



Almost French: Love and a New Life in Paris

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The charming true story of a spirited young woman who finds adventure--and the love of her life--in Paris. "This isn't like me. I'm not the sort of girl who crosses continents to meet up with a man she hardly knows. Paris hadn't even been part of my travel plan..."

A delightful, fresh twist on the travel memoir, Almost French takes us on a tour that is fraught with culture clashes but rife with deadpan humor. Sarah Turnbull's stint in Paris was only supposed to last a week. Chance had brought Sarah and Frédéric together in Bucharest, and on impulse she decided to take him up on his offer to visit him in the world's most romantic city. Sacrificing Vegemite for vichyssoise, the feisty Sydney journalist does her best to fit in, although her conversation, her laugh, and even her wardrobe advertise her foreigner status. But as she navigates the highs and lows of this strange new world, from life in a bustling quartier and surviving Parisian dinner parties to covering the haute couture fashion shows and discovering the hard way the paradoxes of France today, little by little Sarah falls under its spell: maddening, mysterious, and charged with that French specialty-séduction.

An entertaining tale of being a fish out of water, Almost French is an enthralling read as Sarah Turnbull leads us on a magical tour of this seductive place-and culture-that has captured her heart

Almost French: Love and a New Life in Paris Details

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From Reader Review Almost French: Love and a New Life in Paris for online ebook

Alanna says

Oh dear god, can I really bring myself to write a review of this "book"? This has to be honest to goodness one of the worst pieces of "writing" I have ever had the misfortune to read. On so many levels.

Firstly, we are supposed to believe this person is a professional journalist. Well, she may be an author, but she's no writer. I think the editor just had too much work to do here and gave up. Commas, semi-colons, even full stops pose a problem. The perspective and the tense chop and change between paragraphs and even sentences. There is no coherency anywhere. So she can't write. But can she tell a story? Nope! We are dragged through her ridiculous account of moving to Paris and finding the French oh so snobby and unwelcoming and after only a year or two into it she decides that she really should try and learn some of the language!!! Kill me now. And the French man is ever so dreamy and so much better than Australian men and knows how to treat a lady. Kill. Me. Now. And oh goodness me, the wedding, and the guest of honour being her horrid scrappy little chihuahua? KILL ME NOW!!! I have spent a lot of time in France, living, working and holidaying, and I have NEVER met ANYONE who resembles ANY of the characters in this book, all pompously presented as representing "The French".

I am a native English speaker, French teacher, French-English translator and linguist. I have spent the better part of my life trying to facilitate understanding between cultures, and specifically to bridge the ever-widening gap between the French and us Anglo-Saxons. Why ever-widening? Because of trash like this. Pointless whiney drivvle that perpetuates the love-hate stereotypes we've been rehashing and rehashing for generations now. Oh the French are so arrogant, we hate them! Oh they have such impeccable taste and fabulous cuisine, we love them! Oh, the French are too good to speak English and drive like maniacs, we hate them! Oh they are so good at losing weight and raising their children, we love them! Puke, vomit, give me a break! If you want a piece of poorly hung-together, trashy, navel-gazing rubbish to perpetuate all the zero-intelligence stereotypes about the French you can read in a \$2 magazine, then be my guest. If however you want to read something that will actually help you better understand this wonderful, rich culture and people there are THOUSANDS of books out there that would serve you better.

I would write a more comprehensive review of this book, but it actually just makes me really angry. The popularity of this book and its ilk undoes so much of the work I have personally done to foster mutual comprehension and help bridge the cultural divide. If we could both just stop shouting "you're so different from me!" for two seconds we would see how many of our beliefs about the other come directly from rubbish like this and are not in fact true. End of rant.

Emily says

I loved hearing about Paris from an Australian-born narrator, but I felt a real disconnect with the romance. She never really lets the reader in to hers and Frederic's romance -- I found this rather strange.

Liralen says

Hmm. Okay. I'd been looking forward to this one for a while—I am perfectly happy to romanticise the idea of picking up and moving halfway across the world on a whim; ideally, I'd like to do the same when I finish

grad school (minus the whim part). Turnbull is wonderfully descriptive about life in France, too: this isn't the sort of book where Paris is vaguely in the background. She's *in* Paris. Improving her language skills by leaps and bounds. Adapting to French ways of eating and socialising.

But, gosh. It's not that I fault her for experiencing culture shock—that's really to be expected. It's part of the theoretical beauty of picking up and moving like that. It takes so long for her to get past it, though: after three years of living in France, she finally decides that she has to 'forget how I did things in Australia and learn a new way of communicating that works in France' (184). That's a long way into the book to come to that realisation, you know? And again, I can't fault her for struggling, but I spent a lot of time wondering why she *stayed*. Was it the relationship? Because, well, details of the relationship were hazy enough that I wasn't really sure what kept them together, especially given Turnbull's difficulty assimilating. Or was it a faith that things would get easier if she stuck it out? Because I can respect that, except I didn't really see it.

Perhaps I am being unduly harsh. In many ways I was actually glad that she presented a more complex picture than starry-eyed romanticism (we'll get back to those starry eyes in *Only in Spain*). And I appreciated her assessment, towards the end, that no matter how long she stays in France she'll never be truly French—that Australia calls to her, sometimes, and that on some level she'll always be an outsider in France. It ends up being, I think, a more complicated book than I originally gave it credit for, with plenty of food for thought.

Rebecca says

3.5 Stars

I have an embarrassing predilection for books describing the ingenue immersion into Parisian life. When I see the cover with a french scene on the bookstore shelf, I can't refrain from picking it up and buying it. And they are generally horrible drivel.

But this one was refreshingly intelligent. Sure, Sarah begins the book with a fair amount of complaining about her perceived difficulties, but I began to realize I would probably be doing my own fair share were I in the same circumstances, and I decided to cut her a break and appreciate her realistic non-sugarcoated experiences. Sarah's training as a journalist insures writing that is strong and articulate, and her observations are tender and personable.

To clarify, this isn't a romance. The subtitle "Love and a New Life in Paris" is misleading for the reader. With very few PDAs, Sarah could very easily have been moving in with a tolerable cousin. Instead, she takes on topics such as feminism (or lack of) in France, the down-to-earth nature of a top haute couture designer, concerns with the refugee and homeless populations, and the never-ending fragility of Parisian self-confidence.

Almost French is a light, enjoyable read, but not an escapist story. If nothing else, it might dissuade the Francophile from wanting to run off to live in Paris, thinking more about paperwork and protocol rather than baguettes and berets.

Jenny says

Very repetitive, not very well-written, boring at times. I really wouldn't recommend this unless you are someone who is infatuated with Paris and Parisians, which I am not.

Jenna says

I picked up this book as one of those buy 2 get one free deals at a Borders thinking oh what the heck it might be fun.

It was a great deal of fun looking at French society and culture through the eyes of an Australian journalist.

It is a rather whimsical decision that leads her to leave her life and move to France and I know that deep down most of us wish that we could be so daring.

I highly recommend it.

Jen says

A longtime Francophile, I love these kinds of books. While Sarah Turnbull is Australian, some of her perspectives and thoughts are very American. It was fascinating to read how her thought processes and ideas slowly changed to reflect that of the French--or to at least understand French thinking. Some of the events she experiences are at once hilarious and humiliating, yet Sarah sticks it out, determined to remain in France with the man who drew her there--Frédéric.

As a reader, we see from Sarah's perspective how Frédéric was forced to change as well, becoming more lax with his French societal rules and stipulations. By the end, they had come to a cultural understanding.

Sarah has a writing style that is conversational...I felt as if I were sitting down to tea with a good friend to hear all about her French adventures. And at points, I felt as if I should be taking notes about French culture so that the next time I'm there, I can fit in better. But I learned that a foreigner can never really be mistaken for a Frenchman. We will always be on the outside looking in one way or another.

Kathryn says

3.5★ The idea of living in France sounds lovely, but in reality, I think I'd probably be lucky to manage living there for any more than a month!! There are just too many things that would drive me batty - the bureaucracy, the queues, the competitiveness between women which results in a lack of friendliness, just the general effort involved in living each day in a culture which involves a completely different perspective compared to the Australian way of life, as the author found out... I know there are compensations - great chocolate, pastries, and baguettes, being able to walk along the Champs Elysees and go to the Louvre and Luxembourg Gardens daily, to name a few, but I don't think they'd make up for the mental and emotional toll it would take to change my attitude and way of thinking!

Thanks to Sarah for doing it, and writing about it, to make me realise that even if I ever get around to learning the French language, learning the French way of life and living it every day is another matter altogether!!

Crystal says

This is the best I've read so far of the "moved-to-France-adjusting-to-cultural-differences" genre. Sarah, the Australian TV journalist, goes "walk-about" in Europe, meets a Frenchman in Romania, and then accepts an invitation from him to visit Paris. She goes and the rest is history, which this book chronicles. She covers the cuisine, the fashion, the dog mania, the trying to make friends, and many other situations. I particularly loved her description of the bafflement at going to a "party" where everybody stood around in silence with open champagne bottles but no drinking. After Sarah finally takes the plunge and starts pouring champagne in the glasses, she is told by somebody that they must wait for all the guests to arrive, which she thinks is a big disincentive to get anywhere on time. I too had somewhat similar experience when I cooked a big Mexican dinner for a crowd of French people (in Paris) and wanted to start serving margaritas to everybody when they arrived, but was told we had to wait on everybody. One person was quite late and I was really frustrated. I asked a Brit how they did it in England and was told like Americans--people arrive, you give 'em a drink.

Bien sur !!!

Lolab says

The author, an Australian television journalist, on a whim, heads to Paris to stay with a man, a French lawyer, that she's met only twice. The book is billed as a love story, though we actually see very little of Frederic, her future husband, other than brief caricatured appearances - after picking her up at the airport, he effortlessly whips up an elegant lunch, setting the table with crystal knife rests and an antique silver bowl filled with flowers. While contemplating the opulent table setting the author makes a profound observation that will be repeated throughout the book: "This must be how things are done in France."

We are also treated to such insights as 'French woman have no female friends' [due to French cultural pressures to be beautiful and sexually attractive, therefore all other women are perceived as a threat]. Okay. She also reaches the conclusion that the French 'like meat', and that one wouldn't dare serve, say, a veggie lasagna, at a dinner party.

This self-indulgent author whines and drones on about her difficulties adjusting to ex-pat life, illustrating with 'hilarious' anecdotal evidence such as wearing Doc Martens to an elegant cocktail party or brashly helping herself to champagne as the other guests wait for their hosts to arrive. We also get to hear her complain that Frederic's apartment, located in the lovely leafy suburb of Levallois, isn't located in the *real* Paris. [shockingly, after living with him for only 4 months, she starts to nag him to buy a place in the centre de ville. She, struggling to establish herself as a freelance journalist, with absolutely no income, actually whines that the 20 minute train ride to the center is inconvenient].

Annoying author aside, the book is clunky and poorly edited. It seems as though the author put together a collection of her rejected articles on ex-pat life and arranged them in chronological order and called it good. At times I felt that she tried to follow the general organization of Adam Gopnik's *Paris to the Moon*, but this book has nothing in the way of the charm or compelling insights that Gopnik so delightfully shared in his

collection of essays.

Fran Babij says

I really enjoyed this. It was pleasant and interesting reading and explained so many quirks about my own personality that I never realized were traits passed down from my predominantly Parisian, French family. Also made me glad I have enough Anglo-Saxon blood in me to balance it out. Surprisingly it also became the catalyst that made me decide to pick up my French lessons again after dropping them 20 years ago. Anyone looking for a TRUE inside view of French culture, both good and bad should read this.

Nikki says

Much, much better than the last book I read on Paris. The differences were that, in the last one, most of the major issues facing the author were because of her own stupidity. This one, she goes more into the major cultural differences that she found in the way the French live. Even though she was Australian, you could definitely relate to the Anglo-Saxon mindset she went to France with, which seems the same whether you are American, English, Canadian, or Australian. The same differences were there, the same misunderstandings, the same surprise at certain aspects of French behavior. You could definitely relate. It made the cultural differences seem so vast!

My only complaint was not one of the book, but that the author lived there in the 90's. I imagine that with the increasing globalization, internet connection, and younger generations, the cultural differences are probably much less pronounced than they were when she arrived. I definitely won't be as surprised at something I find bizarre when I go there though! From the etiquette at dinner parties, to conversation faux pas, everything was really fascinating. It further helped that she did her best (with the aid of her French husband no doubt) to explain why the differences were there: a shared cultural past, social hierarchies left over from times past, how women and men perceive one another because of the way they grow up. All of it. Very fascinating. And on a extra note of cultural understanding, I thought it was very interesting how similar all Anglo Saxon cultures are.

Sarah Hine says

This book gets a big fat "eh" from me. I really WANTED to like it. It's a memoir of a young Australian woman (indeterminately aged) who moves to Paris to be with this guy and she ends up staying and

discovering true French and Parisian culture. Sounds good, right?

I found it hard to identify with the author and never felt like I was close to her, truly understood where she was coming from, or found that she was particularly likable. All of which I think are important when reading a girly memoir. Memoirs are a difficult genre to write and I don't think she ever really got there, for me at least (although I accept that I am an extremely harsh memoir critic). I also felt that the book would have been so much better if ONLY she didn't have the French boyfriend. She sort of dances around this topic because clearly she doesn't want to make too much of it and take away from her cultural observations. In fact, I felt that as a reader, I wanted it one way or the other - either leave your boyfriend out of things, or give me more juicy details so that I can understand what your relationship is actually like. She sort of hedged and did neither. So again... eh.

If you want warm heartfelt stories about Paris and Parisian culture, I would much more heartily recommend Adam Gopnik's "Paris to the Moon" - I found his writing style and themes to be much more charming and enjoyable.

Haley says

I'll grant you that the title of this one is a bit cheesy. Luckily the book itself was a different story.

Sarah Turnbull is a twenty-something Australian journalist who, upon taking a one year hiatus from her job to tour Europe, meets the Frenchman Frédéric, who unbeknownst to her, she would one day marry. Taking a bold risk, which she later claims was the result of following her heart and not her mind, she travels to Paris to stay with him for a week. She never looks back.

In the early years she spends living with Frédéric in Levallois, a dull suburb located just outside of Paris, Sarah struggles to assimilate into French society. Burdened with homesickness, she grapples with the many perils of French living. Whether it's being chastised for wearing jogging pants to the bakery or feeling entirely ignored at dinner parties, Sarah feels like an outsider, unwelcome and unwanted.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book was its emphasis on French women. Anyone who has spent time in France will tell you there is something distinctly different about the French. Its people are unlike any other country in Europe, let alone the world. Here in America, we have a tendency to label them as snobs. French women are particularly hard to navigate.

"As soon as a Frenchwoman meets another woman, she'll look her up and down, check out her clothes, her makeup, her shoes. She'll be very critical of the other one...She'll be thinking: well, she might have nice blue eyes but she's got a really big bum. The competition is not limited to looks though...The fear is also that the other woman might appear more intelligent, more interesting to their husbands or boyfriends. Foreign females represent an even greater threat, apparently, because of their alluring accents and 'exotic' appeal."

Look, I'm from America, the country that gave them McDonald's and Bush. I should think my "exotic" appeal is nonexistent. In any case, I'm not sure that Sarah's description is entirely true. I have several French friends, and my experiences with them have been varied. Some have been readily accepting of me, others have acted ambivalent and standoffish until they came to know me better. Like Sarah, I feel like an outsider among them. They are all so chic, carrying themselves with a subdued confidence that imbues non-French women, such as myself, with a feeling of inferiority. They seem the perfect representatives of the female sex.

I'm far from being an extrovert, but I've often wondered whether I'm too upfront. And what of my clothes, are they too sloppy? "It takes time in France", said Frédéric on building friendships, and he's right. The key, as Sarah points out, is to be yourself. Frenchwomen will eventually warm up to you, and when they do, they make great friends. The problem never lied with me (or so I keep telling myself), but rather a cultural characteristic that dictates friendships be developed over sustained periods of time.

During her third year in France, things begin to change for Sarah. Not only has she begun to make friends, but she moves into Les halles, *un quartier* located near the center of the city. The move fills the void of a certain something that she felt before was missing. Situated near the Palais Royal, Les Halles, although once a medieval market place, is now a colorfully diverse neighborhood that is best identified for its many textile shops, all of which work for foreign companies. I indulged in Sarah's descriptions of her walk to the café each morning, passing by the many local boulangeries and fromageries while chatting with the local *clochards*, or homeless people. Certainly Les Halles is not the Paris tourists think of, but its character is what gives the city its heart.

Then too there are her descriptions of the breathtaking beauty of Paris.

"It doesn't matter how many times we do this walk: without fail I'm struck by the heart-stopping beauty of Paris...Perhaps because it is still relatively new to me or perhaps because it somehow seems preposterous that such beauty could be created by people. The city is a testament to civilization...Breathtaking beauty of any kind is moving. It makes tourists of us all. It anchors your heart to a place...The wonderful sights of Paris inspire emotion and yes, even love."

In fact, the story is not set entirely in Paris. Because the French still consider the country side *la France profonde*, or the true character of their country, on weekends the city clears out as Parisians travel to Brittany or Normandy to visit their family homes. Frédéric's father lives in Normandy, and as a result they visit him frequently. Whereas Frédéric is enumerated with the small town in which he grew up, Sarah finds it dull. To Sarah, her childhood home in Sydney has much more to offer. The scenario presents another obstacle for foreigners: no matter how well you adapt to French society, you will never BE French. You can never share in another's memories of, say, a rural idyllic childhood because you yourself did not experience it. Growing up in the country is, as Sarah describes, an important part of the French cultural identity, and it's one that she lacks.

Six years after she first arrived in France, she describes it as nothing short of an adventure. Looking back, she can hardly remember the girl who first stepped off the airplane, jet lagged and nervous at the thought of spending a week in Paris with a man she hardly knew. Through her many struggles, Sarah has developed a keen appreciation for the French. Whether it's their unique style, their abhorrence for *les mauvais goûts*, or bad tastes, their subtle humanity as seen through their treatment of the local homeless people, or even their innate Frenchness, which one moment will have you reeling with anger and the next thanking them for their gratitude, Paris is filled with passionate people who will surprise and inspire you. Simply put, there are some experiences that one can only have in Paris.

I really enjoyed this book. I learned a lot (never wear shorts in Paris if you wish not to be identified as a tourist), and laughed a lot too (e.g. "Tu veux une pipe?"). Most importantly, this book made me aware of what it means to be a foreigner living in another country. Moving to France is something I dream of one day doing, but this book, with its recurring emphasis on homesickness, made me question what it would mean to leave behind my parents, my friends, my country and even my sense of identity.

"It's a bittersweet thing, knowing two cultures."

I can only imagine.

Diane says

This is a story of a Journalist - from Australia - Sarah Turnbull who, acting on impulse visits Frederic in Paris for a week, and fall's in love.....

This is a book which I cannot leave much of a rating as I only read the first two chapters. I just could not read anymore, BORING is an understatement and the fact that I just could not "get into". Off to the charity shop this book goes in the hope the hope that it may bring pleasure to someone else, but definitely not me !!

Elizabeth says

Kirsten gave this to me for the plane ride.

I enjoyed Turnbull's interpretation of life in France. I also liked how she was able to find a line between her own traditions and the traditions of her adopted home. It was refreshing to see that she neither tried to cling to heritance, nor entirely embrace her new location.

The one chapter that I didn't agree with was her section devoted to French women. She argued that their ways were uptight and unnatural. I've grown up with several French female relatives and I would argue that for them, their mentality is extremely natural--almost primitive--in it's approach to daily life. I enjoy their frankness.

I would recommend this book to Francophiles, journalists interested in the life as a foreign correspondent, and people who like learning about cultural differences. Enjoy!

Mark says

Sarah Turnbull was a reporter for the SBS television network in Sydney, Australia. After several years in the role, she decided to take a year off to travel around Europe before she got "too old". While on her travels a chance meeting with a French man, Frederic Veniere, in Bucharest changed the course of her life.

Accepting an invitation to meet up again with Frederic in Paris as she travelled through, Sarah never made it back to Australia except for holidays. She continued her travels for a short while before returning to and moving in with, Frederic in his Paris residence.

Almost French is her story from the day she left Sydney and for the next six or seven years. I loved this book for what I wanted to get out of it. I wanted the feel of being in Paris, I wanted to know about Paris and not just the landmarks like the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre. I wanted to "be there" as she spoke to the French, dined with the French and shopped in French shops, I wanted to hear of their culinary delights, almost smell the aromas and I wanted to visualise France, its people and its places. Well done Sarah I got what I wanted

from you in this regard.

I could not rate this higher than three stars because I'm sorry to say but I'm not sure I 'like' Sarah as a character and therefore Sarah as a real person. For all of the opportunity and the pleasures she encountered, from the chance meeting right through her experiences in Paris and country France, she never comes across to me as grateful. The book is full of her complaining and whining about culture shock, not fitting in and feeling alone. I am sure it is not easy to be in a foreign land with foreign values, customs and language but I had a sense that Sarah almost feels entitled. By that, I mean that she presents as someone who 'is there' so everyone should make a fuss about her. She starts out by finding the French aloof and unwelcoming, perhaps even harsh but to this point, I don't think she goes out of her way to fit in. Towards the end of the book, you can sense the changes, feel how she has turned things around and yet she then seems to cast a downward glance on her birth country of Australia.

Although she is just expressing her own and true feelings I just was put off by some of her feels and comments. The many parts of the book where Sarah describes Paris lives Paris and enjoys France as a whole were most enjoyable.

Beejay says

As delicious as a mararoon from Laduree, and as charming as a canal-side village in Burgundy, for Francophiles forced to live so far away in the Antipodes, this lovely, oft-times hilarious, little book - taken, naturally, with a generous glass of red - provides a delightful interlude. Do yourself a favour, set yourself up with some wine, some cheese and just enjoy. Bon appetit.

Rebekah O'Dell says

C'est vrai — I read a lot of memoirs about girls who move to Paris. I suppose it is just testament to some kind of universal dream that so many memoirs are written on the same subject, and yet I pick up all of them. To me, this is ultimate escapist reading.

Delightfully, this was my book club's January pick ... and I didn't even pick it (though I might have advocated for it a little bit.)

There isn't too much to tell by way of sheer plot that is original – Turnbull meets a dashing, eccentric Parisian at a dinner party in Bucharest. After a few phone calls, she agrees (with some minor reservations ... like the fact that he could be a serial killer) to stay with him in Paris for a week. Frédéric is not a serial killer, and thus one week becomes two. After a brief four-month jaunt around Europe, Sarah finds herself back in Paris permanently. While it may have been amour avec Frédéric, adjusting to the City of Lights is not quite as easy. As it turns out, living in a foreign city is very different from visiting a foreign city, and Turnbull's first couple of years are fraught with good intentions followed by loneliness and tears. Eventually, Turnbull finds her footing, marries Fred, and ils vécurent heureux.

Though I was pretty thoroughly engaged in Turnbull's story, I think that may initially have been more because I am a fan of the genre and a sucker for the storyline. Parts of the narrative felt over-written (and self-admittedly cliché) to me. For example, on one of Turnbull's first nights in Paris she recounts,

I guess the circumstances are perfect for falling in love. Every skidding stop on the motorbike, each intimate garden, every candlelit café terrace conspires to spark romance. But is it the scene, the city or the man I'm succumbing to? A combination of all three? These questions don't even enter my mind. Who cares when it's all so much fun? Yes, I admit, I'm carried away on a kaleidoscope of clichés straight out of a trashy romance novel. It is magic.

The beginning left me feeling cold, rather than oh-la-la-ing. Interestingly, the tone seems to shift around chapter ten, when each chapter focuses less on the linear narrative of her transition and reads more as a series of essays on French life, culture, and the challenges of assimilation. I wondered if these chapters were bits she had published before.

Still, these essay chapters mark the biggest difference between Turnbull's story and the others I've read in the genre — it turns out that it isn't all about her. She muses — often quite fascinatingly — on well-known facets of French culture with an insider-outsider's perspective. French fashion, food, and politics are all analyzed under Turnbull's lens, which is the most effective and interesting part of the book. Turnbull as love-struck foreigner isn't nearly as compelling as the journalist Turnbull making sense of the French.

It's a good book — not a rave, but worth reading if, like me, this is the kind of book you like to indulge in every so often.

Jill says

This story of an Australian woman who meets and falls in love with a Frenchman, almost immediately moving to Paris to live with him, is a great illustration of what it's like to be an ex-patriate (particularly coming from a country with a relatively short history and moving to a place with a deep and rich history). The culture clash is evident and reminded me of my own experience living in Japan (a place of long history filled with tradition) as an American (from a place with a much more heterogeneous population and far shorter history). I found it comforting to know that many of us have similar experiences wherever we are. It was also a great glimpse into life in France.
