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What's love got to do with it?

Having seen the wider narrative arc of the memoirs in Chapter 3, and the intense feelings of longing and attachment to France from a distance, this chapter backtracks to ask what the Australian authors are pursuing when they invest themselves in France and travel to the other side of the world to experience living there. The word 'love' stands out in the titles of the books, suggesting that it is a major theme. So let us ask, like Tina Turner, 'what's love got to do with it?' Why is love highlighted on the covers, and is it equally important between them? What, if anything, is going on under the covers in the books? The idea of romance appears inextricably linked with France and particularly Paris as a destination. Is this what prompts the travel and the memoirs? What part does love play in the life story recounted?

The romance in France

The idea of romance appears prominently in the presentation and marketing of the memoirs of Australians in France. 'Love' appears in numerous titles:

- *Almost French: Love and a New Life in Paris* (Sarah Turnbull, US edition)
- *Last Tango in Toulouse: Torn Between Two Loves* (Mary Moody)
- *We'll Always Have Paris: Sex and Love in the City of Light* (John Baxter)
- *A Town Like Paris: Falling in Love in the City of Light* (Bryce Corbett)

- *Buying a Piece of Paris: Finding a Key to the City of Love* (Ellie Nielsen)
- *From France with Love: A Love Story with Baggage* (Nadine Williams)
- *La Vie Parisienne: Looking for Love—and the Perfect Lingerie* (Janelle McCulloch)
- *French Ties: Love, Life and Recipes* (Jane Webster)
- *Finding Paris: An Unusual Love Story* (Hedley Galt)
- *Farewell My French Love* (Nadine Williams)

Then there are titillating titles such as *Paris Tango* (Carla Coulson) and *Ooh La La! A French Romp* (Ann Rickard), which, while not actually mentioning romance, allude to it. And where love is absent from the title, it nonetheless often appears on the cover in the tagline:

- ‘A true story of recklessness and romance’ (Biggs 2005)
- ‘A new life, new love and three guesthouses in a small French village’ (Taylor 2005)
- ‘What the City of Light taught me about life, love and lipstick’ (Lawrence 2017)

or reviews:

- ‘A vivacious contemporary tale of life, love and dreaming’ (front cover, Raoul 2008)
- ‘Living and loving in Paris—what more could a woman want?’ (back cover, Holdforth 2004, quoting Margaret Whitlam)
- ‘If you can’t have a French lover, *True Pleasures* is the next best thing’ (front cover, Holdforth 2005 [North American edition], quoting John Baxter)

A large proportion of the memoirs thus strongly promote the romantic aspect of the story they have to tell. The reader could be excused for thinking these books all focused on a relationship unfolding between soulmates. More often than not, however, the love story is a minor theme, easier to find on the cover than in the text itself. It is true that Sarah Turnbull and Marisa Raoul each marry a Frenchman, and John Baxter a Frenchwoman, and that Bryce Corbett and Shay Stafford each tell of falling for each other, but of these memoirs, only Corbett’s really delivers a love story. Indeed, of all the supposed tales of love promised by the book covers, love is a principal theme in only very few, and even these are not classic stories of romance: Mary Moody in *Last Tango in Toulouse* tells of

her affair in the south of France and how it almost destroys her marriage; Nadine Williams relates the vicissitudes of her relationship with her French partner when they travel to visit his family in France (*From France with Love*); while John Baxter (*We'll Always Have Paris*) weaves a select history of eroticism in Paris into his personal narrative. A romantic entanglement hovers on the horizon in Henrietta Taylor's *Veuve Taylor* and Barbara Biggs's *The Accidental Renovator*, although the focus of the books is elsewhere, but is quite absent from Lucinda Holdforth's *True Pleasures*, Ellie Nielsen's *Buying a Piece of Paris* and Janelle McCulloch's *La Vie Parisienne*, where the mention of 'love' on the cover is simply gratuitous. Despite the promises of love, romance is more often pursued as an elusive fantasy.

The lack of a liaison, whether with a French or Australian native, is however no obstacle to the association of France and romance, not only for the marketing of the book, but indeed for the authors themselves. Romance may be deemed an essential ingredient of a memoir of life in France, but the love story need not involve another person. For some, the romance is with oneself. After extracting herself from a destructive relationship, Hedley Galt travels to the French capital to look for love. Following some soul-searching, she resolves:

I'm going to date myself. I'm going to become romantically involved with *moi*. [...] Paris is going to be the 'city of self-love' where I dine and dance and romance myself. (2013, 184–85)

And ultimately she concludes: 'So I guess I did end up finding love in Paris' (289), for she has found it within herself. Katrina Lawrence is abandoned by her boyfriend and finds that 'Paris remained my own escape, a haven and sanctuary, where I only had to please, and learn to love, myself' (2017, 157). And Sally Asher also ends up telling a story of 'self-love' (2011, 174), of valuing and nurturing herself (152), in which she advises her readers is to 'start romancing yourself, because the seed of love starts within your own heart' (215) and because 'The love you give yourself will provide you with the strength to make permanent changes in your life' (222).

For others, places become protagonists in the tale of love. For Vicki Archer, a farmhouse in Provence is love at first sight: 'the physical attraction was immediate' (2006, 6), and as for the renovation, 'I was a woman in love; I could not have stopped myself even if I had wanted to' (2009, 5). In fact, the 'inexplicable passion' (2009, 5) she feels is an intensification of a prior

dalliance with France. She writes 'I had become infatuated with France some years earlier' (2006, 6) and recalls 'the moment I first fell in love with France. [...] I was seduced by the landscape and intrigued by the people' (2006, 205). She finds the country 'irresistible, alluring' (2006, 208) and is drawn into an 'ongoing love affair with France' (2009, 5, cf. xi).

Hard-nosed journalist Sheryle Bagwell writes in a very different style from Vicki Archer, generally pragmatic, even critical; however, she too admits to 'infatuation' (2006, 22) leading to a 'continuing love affair with France' (270, cf. 1, 279, 291). The 'French life' constructed by Susan Cutsforth and her husband (2013, 247) similarly springs from 'Our love affair with France' (15). Paris in particular is seen to have irresistible powers of 'seduction' (Lewis 2006, 9, 13; Turnbull 2002, ix), and the authors surrender to its charms and swoon for the city. Jane Paech (2011) structures her memoir around the French rhyme for plucking daisy petals, rearranged from coolest to warmest feelings—'Je t'aime pas du tout, un peu, beaucoup, passionnément, à la folie'—with the chapters recounting the development of her relationship with Paris until she finds herself 'in love with a city and a culture, warts and all' (243). Ellie Nielsen recounts her 'unrequited love affair with Paris' (2007, 25), and Janelle McCulloch too falls for the city, guaranteed to enthrall even when suitors are thin on the ground: 'We want the martini fuelled magic; the richness of a foreign romance. Even if it's only with the city we love' (2008, 27). In this way, even if one's love life is a 'lost cause' (227), a French memoir can include romance. Indeed the love story with France/Paris/Provence is a far stronger theme across the memoirs than finding a partner.

Some might see the need to include romance as a self-evident consequence of the stereotype of Paris as the 'city of love' and a simple marketing ploy. As Barbara Herrnstein-Smith reminds us, however, stories are always told 'by someone in particular, on some occasion, for some purpose, and in accord with some relevant set of principles' (1980, 218). Even stock narratives are retold for a reason. The fact that there is an abundance of these stories in a given decade should give us pause to ask why this stereotype is being milked, and prompt us to investigate the ways in which the theme of love is used and its cultural purposes. Attention to the gender of the author provides clues to what is at stake in framing the memoir as a love story, for although both men and women authors are susceptible to 'falling in love' with France, there are telling differences in the ways in which the romance unfolds.

Gendered tales

Of the six male authors represented in the corpus, only Bryce Corbett and John Baxter announce their memoirs as love stories on the cover. Corbett's fulfils the expectations raised by the title in the sense that he unabashedly recounts his amorous encounters, offers 'Lessons in French love' (2007, 225) in which he discusses cultural conventions of flirtation and romance, and tells his story of falling in love with an Australian dancer at the Lido cabaret.

Baxter's memoir is different. Having proclaimed that love is a requirement of the genre, that 'All Paris stories are to some extent stories of love—love requited or unrequited, knowing or innocent, spiritual, intellectual, carnal, doomed' (2005, 20), his *We'll Always Have Paris* presents an interesting twist on the genre. His first chapter is temptingly entitled 'A love story' (17), but his relationship with Marie-Dominique, which prompts his move to Paris, is in fact a backdrop to his equally important relationship with Paris. And the 'Sex and Love in the City of Light' of his subtitle are not the carnal delights that he himself enjoys but Paris's history of eroticism that he weaves into the narrative of his life in the city. More details are given of Josephine Baker's banana-skirted rise to fame than of his courtship of Marie-Dominique.

The book concludes with Baxter's wedding, but the relationship that dominates the account of the nuptials is that between Baxter and France:

Marriage, said the *adjoind* during the ceremony, has been described as a long conversation. [...] The long conversation has been going on for more than fourteen years now, as much between myself and France as between myself and Marie-Dominique, and we haven't found ourselves lost for words yet. Occasionally, our voices—France's and mine—rise above a discreet murmur. When President Chirac elected to test his atomic weapons at Mururoa in 1996, for instance, my adoptive country and I had a bitter domestic row. (2005, 347)

The metaphor of a marriage with France, a partnership of sorts, is not found in any of the women's memoirs, but curiously is also threaded through that of another male author, Alister Kershaw, whose *Village to Village: Misadventures in France* (1993) predates by almost a decade those of the corpus. Like Baxter, Kershaw is somewhat reticent on the topic of his own love life in *Village to Village*. We discover almost accidentally that he

has married twice during his 48 years in France, but no details whatsoever are given, not even the first names of his wives. Indeed the marriages are only mentioned in passing to explain accommodation needs and never in terms of romance: 'During a brief marriage, my wife and I lived in a crazy Left Bank hotel' (6); 'The brief marriage had come to an end so that I didn't need an unduly extensive establishment' (8); 'I had remarried and had two children' (80, given as one reason for his move to the country). Paris, on the other hand, is the obvious object of his affections: from 'love at first sight' (1) to 20 years later when he realises that 'my great love affair was over' (65) due to the modernisation and Americanisation of the city, at which time he announces that 'Divorce, I could see, was unavoidable' (66): 'Paris and I were divorced by the time the culminating aberration [the pyramid at the Louvre] came into existence' (70).

The propensity to deflect romance from people onto places thus features regularly throughout the memoirs of Australians in France, whether due to an unwillingness to disclose intimate details, or the lack of a flesh-and-blood love interest, or perhaps a feeling that a relationship *with* Paris may ultimately be more gratifying than a romance *in* Paris, Paris itself being an object of desire. But while many of the women write of falling in love with Paris or France, apparently only the men go as far as contemplating marriage. Although only two of the male authors explore the topic of an intimate relationship with France, both recount it through the metaphor of marriage.

Now marriage is a story with romance most firmly at beginning and with a variety of possible narrative outcomes. Baxter and Kershaw use it to emphasise the possibility of discord, divorce and the need for dialogue in the relationship with France and Paris respectively. For the women authors, on the other hand, the relationship with France tends to be described in terms of breathless infatuation, idealisation, a dizzying loss of self-control, and such sweeping transformation that they write of their 'new self' and 'new life'. Rather than a symmetrical partnership characterised by the negotiation of differences (as Baxter and Kershaw recount), we find a tendency towards identification, a dissolving of the distinction between self and other. In a significant number of the women's tales the whirlwind romance entails a flirtation with French identity, an identification with France and Frenchness to the point of desiring to be French, as evidenced by titles such as *How to be French* and *Almost French*. In contrast, the male authors retain a clear sense of a separate self, and none of them harbour the fantasy of being French.

How is it that in many of the women's memoirs, the romance with France has such a profound impact on their sense of self? Apparently, this is not just a romance but a fairytale romance. As with Cinderella, the love story is closely associated with magical transformation—of oneself, of one's life. It is as if France possesses the power once attributed to fairy godmothers and waves a magic wand. Romance and metamorphosis come together in a particular variation of the classic fairytale, in which France is figured as the catalyst for change and the handsome prince fades into the background.

'It's because I want to live in a fantasy world'

A recurring image in the memoirs is that of France as a fantasyland with the power to transform lives. Among the memoirists, Margaret Ambrose sees France as 'a place where dreams become reality' (2005, 15), while Ellie Nielsen affirms that 'Magical transformation is an everyday occurrence in Paris' (2007, 21), and when asked why she is buying an apartment there, muses: 'It's because I want to live in a fantasy world' (61). Patti Miller writes of Paris as a 'fantasy city' (2015, 23) offering 'the possibilities of entering another world' (22). Mary Moody echoes the sentiment: 'In a sense, when I am living in the village it's as though I have completely escaped from my real life into another world; a fantasy world' (2009, 63–64; cf. Lawrence 2017, 13) and Henrietta Taylor insists that 'Saignon was, and always will be, a magical place where my life turned around on its axis' (2005, 219). 'France is magical and she calls us "home" constantly' writes Jane Webster (2012, xvii).

The theme of France, and more specifically Paris, transforming the authors is pervasive in the women's memoirs. For Hedley Galt, the sole purpose of Paris is to effect change. She proclaims that 'change can happen in an instant' (2013, 236) and when it does, she knows that 'Paris has served its purpose' (237) and she is ready to leave the city. When Janelle McCulloch reflects on her 'extraordinary period of personal growth', she attributes it entirely to the capital: 'All it has required is Paris' (2008, 233). For Lucinda Holdforth, Paris effects changes that are nothing short of a 'revolution' in her life (2004, 221). Retracing the lives of celebrated women in *True Pleasures*, she presents Paris as a place that empowers women to recreate themselves: 'Paris, the city that attracts women who

want to make themselves [...] Paris is where a woman can make—or remake—herself” (159). Accordingly, she writes of transforming her life during her three weeks in Paris, creating a new French-inspired self that will endure on her return to Australia. Holdforth is not the only author for whom the changes are so far-reaching as to constitute a different way of being. For Vicki Archer in her Provençal farmhouse, ‘A new existence emerged to replace the old’ (2006, 14):

Falling in love with this place all those years ago changed my life as I knew it; my *coup de foudre* opened the door to another life, my French life. (2006, 216 and back cover)

In Normandy, all the members of Jane Webster’s family undergo a transformation: ‘each of us had found a new incarnation’ (2008, 220). Other authors emphasise their own agency in the metamorphosis: Henrietta Taylor writes, ‘Before I knew it I was forging a new life’ (2008, 4); Nadine Williams explains, ‘I have fashioned a new me [...], a middle-aged Nadine seeking a richer way of living’ (2007, 17); while Janelle McCulloch feminises her new existence: ‘I mapped out a new life: one that was as different to my Australian one as stilettos are to thongs’ (2008, 38). These authors go beyond Judith Adler’s conception of travel as ‘performed art’, whereby travel becomes a medium for ‘self-fashioning’ and ‘bestowing meaning on the self and the social [...] realities’ through which one passes (1989, 1368), in that they see self-transformation as the specific power of France.

The transformations of life and self that are wrought by Paris and France are invariably regarded as positive, for as Barbara Biggs affirms, ‘There’s no other place where people imagine nothing really bad could possibly happen to you’ (2005, 148). Like Walt Disney’s vision of Fantasyland (Jackson, Rich, Phelps and Schumann 1955), France is seen as a place where dreams can come true. While the same dream is not necessarily shared by all, some oneiric images reappear regularly: Margaret Ambrose’s dream is of ‘a place where beauty, elegance and style reigned supreme; where every girl could be a princess; surrounding herself in beauty and adoring males’ without being expected to ‘have a stance on global warming’ (2005, 16). Marisa Raoul in moving to France has ‘fulfilled a schoolgirl fantasy’ of:

the moment I would stand on French soil surrounded, of course, by doting Casanovas who whispered naughty French nothings in my ear, whilst serving me *pâté* laden toasts and endless glasses of intoxicating Champagne. (2008, 20)

Such remarks appear as nostalgic iterations of an age-old fairytale of femininity and romance. To what extent, then, is love or the quest for love the key to understanding the proliferation of the memoirs?

What's love got to do with it?

The 'love' that appears so prominently on the covers of the memoirs serves less to denote thematic content than to add sparkle and to fulfil what appears to be a generally accepted genre requirement: that stories set in France include a love story, however peripheral. Among the books of the corpus, a love affair with France—whether Paris, Provence or another province—is the most popular way of satisfying this expectation. For the (relatively few) male authors, the relationship with France is negotiated, and either differences are accommodated and compromises are found or the relationship founders. For the female authors, on the other hand, allusions to love invoke the possibility of a fairytale romance in which one surrenders oneself to benevolent but mysterious forces. The romance can be with oneself, with a farm, with Paris or with France, but the important element is less the object of affection than the magical makeover that is unleashed by the romance. France is depicted as a land of enchantment where dreams and fantasies are realised in the form of a new self and/or new life, often labelled as French. This leads us inevitably to wonder what is French about this new existence, or 'What's France got to do with it?' Not all the authors share the same fantasy, and the following chapters will trace patterns and tensions in the portrayal of the new lives forged in France.

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