



French Toast: An American in Paris Celebrates the Maddening Mysteries of the French

Harriet Welty Rochefort

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Peter Mayle may have spent a year in Provence, but Harriet Welty Rochefort writes from the wise perspective of one who has spent more than twenty years living among the French. From a small town in Iowa to the City of Light, Harriet has done what so many of dream of one day doing-she picked up and moved to France. But it has not been twenty years of fun and games; Harriet has endured her share of cultural bumps, bruises, and psychic adjustments along the way.

In *French Toast*, she shares her hard-earned wisdom and does as much as one woman can to demystify the French. She makes sense of their ever-so-French thoughts on food, money, sex, love, marriage, manners, schools, style, and much more. She investigates such delicate matters as how to eat asparagus, how to approach Parisian women, how to speak to merchants, how to drive, and, most important, how to make a seven-course meal in a silk blouse without an apron! Harriet's first-person account offers both a helpful reality check and a lot of very funny moments.

French Toast: An American in Paris Celebrates the Maddening Mysteries of the French Details

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Andrea Guy says

I have mixed feelings about this book. It was a cute fun read about a woman from Iowa who was transplanted in France, marries a Frenchman and stays there. I think the problem I had while reading this, wasn't that the book wasn't witty or didn't offer a funny view of how the French were, it was that I genuinely didn't like Harriet, or her husband, Phillipe.

The other thing that irked me was how this book was definitely scewed to the more well to do people. But then again, how many poor schmucks like myself can afford to take off to Paris to live and while there find a man to marry?

The book is written with a combination of wit and comparison. Harriet likes to name drop the various doctor's who have written about marriages of different cultures. I'm not sure what she hoped to accomplish with that, as most of the references didn't feel like they added anything to the book. They just seemed to be there to make Harriet feel like there was some credibility to the story. But then again, why does there need to be credibility. It is a memoir! Not a travel book. Only it is a bit of a travel book, because Harriet doesn't share a lot about her life, just some viewpoints. Most of which make me dislike her. Have I mentioned that? I think I have.

The one thing I particularly found annoying was her take on the mother/daughter relationships. She felt that French mothers and daughters were a bit too close, citing that she didn't need to talk to her mother every day.

Harriet, that is you, and that definitely doesn't speak for the whole USA. Just as her complaints about packing her husband's suitcase for trips... Women's lib aside, I could think of a lot of worse things a husband could expect from his wife.

Harriet doesn't really paint France or the French in a positive light, yet it is obvious she loves living there. I think the reasons might be education and health care. Two things the USA could stand to shape up.

So would I recommend this book? If you were bored and needed a little chuckle and had nothing else to read.

Tammy says

About 25 pages in, I remembered why I hadn't finished this book the first time I started it. The author annoyed me, most especially with her views of Americans, of all things. She must have become more French than she thinks if she really believes that all Americans are armed and will shoot you for looking at us funny. And don't even get me started on her comments on feminism and political correctness.

I went ahead and finished the book this time. If it was a longer book, I probably wouldn't have bothered. I won't be re-reading it. Overall, I found it too narrow-minded for my taste. Maybe it wasn't intended to be that; I think the author was trying to be funny, but it just didn't work for me.

Mom says

I thought this was going to be a quick read but it turned out to be more detailed and absorbing than I expected. I didn't understand some of the references and didn't agree with some of the comparisons she made. Still, I learned a great deal about the French and how they think. If I had known about its existence before I went to France I would have read it before going. They always say don't talk loud, don't smile, make sure you get the correct change, always watch your back, but they don't tell you why. Now I know. I would recommend this book to anyone going to France for the first time or if you just want to learn more about our French friends.

Sarah says

I wanted to check this out because of the author's Iowa connection and because I love books about France. This was, unfortunately, DATED, poorly written, and revealed very little about the author. Not candid and not very insightful. Just about boring. It might've blown some socks off when it came out, but it's neither historically interesting nor relevant.

Ka says

Like the author, I am a Midwestern girl with a passion for all most things French and thus expected to thoroughly enjoy this book. I found the narrative style far too campy, however, and was left to muse on whether madame really is that dense or is playing up her Iowan roots to score points with an American audience. It is ironically a prime example of the untoward familiarity the French are so suspicious of, something she talks discusses *at length* in the book.

Nearly all of the insights in this text are considered with more eloquence and humor in *Talk to the Snail: Ten Commandments for Understanding the French* by Stephen Clarke. I encourage anyone interested in reading *French Toast* to try M. Clarke's book instead.

Meredith says

The book had some helpful insights into French psyche and culture, but it would have benefited from the pen of a good editor.

Rose Anderson says

Very thoughtful observations from a woman from Iowa married to a Frenchman and the mother to two half-French sons after twenty years in France.

Amanda Hoeft says

This book is very funny and somewhat informative.

Courtney says

It is more about Parisians than the French and sometimes she acknowledges this, but it was irritating at times. Think about it, someone goes to New York (or perhaps LA) and says 'now I know what Americans are like', sigh no.

I did find her discourse on the school system very interesting.

Also, when I went to a supermarket in Paris I experienced zero issues, is it a difference of twenty plus years, or did I just not go during peak hours?

Oh and her 'interviews' are just short conversations with her husband, not in-depth and often come off as childish.

It is more memoir, or from her point of view, rather than an overview of what France, or even just Paris, is like.

(3.5 stars)

Eric_W says

This wonderful book, delightfully read by Anna Fields, is the humorous memoir of an American woman who marries a Frenchman. Peter Mayle's observations of the French are amusing, but he always observes from the outside, whereas Harriet Rochefort married a Frenchman (providing countless anecdotes of French in-laws); has taught in the French schools (offering trenchant and useful observations of the rigorous French public school system, where children go to school for an education, not to play sports, explaining perhaps why the French foreign minister speaks English embarrassingly better than our president); and speaks fluent French (providing an understanding of the subtleties of the language Mayle cannot duplicate). The book is laugh-out-loud funny.

She marvels at the superhuman qualities of French women; her sister-in-law, for example, prepares a ten-course meal in a silk blouse and heels but no apron — with nary a spot. Harriet's contribution to French cooking is an attempt to introduce the sandwich as a meal concept. "When I first came to France over twenty years ago, I decided to introduce the concept of The Sandwich As A Meal to my in-laws. This was pre-McDonald's, when people like my father-in-law still returned home for lunch, a four-course affair. My mother-in-law, used to the preparation of two ample daily repasts, embraced my idea eagerly. We hence proceeded to prepare sandwiches for lunch and serve one to my father-in-law, normally the soul of tolerance. He gazed at our creation as if it were a strange living creature and upon being informed that you ate The Sandwich with your hands, commented ironically, "Well, why don't we just get down on the floor and throw bones over our shoulders while we're at it?" That, needless to say, was the last time we ever even entertained the idea of fast food in that family. My father-in-law has since died, but tradition holds. In my belle-famille, a sandwich is not a meal."

Did you know that the French think nothing of banging into the cars in front of and behind them as they move in and out of a parking place? And horror of horrors, one must never cut pieces of lettuce, but rather fold them with fork and knife then placing it in the mouth. And of course, Gruyere is never eaten the same way as Camembert.

A peek at Harriet's website is worth the time. She reports there: "Intercultural differences are the subject of my book, French Toast, which tells the tale of what happens when an American from Iowa, yes, IOWA (not Ohio or Idaho, if you see what I mean), goes to France on her own steam, marries a Frenchman, and ends up spending the rest of her life far away from home. In spite of the glamour, it's not always easier to adapt to a foreign culture - especially when you're the one doing all the adapting. I love France, I love French cooking, French history, French museums and monuments. My children were born in French hospitals and attended French schools from la maternelle (pre-school) on to and through university. If it weren't for my American accent, I might almost have gone native. In spite of all this, cultural differences continued to loom and I was fascinated to see that the differences became greater, not smaller, as the years rolled by. In French Toast I tell about these cultural differences which range from French attitudes towards sex, money, and even and especially, politeness. It's admittedly a very American viewpoint but the book has its resident Frenchman, my husband Philippe, right on hand to comment and counter my remarks in an interview at the end of each chapter. I call this the only book about the French in which a French person gets the 'droit de réponse' (right to answer) in real time."

Cindy says

I know this is not a sociological work but only a mere personal memoir but I don't find it particularly smart or insightful into French culture. (I don't find it witty either, as the cover suggests or as reviews have raved.) The author's views and interactions of the French seem only with the aristocrats and she never gives middle-class views on anything (which isn't her fault because her experiences deal with a lot of her French family); even so, it seems as if her views are skewed. She was shocked that if you were invited over for dinner at someone else's house, you had to not only ask the host family if it was okay if you bring someone but you had to give them the guest's name too. Isn't that just common courtesy? I RARELY ever complain about a book (I always find good things in almost every book), but it seems that she hates France more than she likes it, even when she claims "I know it seems as if I don't like France, but I do, really!!!" Like I said, I know this isn't a sociological book but if you want to read a personal memoir where you actually get something - anything - from it, it's not this book.

Ms. Yingling says

Vaguely interesting, although I wonder how much has changed in the twenty years since this was published. Also checked the sequel out from the library, so will learn more about French cooking as well!

Katelyn says

It's a cute book for people who aren't completely exposed to France. As someone who has already traveled

there and has learned much about the culture, it wasn't a whole lot of new information. I liked the commentary from the husband.

Fanny says

Oddly enough, even though the book states that it gives insight into the French culture, I thought it was more of an account of American culture than the French one. Reading this book, we have to remember that we always look at other cultures through our own cultural lens, the author included. As such, the insight into her culture was very interesting.

The style is anchored into American culture, which is why I think Americans will love the book and find it witty and funny. Other cultures may respond differently to this book.

Overall I enjoyed the book, and don't regret reading it.

Tina says

Full review and inspired dish amy be found at Novel Meals:

<http://novelmeals.wordpress.com/2013/...>

A fun read if you are a bit of a Francophile. This is a lighthearted easy read with insightful information on what's it like to be an American married to a Parisian, living in Paris.

The author, Harriet Welty Rochefort, had an adventurous spirit since she was a child. An early influence was her step grandmother who was a professor of French at Grinnell College in Iowa. Growing up in a farming community in SW Iowa was about as far from France or anything exotic that she could think of. After college she traveled extensively taking in the sights and different cultures of South America, Acapulco, the Canary Islands and finally landed in France.

One of the things I liked was her descriptive scenes and views on childrearing, education, food, manners, shopping expeditions and the instances when her "Americanness" butted proverbial heads with the Parisian attitudes.

Several of the beginning chapters are devoted to food and wine...of course!

From the book:

"Catching on to French food was both easy and complicated....I have a hard time trying to think of what to serve for two full-scale four-to-five course meals a day, seven days a week. My French sister-in-law doesn't seem to have this problem. In the family country house, where there are always at least ten people at the table, I watch with wonder as she casually composes each meal.

An example might be pate to start with, then magret de Canard (breast of duck) cut into little fillets. This is accompanied by fresh peas, new potatoes and followed by a green salad with delicious homemade vinaigrette and finally a big plate of wonderful cheese. Brie, Camembert, a chevre, a blue and d'Auvergne. This is followed by ice cream, cake or fruit, depending on what went before."

This is a Saturday noon meal. On Saturday night she makes another five course meal. Amazin
