



## Foreign Tongue: A Novel of Life and Love in Paris

*Vanina Marsot*

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Paris, the storybook capital of romance—of strolls down cobblestone streets and kisses by the Seine—may not be the ideal location to mend a wounded heart. But pragmatic professional writer Anna, who has been unlucky in love in L.A., has come here with keys to her aunt's empty apartment. Bilingual and blessed with dual citizenship, she seeks solace in the delectable pastries, in the company of old friends, and in her exciting new job: translating a mysterious, erotic French novel by an anonymous author.

Intrigued by the story, and drawn in by the mystery behind the book, Anna soon finds herself among the city's literati—and in the arms of an alluring Parisian—as she resolves to explore who she is . . . in both cultures.

## **Foreign Tongue: A Novel of Life and Love in Paris Details**

Date : Published April 14th 2009 by Harper Perennial (first published April 1st 2009)

ISBN : 9780061673665

Author : Vanina Marsot

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Cultural, France, Fiction, Travel, Romance, Humanities, Language, Womens Fiction, Chick Lit

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# **From Reader Review Foreign Tongue: A Novel of Life and Love in Paris for online ebook**

## **Kathryn says**

I LOVED this book!!

From the perspective of a Francophile and language freak who hasn't seen Paris in a decade & just went through a nasty break up this book had elements that spoke to me all over the place.

I laughed aloud reading this book more than I have in a long time & I'm still giggling about the fact that one of the start-of-chapter quotations was the "royale with cheese" speech from Pulp Fiction.

Obviously the people who have difficulty listening to the self-destructive mental processes of a recent deception & bad break up haven't been through one lately & good for them. However, I found this book excellent in its descriptions of the ways in which someone will dwell on idiotic tidbits when in the throes of relationship recovery. It may not be funny but it's accurate, and capturing those uncomfortable moments are part of what makes great literature.

I loved the random tangents she went on while looking up words for her translation, and I loved the descriptions of Paris. I love love LOVED this book, and when it was done I closed it and pressed my forehead to it wishing that there was a way to just absorb it into myself.

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## **Ti says**

The Short of It:

If a Hollywood ending is not your thing, then this book is just what the doctor ordered.

My Thoughts:

Back in April, I was lucky enough to hear Vanina Marsot at the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books. When she discussed her book, Foreign Tongue—what she described intrigued me. When we think of Paris, we think of romance, beauty, food and wine. There's that, but there's also a grittier side that we normally do not read about and when I heard that, I knew that I had to read this book.

After leaving a cheating boyfriend, Anna ends up in Paris. She lives rent free in her Aunt's apartment, eats a lot of pastries, hangs out with friends and manages to fall in love with another man. On top of that, she finds a job translating an erotic novel from French to English. What's not to love, right?

Well...there are some underground clubs. Clubs that basically focus on orgies and the like. When Anna's friend suggests that they go to one, she isn't interested at first, but after thinking about it for awhile, she decides that she is curious and wouldn't mind checking the place out. Reading about the club was a bit bizarre but I have to admit that I was a bit curious too. I mean, do these places really exist? This is definitely a grittier, dirtier Paris than I ever imagined but at the same time, I could not pull myself away from it.

Let's talk about Anna's work for a bit. She is hired to translate an erotic novel from French to English. This proves to be quite a challenge! For one, the novel that she is translating sucks (what's the French translation for that?). Finding the right word involves knowing how to interpret the intent of what is being said, and since Anna is only given one chapter at a time, she has a hard time coming up with the right words since she doesn't know the end result.

There is a lot of French in this novel. Much of it is translated immediately by the author but some is not. I was surprised at how much French I remembered from my four years of French class. As I read each passage, I had fun trying to figure out what was being said. It gave me an appreciation of the language that I didn't have before.

When Anna finds a new guy, it's not all bells and whistles. Olivier is handsome and a bit mysterious but you can sense a darkness about him. He has secrets! As Anna visits with friends and attends all sorts of parties, she has her doubts about Olivier and as much as she wants to ignore them, she can't.

Overall, this trip to Paris was a bit different than the other literary trips I have taken. It took me to places that I would not have gone on my own, but that is what adventure is all about.

I'll end with this (at the end of page 287):

Anna : Tell me, what's it called in French when a film ends happily but in a way that you don't believe?

Clara (Anna's Friend): An American ending.

Book Chatter and Other Stuff

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## **Annie says**

\*\*\*WARNING: This book is very vulgar.\*\*\* (Way, way, way too much for me, even if it is sporadic.)

This is perhaps the most difficult book review I've ever had to write, as my feelings are composed of such extremes. At first it delighted me, then repulsed me, then impressed and intrigued me, then annoyed me, and ultimately... disappointed me.

First off, allow me to praise the work. Vanina Marsot is an amazing writer—a compliment I rarely give out. Here lies her strength. She would describe delicate and subtle human feelings that I have had many times, but had never depicted aloud or in words, with such uncanny accuracy. I found myself many times just staring at the page in awe—here was feeling/sensation I was intimately acquainted with, yet completely unconscious of it. Marsot also knows words in and out and how to use them. Her words leap off the page with this deliciously literate precision, yet with an organic flow. I learned many new words reading this work—something I delight in completely.

Also, as I too, like the author and the protagonist, am bilingual in French/English, I relished all her astute cultural observations of both the French and Americans. The author really knows both cultures, and she's able to describe their idiosyncrasies with such aplomb and precision. It was a revelation. For example, at one

point she says:

“This concept of frivolity seemed another particularly French idea, a contradictory puzzle that, to them, made perfect sense, I couldn’t figure out if it was the vocabulary of the idea that startled me or the idea itself. The French always seem so practical so logical, so able to explain everything rationally...except when they can’t. In the realm of emotions, all that Cartesian logic goes out the window, and they leap to wild, euphoric, contradictory conclusions that they justify with poetic phrases. I couldn’t tell if it was a profound, heartfelt examination of emotion or a sinuous exercise in rationalization via word arrangement.”

“Yes!” I remember screaming out when I read that, because it is SO true of the French. She hit this strange French mystery nail right on the head. In all of my dealings with the French, I have had the exact same sentiment, but ne’er had I heard it elucidated so succinctly and beautifully.

What I principally loved about this book was how it took me deep into the realm of a city that fascinates me. I love Paris, and read books that take place here voraciously. Not only this, but being bi-lingual, too, all her musings about how to translate French into English and visa versa, and how it is sometimes simply impossible to preserve the subtle nuances of the original writer, really hit home. Plus all her deep questions regarding culture, upbringing, and how big of a part that language plays in our identity—so perceptive and thought provoking.

Now, unfortunately, we’ll discuss the downsides to this work. First and foremost, it ended terribly. Not terribly in an Othello way, but in a severely disappointing way. I get it, of course...she was trying to give it a French “neutral” ending. A “real life ending.” I get it. However, what she forgot is that this book is written in English. (Maybe she’s translating it into French, too, I don’t know, but I read the English version, so let’s continue...) Hence, the book is targeted at an American audience, and she has the gall to end it on this weird, abrupt, melancholy point. And you’re like, “huh?” And it’s totally ironic, because in the book, the main character is translating this erotic novel (hence the vulgarity) and it has three possible endings, all of which she deems inadequate. Frankly, most the endings of the erotic novel were more satisfactory than the book’s actually ending. In the end, you end up not really caring about the main character. She’s just kind of “eh.” Does the main character whine, become victim-y, and make poor choices? Oh, yes, all over the place—which sure, makes her human, but many of her choices chip away at her likeability. But what’s more... there’s no shred of hope for her life in the end. There’s a little perk with regard to her work as a translator, but that’s it. Most of the book is about her personal and romantic life, and there’s no redeeming factor at ALL in the ending regarding that. Plus there’s a sad, weird twist at the end that’s ill-fitting to the rest of the work.

After I finished the book, and the “Acknowledgements” section was thrust upon me, I just sat there... pissed off. I read through all of that (and there were some annoying low moments where she’s positively wallowing in self-pity and despair, or high on some laced pot, not to mention the truly disturbing vulgarity) ...I read through ALL OF THAT, and this is what I get at the end? That’s it? A weird, inadequate ending that the author thinks, in her hubris, is fitting because of its faux-Frenchiness? No. No, no. Bite your tongue, Foreign Tongue.

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## **KOMET says**

I first learned of "Foreign Tongue" through an online advertisement a few years ago. My interest in it was

further piqued by its focus on a young woman, with dual French/American citizenship (conversant in both French and English) and her experiences in Paris. As someone who has visited Paris twice over the past decade and lived and worked for a time abroad, I am drawn to stories that tie in culture, language, and human sensibilities.

Notwithstanding that, I had a lingering fear that this novel might prove to be an overly maudlin chick-lit book that would have my eyes rolling in disbelief. Thankfully, that was not the case. The main character, Anne, a professional writer in Los Angeles, leaves the States in mid-summer for a Parisian refuge offered free of charge by her Aunt Isabelle (who lives, in the main, in San Francisco) after being jilted by her boyfriend, who has become a newfound celebrity.

Anne opens herself to the reader, and by extension, allows us to experience Paris vicariously. In the process, she finds a job translating for a small publishing house, chapter by chapter, a novel from a mysterious figure who may be someone from the upper echelons of French society. At roughly the same time, she catches the attention in a cozy bar/restaurant of Olivier, an actor she first spotted at a friend's party a few weeks earlier. They gradually develop a rapport which blossoms into a torrid romance with all its twists and turns.

One of the aspects of the novel I enjoyed very much was Anne's relationships with a number of minor characters. For instance, the married couple Antoine (a writer) and Victorine (a scriptwriter/translator), whom Anne had met at a private party. Here is one of the exchanges Anne had with the couple:

(Anne) "You have a more comfortable relationship with cruelty, perhaps. After all, in French, to be *malicieux* can have a good connotation, like someone who has a delightfully pointed sense of humor: *malicieux et délicieux*," I said.

"But you have this as well --- the wicked sense of humor," Antoine remarked.

"That's true," I admitted. "I hadn't thought of that." Victorine poked a finger in the teapot and took it into the kitchen...

"We are not so different *à la base*," Antoine mused. "It is more a question of style, of the things we privilege more than you, and vice versa."

"Like?" I asked. (Anne)

"You value approval more than we do. We privilege pride, this idea of 'saving face,' so important to the Japanese as well. You are more open, we are more reserved. We like riddles, you like answers. We are more interested in the game than the outcome," he said...

"The game," I repeated, unsure of what he meant. (Anne)

"The game of social interaction," he clarified. "The discovery, layer by layer, of people. The unfolding of meaning. This is something we appreciate. It seems to me --- but I am speaking in broad strokes and there are always exceptions --- however, it seems to me Americans want to know who and what everything is, they want to fix it so it will stay put and they can move accordingly. Look at your politics," he said. "As de Gaulle said --- and I am not usually one for quoting him --- your country excels at attempting to impose simplistic solutions onto complex problems. But nothing is simple or fixed in life. People are surprising: vain, careless, flawed, contradictory, often blind, and full of foibles. This is diverting, confusing, maddening, and, of course, touching." He leaned back in his chair, pipe clamped between his teeth.

There were also some elements in the dynamics of Anne's and Olivier's relationship that were just as revelatory. But I won't go into any of that here. What I enjoyed most was the journey I experienced through reading this novel. I really didn't want it to end.

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### **Carola says**

While this book is (sort of) touted as a romance, that wasn't what I found most enjoyable. More intriguing were Anna's thoughts about culture and language as she is working on the translation of the book. Because she is informally bi-lingual, meaning that she learned French from her family and studying abroad she has some interesting comments about the often untranslatable subtleties and nuances of meaning in a language. Anyone who has traveled or worked in a foreign country or tried to explain certain colloquialisms to family visiting from abroad knows how hard it can be. Toward the end of the book, she remarks about how she's often felt more French in America and more American in France, never quite fitting in either place.

It's the language and culture, not the romantic interlude, that allow Anna to grow, change, to get a better sense of her place in the world.

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### **Eve says**

I really loved this book. The story was engaging, but I was more fascinated with how she dealt with the differences between French and English (languages and cultures). I have never read anything quite like this — with this particular approach to dissecting the languages and cultures.

Each chapter begins with a well-chosen quote in either French or English (she provides very good translations of the French quotes for those who need it, or for someone like me, who likes to see both versions presented and how the translation was approached). These quotes relate to language and culture and enhance the book.

The author also works in her “discussions” of linguistic and cultural differences naturally into the book, so that they are part of the story and do not disrupt the reader's flow.

If you are a French speaker (and even if you are not, but you love languages), I highly recommend this enjoyable novel that recounts an interesting story about a bilingual in Paris and at the same time provides enlightenment and insight into bilingualism from a higher-level perspective, exploring how we see culture and language.

(There is a longer version of this review on my blog here: <http://bloggingonbilingualism.com/201...>)

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### **Elyse Rudin says**

Delightful book about a young woman who gets jilted by her actor boyfriend. She moves to her aunt's apartment in Paris and becomes a translator for a fictitious love story. She falls in love with a director and the

story goes back and forth from the story to the woman's life in Paris. I enjoyed this book very much for it's lightness and yet well written prose. Felt as if I were in Paris.

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### **Julia Price says**

You know how sometimes you pick up a book, and it grabs you so tight you can't let go until the end? And then when it does end, you cry like a baby because you fell so deeply in love with each character, the loss is almost too great? Yeah. That.

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### **Jane says**

Picked this up on a whim at the library. A very light and entertaining read, with some substance in discussion of the particularities of French/English translation. On the Pastry References Scale, I'd give it cinques macarons. Some might also rate it highly on the Lingerie Mentions scale.

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### **Bob Kohn says**

Ok, what do you do with a book that is quite interesting and also has a character who belongs in a romance novel? The interesting parts are the insights into the French world view through the French language. The romance part is the main character, Anna, living in Paris, who pines for, goes to bed with, pines for some more, and finally rejects, the tall, dark and handsome theater director, Olivier, who, because he is "French" is also bedding another lady, etc. What carried me through the novel is the descriptions of Anna's work translating a steamy novel from French into English. For instance, Anna wrestles with choosing which English word best describes the French expressions, often quite poetic on the one hand and quite earthy on the other, for parts of the human anatomy involved in making love. There's a lot of that, and not just the human anatomy. And, it all makes one think how much language drives perception. Anna has some adult moments when she deals with Bernard, her publisher, who is quite likeable, which Anna is not.

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### **Joelle Anthony says**

I gave it 4 stars, but I'm pretty sure if I read the other reviews, I could be talked down to 3. But here are my thoughts without their influence....

If you've got no French, you'll miss a lot. If you've got some French like me, it's a challenging read, but I even got some of the jokes in French (at least, I think I did!) so it was kind of fun to discover I have more French than I thought. Still, it did make me a little bit tired at times.

I don't think subplot (the book she translates) adds much to the story. It adds a lot to the understanding of how things are translated and how English and French are related, and that I found pretty interesting from a linguistic point of view. But it was repetitive of the actual story, so a lot of it bored me.

So why four stars if I have all these things I wasn't sold on? Well, the ending for one. No spoilers here, but



she really pulls off the ending well. Also, every once in a while, the writing was pretty stellar. A line here, an observation there...I never once felt like not continuing on, even though it's not a very exciting novel. I would say it's compelling, but not exciting. And honestly, I'm fascinated by the insider's look at Paris.

I'll be interested to read more by this author.

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## **Barbara says**

If you love accurate descriptions of Paris, the French and their language, this book is probably worth your time. I enjoyed it as a fairly well written bit of fluff to read during a very high pressure time at work. However, everything concerning the main character's romantic problems was a notch below in writing quality. Two stars for the relationships, four stars for everything about Paris and the French resulted in a three star rating.

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## **Nancy says**

by Vanina Marsot

Where else but Paris could a woman, running away from a love betrayal, find comfort in the arms of old & new eclectic friends...accidentally get a job translating a dramatic french, pornographic novel...and fall in love with a handsome theatrical producer!?! Art imitating life, or life imitating art, either way our author and translator take us through the streets of Paris not remiss of one taste of chocolat, pears or caffe, I enjoyed myself immensely and pay kudos for a well written novel.

If you're going to escape from questionable job security, and a Hollywood boyfriend who is unfaithful, then Paris is the place to go. And if you are hiding in Paris from said job and boyfriend...ex-boyfriend, then why stick your head in the Seine...you're in Paris! Do not be thwarted because you do not speak French, for if you do you will miss out on a fun adventure in the "city of lights".

Anna is staying at her Aunt Isabelle's 11th Arrondissement apartment. She is comfortable here where she spent her summers as a child. She allows the city to embrace her with the help of some local friends left over from when she studied at the University.

The memory and pain of Timothy is slowly pushed to the back of her consciousness as she takes a job translating a pornographic novel, by a mysterious author, and she meets Oliver Vallant, a theater producer currently in production with his current/former mistress. He patiently pursues her and in quickly, with the help of some french lingerie, she becomes the vixen, the minx, the sexual aggressor. As the sexually charged translation progresses, so does her sexual relationship. But there is always the other woman, the star of his production, his muse. There is also the mysterious publisher, Monsieur Laveau and the always illusive author.

Where else but Paris could a woman, running away from a love betrayal, find comfort in the arms of old & new eclectic friends...accidentally get a job translating a dramatic french, pornographic novel...and fall in love with a handsome theatrical producer!?! Art imitating life, or life imitating art, either way our author and translator take us through the streets of Paris not remiss of one taste of chocolat, pears or caffe, I enjoyed

myself immensely and pay kudos for a well written novel.

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### **Penny says**

If you are a francophile, you will love this book! The plot is no Da Vinci Code..but that is not what you read this book for...it is for the love of France, the subtleties and complexities of foreign translation, and for the baguettes!! I studied abroad my junior year in France, and this book was able to absolutely bring me back to moments that I had forgotten. Through sensory description, Marsot was able to transport me to Paris, walking through Galeries Lafayette wearing Anais Anais; looking at medieval tapestries in dusty antique shops; ordering a verre de rouge at a cafe in the Latin Quarter; the anticipation of that first cup of cafe au lait in the morning before my first class served in a bowl; the chimes ringing as I walk through the door of my favorite little bookstore on a tiny side street; etc, etc. I could go on and on. French being one of my majors in college..I realize I am biased..I would not recommend this book to someone who does not speak French or is not interested in language. That being said..if you fall into the above category, and you would like a Parisian vacation without the price tag, I say OUI!!

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### **Laura Leaney says**

I enjoyed this book. I think it's supposed to be a romance - and that's the somewhat cliched part of the narrative - but what's more fascinating is the narrator's observations about French language and culture. The bilingual Anna has been hired to translate the erotic novel of a writer whose identity remains a mystery to her, but the process of translation is very interesting. I didn't enjoy the narrator's problematic love life nearly as much as this aspect. At one point Anna's friend is making her eggs and she asks, "How do you like yours? Baveuse?" The exchange follows:

I made a face. "That's such a gross word," I said.

"What, baveuse? It's just runny."

"It means runny, but it's the actual word for 'drooly,'" I said. "Bave is drool."

The deft and lovely descriptions of Paris are also pretty wonderful. I've only been there a couple of brief times, but Marsot's imagery conjures the sensory delight of Parisian architecture, cafe life, and window shopping for confectionary indulgences. This is a sexy little novel, but not because of the sex. It's the depiction of intellectual life that made me pine for France. Well, maybe the croissants and pear tarts were a factor too.

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