

1

Introduction: What's it got to do with us?

Preparing a conference paper back in 2011, I discover that yet another tale of an Australian in France has hit the shelves, already the 32nd book-length memoir of this kind to be published in 10 years. And although the municipal library has stocked 10 copies of Jane Paech's *A Family in Paris*, the website advises that all are out on loan. I click to reserve a copy, and find myself at number 49 in the queue to borrow the book. The local market for these stories appears insatiable. Revising the manuscript of this book in 2018, I scramble to update the ever-growing list of memoirs.

Like so many authors of the memoirs that are the subject of this book, I too at one stage dreamt of France, felt I belonged there, and found a way to live there. In my case, I was in my twenties, keen to enrol in a PhD, and even keener to escape from a destructive relationship. The grateful recipient of a French government postgraduate scholarship, I ended up staying on longer than planned, marrying in France and working as an English teacher. The eight years spent first in Paris and then Compiègne were transformative and enriching, and profoundly shaped my life in unexpected ways. They were an opportunity to discover, amongst other things, my own Australianness and to develop a deep interest in intercultural communication practice, theory and pedagogy.

Unlike the authors studied in this book, I have never felt inclined to write of those years, due perhaps to the lack of a confessional bent or a sense of their banality. And the model for a successful memoir of France in the

1990s was Peter Mayle's tale of rustic renovations in *A Year in Provence*, a favourite among Australians of my parents' generation, but so remote from own experience as to be alienating.

It wasn't until almost a decade after I had returned to Brisbane that the Australian memoirs of France started to appear, first a trickle, then a flood. The popularity of Sarah Turnbull's *Almost French* changed the template: here was a Paris-based woman closer to my age and keen to analyse what she saw, and yet many readers appeared to register only the aspects of the book that corresponded to their preconceptions of France. The project was born. As I saw memoir after memoir published and seized on by an eager readership, I became more and more curious: what is it that prompts this fascination with France and with stories of lives touched, however fleetingly, by travel there? Yes, France is a popular tourist destination, but the United Kingdom attracts four times as many Australian visitors as France does (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019). And Australians travel in very large numbers throughout Europe, Asia and the Americas without penning memoirs on an industrial scale about their exploits. The allure of all things French that I had felt as a young woman became a fascination with the fascination itself, and curiosity about the cultural variations available: if France attracts visitors from all over the world, what are the particular dreams that France inspires in different places? And how much do those dreams—and their realisation—really have to do with France, and how much with where the dreaming took place? In other words, *what's France got to do with it?*

The book pursues these questions as it explores a contemporary publishing phenomenon: the proliferation since the year 2000 of memoirs by Australians about their experience of living in France and the seemingly insatiable demand for them. While only one such memoir was published in the 1990s, well over 40 book-length examples have appeared since, not including fiction, short stories, feature articles, spoofs and self-published books. The early bestsellers launched a wave of publications that continues into its second decade. The memoirs, of course, do not exist in isolation. They are buoyed by media representations and enterprises urging us to live a French life, whether through adapting our lifestyle or residing in France. And in the bookstores they can be found alongside the memoirs of other Anglophones writing of their life in France: Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence*, Carol Drinkwater's *The Olive Farm*, Adam Gopnik's *Paris to the Moon*, Julia Child's *My Life in France*.

An obvious peculiarity of the Australian memoirs, in comparison with those from Britain and America, is the fact that they are overwhelmingly authored by women, and furthermore marketed to a feminine readership. Gender, then, has been a cornerstone of this inquiry. And the book will show that although the memoirs are ostensibly about France, they are in a sense more interesting for what they reveal about issues of gender and identity among Australians.

For although we might expect a focus on travel, intercultural adjustment and communication in these texts, this is the case only in a minority of accounts. More frequently, France serves as a backdrop to a project of self-renovation, and is configured to suit this purpose. The book delves into the kind of France that is constructed in the narratives, in order to discover what is at stake in the fascination with France, enabling these memoirs to gain such traction among Australian women at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The surge in the publication of these memoirs since the turn of the millennium suggests that they respond to particular preoccupations—whether dreams or desires or anxieties—and the task of this book is to explore these. In particular it asks to what extent France and its culture, people, ways and habits are central to these memoirs, for often Francophones appear to play only bit parts in the scripts of life in France.

The chapters that follow each probe a theme, a theme sufficiently present across the memoirs as to provide a potential clue to understanding their success and popularity. The clearest commonalities include the idea of living in France rather than merely travelling, ways in which a sense of belonging is claimed and validated, the framing of the story in terms of love and romance, the disciplined construction of a stylish life, demographic patterns among the authors, attitudes towards cultural difference, the language barrier, consumption of wine, cultural constructions of gender identity, and the view from the Antipodes. The various chapters examine the role each of these elements plays and the extent to which they shed light on the phenomenon.

Chapter 2 (‘What’s travel got to do with it?’) introduces the reader to the books and their authors. It sets the scene for the analysis, situating the memoirs as a paradoxical subgenre of travel literature. For while predicated on travel—after all, all the writers set foot in France—very little actual travel is recounted. The authors focus instead on the aspects of their everyday life in France that distinguish them from tourists, even

though their sojourn may be quite brief. For even when the relocation is clearly a temporary affair, it is recounted as a move to a different way of life and a different way of being.

This paradox is probed further in Chapter 3 ('What's being there got to do with it?'), which notes that a common trope among the memoirs is the assertion of a sense of belonging in France. Clearly this is partly a feature of the genre: the success of the books largely depends on their capacity to provide an insider's point of view. Curiously, however, the feelings of belonging turn out to be less the result of length of residence and cultural integration, but have instead been developed and nurtured at a distance, half a world away. Indeed, Australia's distance from France appears to strengthen and preserve feelings of belonging, in a way that ready geographical access precludes.

Chapter 4 ('What's love got to do with it?') highlights the marketing of the memoirs as love stories, romance appearing to be inextricably linked with France and particularly Paris as a destination. The prominence of love in the titles and on the covers of the books, however, stands in contrast with the rarity of stories of relationships between those covers. Instead, the stories revolve around self-transformation, while the romance is deflected onto places as the authors find themselves enamoured of France, Paris or even a decaying farmhouse. The self-transformation is generally cast as learning to live a French life, or even as becoming French.

Chapter 5 ('What's France got to do with it?') confronts this representation directly and asks how French this French life is, what imaginations of France and of Frenchness underpin this trope, and how it is made to appear so readily accessible. And it finds that the principal descriptors of Frenchness are not tightly bound to France, or French language proficiency or long-term residence in the country. Rather, they are more commonly identified in terms of a particular discourse of femininity. Chapter 5 arrives at the conclusion that France is primarily configured in the memoirs as epitomising postfeminist ideals of elegance, romance and luxury domesticity and offering the opportunity to embody them.

This argument marks a turning point in the book. The identification of Frenchness as a postfeminist ideal is a particularly strong discursive current, but does not go unchallenged. A tension builds around it in the corpus, a tension both between and within memoirs. The next three chapters pay close attention to memoirs that, while not ignoring the

strength and seduction of the postfeminist myth of France, undercut it or indeed subvert it to achieve other purposes. Chapter 6 ('What's class got to do with it?') investigates the way in which working-class origins, being older or having an ethnic background offer some immunity to the postfeminist dream. This does not, however, mean that it can simply be ignored; and we find that even those women who explicitly reject those ideals feel compelled to rehearse them in some way in their memoirs. Whatever the position ultimately taken, France is the site for weighing up the possibilities; the dream is never simply passed over in the women's memoirs.

In addition to overt challenges, we find diversions of the postfeminist narrative to other purposes, traced in detail in the following two chapters. Chapter 7 ('What's culture got to do with it?') undertakes a reading of Sarah Turnbull's bestselling *Almost French: A New Life in Paris*, to explore the difficulty of harnessing the travel memoir to the task of facilitating cultural understanding. The memoir engages in a play of genres, using the lure of the travel memoir to entice readers towards intercultural learning. The hybridity attempted is, however, a delicate enterprise, in that the lessons on offer risk being overshadowed by the expectations readers bring to stories of life in France. The chapter examines the competing seductions operating throughout the text, arguing that the marketing pressures are such that memoirs focusing on intercultural concerns still need to be framed in terms of a makeover of life, love and self.

Whether or not they attend to the subtleties of cultural difference, each of the authors is inevitably confronted with the need to communicate in French. Chapter 8 ('What's language got to do with it?') examines the role language plays in the 'French life' of these writers. Sometimes French language is merely used decoratively in the memoirs. Meanwhile, speaking French tends to be portrayed as either limiting, diminishing the author to a shy shadow of the familiar self, or taken for granted, with the author's proficiency in French concealing the effort involved in learning a foreign language. Only rarely is language learning represented as transformative, reforging the author's experience. One such instance is Ellie Nielsen's memoir *Buying a Piece of Paris*, which paradoxically details the process of language learning while camouflaging it as the tale of a shopping expedition on a grand scale. The chapter analyses this double game and its implications for identity and belonging.

Sitting in cafés and bars drinking French wines and champagnes certainly makes the Australian authors feel more French and is sometimes even seen as facilitating fluency in the French language. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the stereotypes of the two cultures, consumption of wine figures prominently in the memoirs, as Chapter 9 ('What's wine got to do with it?') demonstrates. What is nonetheless revealing is the extent to which the authors are able or willing to attend to cultural differences and modify their drinking habits in a French cultural context. In a number of memoirs, drinking patterns play a strong role in cultural identification and figure among the most tenacious cultural traits.

Chapter 10 ('What's gender got to do with it?') starts by taking a closer look at the small subset of Australian memoirs of France written by men, before exploring the presence of gender as a theme across the corpus. In contrast with the women's memoirs, there is little focus on constructing a new self among the men, and there are no examples of Australian men wanting to conform to a French ideal of masculinity. While relations between men and women are a prominent theme among the female authors, the topic is developed in only one of the men's memoirs. The chapter concludes by tracing the association of France with femininity in the memoirs and the identification by the female authors of France as a site conducive to women's self-actualisation.

Exploring questions of gender in the memoirs leads us to look back at the history of Australian constructions of gender, and to ponder the extent to which it has shaped the memoirs and the projects they recount. Could it be the case that this history makes it more difficult to imagine certain kinds of self-transformation in Australia, thereby contributing to the dream of a French life, a French self? Chapter 11 ('What's Australia got to do with it?') asks whether there are push factors to match the pull factors prompting the relocation to France, and draws on analyses of national myths and symbols to suggest motives for the continued appeal of France as a pole of identification for Australian women. The chapter then compares the current crop of memoirs with analyses of previous generations of Australians writing of their travels to see the extent to which the patterns of the twenty-first-century corpus perpetuate the patterns of the past.

As the various chapter titles suggest, the proliferation of the memoirs is not a monolithic phenomenon with a single root cause. When brought together, however, one theme emerges more strongly than others:

the tantalising possibility of a new, improved, France-inspired self. Analysing the processes of cultural identification sheds light on a discourse of identity circulating among a significant subset of Australian women, and shows that underpinning the willingness to consume elements of French culture is the desire to reshape one's life in a certain way. And although some of the books analysed are among the more naive versions of this discourse, its traces can also be found among those of us who have swapped Fouquet's for Foucault, boutiques for Bourdieu. The project of Frenchness may be most visible among self-confessed Francophiles, but should not be seen as foreign to those of us in the discipline of French Studies who seek to refine our linguistic skills and cultural competence in our forays to France. For these desires too lead us to pin a certain idealised sense of self on France.

This text is taken from *What's France got to do with it?: Contemporary memoirs of Australians in France*, by Juliana de Nooy, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.