged. The 'starry-eyed' readings of *Almost French* bear testimony also to the power of genre in determining the reader's engagement with the text. Pavlenko (2001b, 213, 218) emphasises the need to approach language learning memoirs and other cross-cultural autobiographies as genres, to focus on their rhetorical shaping as much as their informational value. And just as Turnbull's writing is shaped by rhetorical conventions, so too is the way it is read. The book has been insistently marketed as a travel memoir, and thus it is with the expectations of this genre—glamour, excitement and the flavour of an exotic location—that most readers open *Almost French*. As Gerhart (1992, 156) remarks, 'genres frame readers as well as texts', and clearly not all readers are prepared to relinquish the genre hypotheses with which they come to the book. Reinforcing Freadman and Macdonald's thesis that genre is not simply constituted by textual features but is an act of interpretation that in turn largely determines further interpretations of a text (1992, 24), we find reluctance on the part of some readers to revise their expectations, to register either Sarah's loneliness or her insights into Australian, as much as French, behaviour.

For Chambers (1991), storytelling can change people when the seductive powers of the narration are able to redirect the desire of the reader/listener. In the case at hand, the shift is from a desire for the set pieces of the life-in-France memoir towards a desire to see through different eyes, and the first condition necessary for it to take place is an acceptance of the detour in genre. It is when readers allow themselves to be enticed away from the predictable delights of the travel memoir towards the lessons of the travel guide that the 'intercultural' reading emerges.

What's culture got to do with it?

In a genre where, previously, French people typically played minor, primarily comic roles against a decorative French backdrop, Turnbull tried to do something different, making a play for audience attention while attempting to impart intercultural knowledge. Given the enormous reach of the memoirs of life in France, the idea of diverting their conventions to a different purpose is tantalising. In the wake of the extraordinary success of the book, can we then say that culture holds the key to understanding the sway of the Australian-in-France memoirs, that a desire for a greater

understanding of French culture drives the publishing phenomenon? The lesson of this chapter is that while readers are certainly interested in knowing France better, it is actually quite difficult for an author to shift attention towards aspects of French culture that do not simply conform to existing preconceptions.

Genre, then, appears to have more to do with it than culture. Although *Almost French* foregrounds intercultural learning, the impact of a text depends less on its content than on the way in which readers engage with it, which in this case is partially determined by the expectations raised by its framing as a travel memoir. Following an interpretative path more travelled, many readers retain only what they already knew, confirming the charm and elegance of Parisian life and the inhospitality of the natives, and missing the message calculated to make them question those very expectations.

Some of the difficulties Sarah Turnbull faces in France stem from language issues. On her arrival in France, her French is limited to conversations learnt by rote from school textbooks (54). Although her linguistic gaffes are not the most telling of her intercultural epiphanies, they too lead her to revise her vision of normality and see things differently. By definition we can expect all Anglophones living in France to need to come to grips with French language. And presumably those who write about feeling French and belonging in France have found ways of resolving issues of language difference and incomprehension. To what extent then does a language learning journey figure in the memoirs? How do the authors represent the encounter with French language? And how important is French language in the experience of living a French life? In short, what does language have to do with it?

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