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Julia Child , Alex Prud'Homme

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In her own words, here is the story of Julia Child's years in France, where she fell in love with French food and found her "true calling." Filled with the black-and-white photographs that her husband Paul loved to take when he was not battling bureaucrats, as well as family snapshots, this memoir is laced with stories about the French character, particularly in the world of food, and the way of life that Julia embraced so wholeheartedly. Above all, she reveals the kind of spirit and determination, the sheer love of cooking, and the drive to share that with her fellow Americans that made her the extraordinary success she became.

My Life in France Details

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From Reader Review *My Life in France* for online ebook

Kavita says

What a beauty! It's been a week since I finished reading this and it's still stuck in my mind. I had never thought a biography of Julia Child would be of much interest to me. I only picked this up out of curiosity after watching *Julie and Julia*. I hated Julie but was intrigued by Meryl Streep in the role of Julia. But even so, I didn't have high hopes from the book.

My Life in France proved to be a beautiful piece of work. It is written by Alex Prud'homme, Julia's great-nephew, who spent days trying to get to the essence of Julia's love of French food. He used old letters and his discussions with his great-aunt to write this book. What is wonderful about it is the way it evokes feels of post-war France in a way I have never seen anywhere else. It's like watching a wonderful Jacques Tati film, only without the satire. I enjoyed the utter fascination of Julia and her husband, Paul, with France and French food. But Prud'homme deserves his own accolades for the writing.

I really enjoyed reading about the relationship between Julia and Paul. They had genuine love and respect for each other. Here is one man you can say is the man behind the woman. Paul encouraged her in every venture and was content to play the second fiddle. Most of the women Julia talks about appeared to be working in the 50s, which I found quite intriguing. It was also interesting to read about Julia's relationship with her extreme right-wing father right in the midst of the McCarthy regime. Julia herself was left-leaning and appeared to be quite rational about her country's foreign policy.

Paul was a diplomat who was posted in France. This is how Julia got introduced to the country. It was instant love for her. After five years in France, they also lived in Germany, Norway, and the US. None of these places are described in quite the same way as France, so they were not as interesting to read about. The book does become less interesting in the second half once the couple leave France but by then I was so hooked with Julia's life and career that my interest remained strong. The author's descriptions of the various friends, acquaintances, and relatives of the couple gave a depth to the story and were sometimes quite funny.

And finally, the food! Julia was obviously passionate about food in all forms, but she was crazy about French gourmet food. I must admit the French have a great food culture, especially the way they take their time to actually eat. Even though I am a vegetarian, I actually began to appreciate Child's dedication to finding the freshest and best ingredients for her dishes. Her commitment to learning new dishes and experimenting on new ways to cook was inspiring. Sadly, I could not use most of her recipes because they were not vegetarian, but I found a couple of aubergine recipes that I totally intend to try out.

Julia Child was a remarkable woman, and Alex Prud'homme is a remarkable writer. This book is eminently readable and enjoyable.

Izzy says

I think the reasons I wanted to read this book are that Julia's always thought of as a late bloomer, and because her travels were so influential in helping her discover herself.

Certainly, her life had great adventure.

Highlights: p. 268

Too tired and busy to go to France. "But then we looked at each other and repeated a favorite phrase from our diplomatic days: "Remember, 'No one's more important than people.!' " In other words, friendship is the most important thing - not career or housework, or one's fatigue - and it needs to be tended and nurtured. So we packed up our bags and off we went. And thank heaven we did!"

Her description of Provence, which she admits has changed since: "It was the cool, early-morning layers of fog in the valleys; Esterel's volcanic mountains jutting up out of the glittering sea; the warming Provencal sun and bright-blue sky; the odor of earth and cow dung and burning grapevine prunings; the colorful violets and irises and mimosas; the olives blackening; the sound of little owls talking back and forth; the sea-bottom taste of Belon oysters; the noisy fun of the marketplace; the deeply quiet, sparkling nights with a crescent moon hanging overhead like a lamp. "

What does it mean that the prose gets better near the end? I want to sail to Europe; how much more fun than flying! I want to see my car brought out of the cargo hold on by a crane.

I just saw a biography about Julia. It really was Paul who introduced her to food. But should you fault where you hear about that which you're destined to know of? And she pretty much comes out and says he dated every woman in Ceylon before he considered her. The biography used his letters to show how he was critical of her at first and then warmed up. What am I supposed to feel about this? I admire her tenacity; yet I'd be unwilling to date someone who noticed me as late as second. She has a different kind of attitude about life that really makes me think. She mentions that they would have welcomed children. I think, though she was very liberal, you couldn't call her modern. Maybe that's not so bad; I just don't think most people would do things this way. And maybe she stayed up nights crying, but she really seems too no-nonsense for that. Meanwhile, knowing I'm fairly young, I still worry about the appropriate time to have children, oh, nonstop. I kinda wish I could just make that kind of commitment to my own husband, so that I could focus on something else. But, for me, I always am never really sure if I'll want to be with him in five years. What do you think it's like to be not restless? But maybe she finally found that in cooking? Maybe I'll find myself someday.

Lisa says

This book was largely ghost-written by a nephew of Julia's husband. Despite that, it was really quite good, and he spent hundreds of hours with her, listening to her stories and capturing her distinct vernacular. I had always suspected that Julia was an exceptional woman, and this book verified that for me. I expected a limited memoir of her years in France after she and Paul married, but it covered her time from then until around the time of her husband Paul's death in 1994. She arrived in France knowing nothing about food or cooking, and this book is first and foremost about her learning process as a cook (and a chef, an author, and a TV personality). Second, though, it's a story of her life with Paul. I'm inspired by this story of a woman who worked for the OSS (forerunner to the CIA) after WWII in Asia, and got married in her mid-30's (unheard-of in the late 1940's!) to the genuine love of her life.

Anecdote: She arrived in France a fairly new bride, very nervous, speaking minimal schoolgirl French, and knowing nothing about food. They got off the boat, and started their drive to Paris, stopping for lunch on the way. She let Paul order, due to her terrible French and her feelings of unworldliness. It was a transformative meal. And the waiter brought the lunch, set it down in front of them, and exclaimed, "Bon appetit!"

I love Julia, so I loved this book. It might be a tougher read for people who aren't genuine fans (my mom: "That sounds really boring"), but the themes of finding one's talents and lifelong development and learning can appeal to everyone.

Lisa (Harmonybites) says

I found this an absorbing read, and I'm no foodie. But I think what's striking in this memoir of Child's love affair with French food is her drive, her dedication to excellence, her passion--there's something attractive in that no matter what the endeavor--as well as fascinating to get a picture of such an elite, esoteric world as high cuisine. It all started for Julia in 1948, when she had her first French meal. When she came to France she knew only a smattering of such French phrases as "*Merci, Monsieur*" (wretchedly pronounced) and was a terrible cook. She didn't even know what a shallot was, let alone what to do with one. One taste of *sole meunière* and she had an "epiphany." One that would lead her to study French cooking at the renowned *Cordon Bleu* culinary school, learning to cook everything from "snails to wild boar" and eventually lead to her collaboration on the ground-breaking cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and to her television show, *The French Chef*.

I'm not even sure after reading this if I *like* Julia Child. She came across at times as ruthless (she calls herself "unsentimental"), stubborn, opinionated--and ironically dismissive of those of different beliefs. I say ironically because she's so hard especially on her father and what she considered his ignorant views and intolerance. She was a liberal Democrat, he was a conservative Republican. And therefore, it seems to her, naturally a boob compared to the sophisticated Julia. Except that as she admits, it was only due to his generosity that she and her husband, living on his salary as a government employee, could live an affluent lifestyle consuming fine wines, escargot, truffles, Camembert cheese and *foie gras*. (Admittedly, one can understand her bitterness towards the GOP given what she related about her husband's brush with McCarthyism.) And while Child paints her father as xenophobic--well, her comments on the English made me cringe, and she characterized Germany as a "land of monsters." (Admittedly, when she and her husband were posted to Bonn, it hadn't been long since World War II. As for the English, she didn't care for their cooking--and that seems to have been a capital crime to Julia Child.)

Did I mention this is about a love affair with French cooking? Because it is. This made me salivate at the descriptions of Brie, bouillabaisse, baguettes. On the other hand, my vegetarian friend would probably find this book nauseating, and there's enough odes to red meat, cream, mayonnaise--and above all butter--to make a cardiologist weep. Nor could I imagine putting the effort, the time and expense, into cooking that Child described here. I'll happily leave the making of brioche and *quenelles de brochet* to professionals and limit myself to recipes no more complicated than *tabbouleh*. But I did enjoy the picture of post-war Europe. This was written by Child with the help of her grandnephew and based on the letters her and husband wrote at the time, so her reminiscences, especially of her time in Paris and Marseilles, are vivid and evocative.

Diane says

If you love books about food or about living in France, this is a must-read. It's the story of how Julia Child learned to cook French food and how she came to write that famous cookbook. (The movie "Julie & Julia" was partially based on this memoir.) The book is filled with charming anecdotes about Paris and Marseille, and includes dozens of photographs that her husband, Paul, took. It's one of the most delightful travel books

I've read in years.

What's wonderful about Julia Child is the confidence she can inspire in a new cook. I liked this quote toward the end of the book:

"The great lesson ... is that no one is *born* a great cook, one learns by *doing*. This is my invariable advice to people: Learn how to cook -- try new recipes, learn from your mistakes, be fearless and above all have fun!"

Richard Derus says

Rating: 3.875* of five

The Book Report: Truth in advertising had no greater champion than Julia Child. Her book is called exactly and precisely what it is: The narrative of her life in France. She begins her book on November 3, 1948, with the Child family landing at Le Havre, getting into their gigantic Buick station wagon, and motoring off across northern France towards Paris. They stop at thirty-six-year-old native Californian Mrs. Child's first French restaurant, La Couronne, where her husband Paul (already fluent in French from his first stint living there more than 20 years before) consults with M. Dorin, the maitre d', and decides the young marrieds (relatively speaking, as he's 46 by then) will have a *sole meuniere* with a glass of wine! I mean! A nice Republican-raised gal from Pasadena, California, drinking *wine* with **lunch**! Who heard of this?! *Mais certainement* not Mme. Child, *nee* McWilliams!

It was the beginning of a life-long love affair between Julia Child and *la belle France*, and Julia Child and *la cuisine Francaise*. It led to several books, several TV series, and a long, happy life spent teaching, teaching, teaching. Mme. Child had found her metier, at close to forty, in a day and time where living past sixty-five was ** considered to be ancient. In the process, the person she became changed the American, and possibly the world as a result, culture surrounding food. Yet Julia Child wrote this book with her husband's great-nephew Alex Prud'homme, who tells us in his brief Foreword that getting his garrulous old relative to open up about the feelings and secrets that make up the majority of any human life. His degree of success was *formidable*, given the generational and gender-induced reticence he fought against to extract the juicy bits from her.

Bravo, M. Prud'homme, et merci bien par tout le faire.

My Review: Julia Child was a fixture around our house when I was young. I got the TV-watching habits I carry with me to this good day at a tender age, and part of the formative process was *The French Chef*. My mother didn't like Mrs. Child much. She was a fan of M.F.K. Fisher's food work, which wasn't in sympathy with Mrs. Child's careful and precise measuring and nice and accurate timing. Mama was a feast-maker, not a dinner-preparer, and that's why she watched Julia Child programs.

I learned about enthusiastic appreciation of food from my mother and Mrs. Child. I was never a picky eater, and only rejected a few foods. (I still hate corn on the cob.) It always seemed like the ladies were having so much fun making these weird dishes! It made sense to me that it would be fun to eat them, and so it proved to be.

In reading this memoir, I immersed myself in the flow of Child's later-life awakening to the joy of food and the sheer exhilaration of preparing special and delicious and carefully thought-out meals for one's loved

ones. While I understand the co-author's challenge in balancing the need to afford the famous personality privacy against the buying public's desire to know the dirt, I can only lament that Prud'homme either didn't or couldn't press Child on the topic of her childlessness. I suspect burying herself in research and in obsessive experimentation was a means of assuaging her sadness at not being a mother. She was, or at least she is painted in this book as being, a very nurturing person, and given the prevailing attitudes of the era, it is unlikely that this absence did not cause her pangs of regret. I would have liked to see some exploration of that, mostly because I think glittering surfaces (which this book limns in loving detail) are even more beautiful when seen with shadows. It's like sterling silver flatware: When dipped into a cleaning bath as opposed to hand-polished, it's true that all the tarnish comes off, but all the character does too, and the pattern is flat and blah for lack of a bit of dark contrast that is left by the more labor-intensive hand polishing method.

The delight of the book was in Child's almost orgasmic recollections of the foods and wines she and her dearly beloved husband Paul Child ate and drank across the years. In the course of learning to cook the *haute bourgeoisie* cuisine that she made famous in her native land, Child came alive to the joys and thrills of sight, smell, and taste in a way that only truly delicious food can cause a person to become. It was the positive counterpoint to her manifold frustrations in collaborative cook-bookery. The travails of preparing the Magnum Opus that is *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* simply don't do enough to make the author come off the page and join me in my reading chair. I rate books based on this type of measure, this degree of ability to enfold and immerse me in the narrative and the emotional reality of the tale being told. I thoroughly enjoyed this book, but I wasn't swept into it and away to France circa 1950, and that was what I came to the read expecting to happen. In fact, when I saw the film partially based on this book, *Julie & Julia*, I was completely swept away and eager to read the source material.

In the end, I got more out of watching Meryl Streep enact Julia Child than I did reading Julia Child reporting herself. I was disappointed.

And hungry.

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Melissa says

Oh, how I love and adore this book. It's one of the best I've read lately, combining as it does my love of France, Julia, and food in one funny, touching package. Julia Child was such a unique, eccentric, brilliant woman, and I'm always inspired when I realize that she struggled along at loose ends for years before finding her true passion and calling.

Her marriage to Paul Child is beautifully portrayed in the book. He was quite a worldly, erudite man, and very forward-thinking for his time in the way he nurtured and supported Julia's talent and career. He was very much a driving force behind her success, but he always made sure she was the one who got to shine. They lived a fascinating life even before her career began, however, living all over the world while Paul was a government official. WWII Asia, post-war Europe, the McCarthy witch hunt -- there's a lot more than just cooking stories in the book.

The cooking stories are great, however. I loved her description of her seminal first meal in France, the one that began her obsession with French cuisine. She really does credit that one meal with being the start of everything that was to follow, from her training at the Cordon Bleu, to the formation of L'Ecole des Trois Gourmandes with Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle, to the three of them setting about writing *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. The amount of work that they, Julia especially, put into researching and writing the cookbook is another inspiration. The woman was not averse to hard work, that's for sure.

I really can't say enough about *My Life in France*. I absolutely loved reading it, and it made me adore Julia even more than before. She really was a treasure.

Larissa says

Years ago, in preparation for a class project in a YA Lit class in library school, my professor asked me who my hero was. (The having of a hero apparently being a given.) I told her that I didn't really have heroes and she was aghast. "No heroes?" she asked sadly, before brightening just as quickly and asking, "What about Elenore Roosevelt?"

After reading *My Life in France*, however, I am happy to report that I am as close to having a hero as I've ever been. Julia Child: left-leaning, wayward daughter to her conservative parents, left home to pursue work with the Office of Strategic Services (the precursor to the CIA), lived in multiple countries in South Asia. Met the love of her life, with whom she shared a love of travel and good food, never had kids. Stumbled upon her life's work in her late thirties, learned a foreign language fluently (and several others semi-conversantly) in her late thirties, made a splendid success of herself in her forties. Had a wacky high-pitched voice to match her wacky, high-pitched personality. Could make fun of her height (over six feet) and her 'gargoyle feet' without seeming to feel secretly bad about those qualities. Clearly enjoyed her wine. Not embarrassed to be goofy. All about making a refined or otherwise inaccessible medium/field (French cuisine) accessible and interesting to a general audience without talking down to them. Self-motivated, ambitious, curious, unapologetic, and a big fan of making mistakes in public (that is to say, on air) and then learning to live with them.

Yes, I'd say that Julia Child is at the very least going to be my emotional-professional-spiritual guide going forward, if not simply being referred to as my absolute most favorite person I've never met ev-er.

Bon Appetit!

Yvonne says

This was a Christmas gift from my best-friend-forever Ariel, and a perfect read not only for foodies and urban farmgirls like myself, but anyone who's going through the "if not now, when?" blues. As some previous Goodreaders have already noted, it's a bit of a revelation to read about someone so famous (or infamous, if you've seen Dan Ackroyd's histrionic impersonation of "Jules") being such a late bloomer. This is America, and even though Miss Thing found herself in France, we prefer our great ones to know their calling and find their way as early as possible. In the womb, if you can swing it. Child is an engaging writer, and the book details the almost decade of Child slowly, carefully building herself up from someone who truly had difficulty boiling water to the grande dame of the culinary world we know and love today. She

found a passion and followed it without worrying (much) about how it would pan out, no pun intended. Mastering the perfect oeufs was its own reward. Also? Doesn't sound like working for The Man has changed much in 70 years. There are some eyerolling tales here of the Childs being tossed about like an old Raggedy Ann doll by their employer, the U.S. government, that will make anyone who collects a paycheck nod with recognition. (Except that startling part about husband Paul being investigated by the government for suspected homosexuality. Apparently they suss'd out such tendencies back then by making you take a trip to the home office and requesting you take your pants down. If you refuse, apparently you weren't gay and could keep your job! Oy.) But yes, if you love food, travel, cooking, late bloomers, France, tiny cars, dogged pursuit of unlikely passions and hobbies, and maybe Julia, this one's for you.

joyce g says

Well what can I add to my loving Julia Child as a food personality and chef. She is iconic in her love of life and someone I have always admired.

Never Apologize!!

Kathryn says

A thorough delight! After all her marvelous culinary contributions, Julia Child (with her nephew, Alex Prud'homme) has created a literary gem--one that will no doubt fill your tastebuds with longing but will satisfy many other senses as it is a joyous, exuberant, intelligent and touching memoir sharing her love for husband Paul, for France, and for good food! I admit that I was fascinated by Julia Child's cooking shows when they aired re-runs on PBS during my childhood--what a big woman, with such a delightfully funny voice, so very excited about cooking chickens and chopping onions! I've maintained a sort of distant fondness ever since, although now that I'm grown-up and have my own kitchen, I really hadn't given her much thought until I watched the charming "Julie and Julia" and was enchanted by Julia and Paul's heartwarming marriage and Julia's intelligence, determination and spirit. Reading her book made me wish the entire movie had just focused on her life! (It did a very good job of capturing the essentials but the book is, as always, so much MORE!)

For those who know Julia Child through her cooking shows, and her down-to-earth personality full of warmth and humor, you will find all of that in her book. And while Julia said that her work really had helped her develop as an individual she really was so much more than just a good cook. Her intelligence led her to work for the OSS (a predecessor to the CIA) during WWII where, in China, she met Paul, ten years her senior, a highly intelligent and artistic man who loved painting and photography and joined her in her liberal political views. His fascinating government job as a sort of cultural ambassador and PR man--designing exhibitions in foreign countries, maintaining good international relations, etc.--led them to various countries. It was upon her arrival in France and her very first meal at a French restaurant that Julia had a self-proclaimed "epiphany" and realized that she wanted to mold her life around good food. Julia learned French, began to take cooking classes--to give her something to do as a way of making Paris "home" Yet her passion and her talents grew beyond her home kitchen. The rest, as they say, is history!

Paul's support of Julia's endeavors was paramount even as she had to uproot every few years to move for his new assignments--they truly seemed a team. I loved the details about their life, from the sweet French stray cat that adopted them in Paris, to the delightful characters they met in the French countryside, to Julia's

confession of loving rubber stamping, to her frustration over not being able to express her political views eloquently enough. The Childs thrived on intellectual society--"eggheads", as Julia called them, but those who enjoyed discussing ideas and weren't too stuck in their own ideology--and those who appreciated the arts, too. The writing style is engaging and delightful and the descriptions of France and of food made me long to visit and partake of the feast (though my vegetarian tendencies caused me to cringe at a few of the recipes, I must admit!) Though the entire book does not take place in France (it follows into their stationing in subsequent countries while Julia worked on her cookbook and to America when she began her TV series) everything in it is rooted to Julia's French epiphany and how her calling in life really began in France. It's also a marvelous glimpse at history since it briefly mentions Paul and Julia's war-time assignment, a France still raw from the war, the rise of the Communist threat and McCarthy-era hunts, and the Apollo flight! Julia's "The French Chef" cooking show was the first successful television cooking instruction program and I loved how she always referred to it as "teaching." In her second round of shows, she had the idea to travel to France to film many of the time-honored food preparation techniques that, she feared, would sooner or later phase out in the light of more modern and "convenient" technology--she wished for the shows to be a sort of time capsule and monument to the culinary tradition with which she had first fallen in love.

For those who saw and loved the movie, hurry up and read the book! You will learn so many more fascinating and charming details about Julia's life. But, truly, I would recommend this book to anyone--Julia Child fan, Francophile, gourmet, anyone interested in spending a few hours with an intelligent, warm-hearted and humorous woman whom you also wish could stay and help you cook (and then eat) dinner! :-)

"No one is born a great cook, one learns by doing. This is my invariable advice to people: Learn how to cook--try new recipes, learn from your mistakes, be fearless, and above all have fun! ... In all the days since that succulent [first:] meal [in France:], I have yet to lose the wonder and excitement that it inspired in me. ... The pleasures of the table, and of life, are infinite!" -- Julia Child

Michael says

A nice window on Child's love affair with France and its food starting in the post war period. Her relationship with her husband Paul was a high point of the book. I appreciated her practical and good humored approaches to the challenges and solutions to helping the average household achieving quality meals. Some of her friendships and conflicts have some life and color, but for the most part the story came across as bland and sanitized. Some of her passion for particular foods comes through, such as for home-made mayonnaise and French bread. Ultimately, there was not enough real life drama (e.g. the "thrill of victory and the agony of defeat"), and I expected more humor. Maybe I was spoiled by the great channeling of Child by Meryl Streep in the movie "Julie and Julia."

Mahlon says

I've never been a fan of Julia Child, and whenever I ran across her show on PBS I'd make a conscious effort to change the channel, which was why I was surprised when *My Life in France* turned out to be one of the most well-written, engaging Autobiographies I've read in quite awhile. The book covers roughly the same time period as the movie *Julie & Julia* except that it extends into the mid-70's and discusses the beginning of her TV career and the writing of her second book. Even though it was completed by her great-nephew and published after her death, Julia's unique voice and enthusiasm shine through. The reader will feel as if they

are having a conversation with her over lunch. Julia's love of the food and people of France, as well as her husband Paul, permeate this book, and allow the reader to get a feeling for her as a person, rather than just an imposing, 2-D TV personality.

Like a hearty meal or a rich dessert, this is a book to be savored until the very last bite..Bon appétit!

Melora says

Interesting. I can't say I was crazy about the style, or Julia herself, for that matter, but her enthusiasm and energy came across clearly (relentlessly!) and I found her story to be, mostly, engaging.

Though I'm not actually interested in French food as a general thing, I do remember Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* as a fixture on my mom's cookbook shelf, and I find the social history aspect of the thing – the growing curiosity and excitement about gourmet cooking alongside the increasing availability use of convenience foods among American home cooks in the 50's and early 60's – an appealing subject.

As I read I found myself swinging between aggravation at her brash, self-congratulatory tone and admiration for her passion, curiosity, and drive. I can only imagine how exhausting she must have been to work with, but what a dynamo! And there were several points where my irritation at her “holier than thou” attitude about her father or others was mitigated by her fuller explanation of circumstances – the McCarthy witch hunts really were awful, and the racist, anti-Semitic attitudes of her father and his country club set were instrumental in allowing these un-American persecutions to last as long as they did. Her letter to a McCarthyite committee member at Smith College, Child's alma mater, who was recklessly communist-hunting among the school's professors, inclined me to forgive her a fair number of condescending generalizations about Americans:

”In the blood-heat of pursuing the enemy, many people are forgetting what we are fighting for. We are fighting for our hard-won liberty and freedom, for our Constitution and the due processes of our laws; and for the right to differ in ideas, religion, and politics. And I am convinced that in your zeal to fight against our enemies, you, too, have forgotten what you are fighting for.”

As I said, I'm not a “foodie,” but there were places where Julia's lovingly detailed descriptions of the taste, texture, and smell of meals made me (briefly) feel like getting up to go mess around in the kitchen. Multi-course, complicated meals aren't my thing, but visions of luscious slices of beef wrapped in delicate buttery pastry *were* dancing in my head. I've never seen her on television, but I'm going to look for some episodes of her show now – her excitement about delicious food really comes across in this book. The challenge of writing down complicated recipes in a way that fully explains but does not intimidate was something I'd not thought much of but learned to appreciate here, and also the issue of translating recipes for readers whose ingredients may be different from the ones the author is using (French flour vs American flour, French chocolate vs American, etc.). Who'd have thought?

Still, there were several aspects of the book I found annoying. The writing itself probably well conveys Julia's storytelling style – it is very breezy, enthusiastic, and sincere. The way the book was written – Julia told stories to Alex Prud-homme and he wrote them up and showed them to her to approve – is very evident. This offers immediacy, but also gives a certain “jumpiness.” Especially in the case of Julia's relationship

with her collaborator, Simone Beck, she shifts between describing Simca as a dear friend and valuable partner to claiming that she was careless, uncooperative, and unreliable. Sometimes things are mentioned which *seem* as though they will have some relevance to the unfolding story, and then they never do. There are some things that struck me as odd that may simply be a function of a ninety-two year old looking back on her life. She describes a restaurant dinner that she and Paul had in France: "Here we were, two young people obviously of rather modest circumstances, and we had been treated with the utmost cordiality, as if we were honored guests. The service was deft and understated, and the food was spectacular." You might think that they were in their early twenties at this time, but actually Paul was 46 and Julia was 36. And, similarly, she tells about her younger sister visiting them and making obnoxious prank calls to Parisian shops. To hear Julia describe it she clearly thought her sister was engaging in adorably youthful hijinx, but her sister was 31 at the time. In places her dated slang also was a distraction. Still, the story of how an aimless new bride developed into an internationally known cook and author, and how she became an iconic figure on television, rises above these peculiarities and flaws and offers some interesting insights into American social history. Three and a half stars.

Dana Stabenow says

I spent the summer of 1987 in Paris, studying beginning French at the Sorbonne and staying at the Cité Universitaire, in a program geared toward older students. Some of them wanted to take a cooking class, and the Sorbonne organized it for them. They needed one more student to make it go, and I was browbeaten into filling the empty space.

Understand, I was raised on the five Alaskan staples of Spam, Bisquik, Velveeta, pilot bread and Carnation Instant Milk. If we didn't get our moose that year we didn't eat meat, except on my birthday, when I got pork chops no matter what. We got all the salmon and king crab we could eat for free. The salmon was mostly fried. The crab was mostly boiled. The first fresh milk I ever drank was in college. The first real cheese, same. Remember those Kraft Cracker Barrel packages of four logs of four different kinds? Until then I thought I hated cheese.

So at the time I went to this cooking school, my most complicated prepared meal was a hamburger. Claudine, our chef, went around the class, asking where we were from, and when I said Alaska her eyes lit up. "Alaska," she said, "sauvage..." and made up a roux for wild game on the spot just for me.

I've been playing catchup in the kitchen ever since. I can't believe it's taken me this long to discover Julia Child.

This book is the story of her life in France, from the first oyster in Rouen to the last pot roast at La Pitchoune in Provence. It's a love story, of her marriage with Paul Child, who is about the most intelligent, charming man I've ever met between the covers of a book. It's a voyage of discovery into French cuisine, into the science of cooking, into collaborating on and writing a cookbook, or any book for that matter. And it's a mesmerizing walk through Paris looking over Julia's shoulder. The first year she says

By now I knew that French food was it for me. I couldn't get over how absolutely delicious it was. Yet my friends, both French and American, considered me some kind of a nut: cooking was far from being a middle-class hobby, and they did not understand how I could possibly enjoy doing all the shopping and cooking and serving by myself. Well, I did! And Paul encouraged me to ignore them and pursue my passion.

(You'll remember what I said about Paul being intelligent and charming.)

The how-to portion of this book is fascinating. French ingredients are different from American ingredients and the French learn cooking by watching, not reading recipes, so Julia would take the recipes of her French collaborators and translate them and the ingredients and the measurements of the ingredients into something an American cook could, first, buy the ingredients for in America, and second, understand and recreate. And then she'd test them and test them and test them and test them again, and she and Paul would eat them and eat them and eat them and eat them again until it was foolproof enough to unleash upon American cooks. *"No one is born a great cook," she says, "one learns by doing."*

In between they'd drive around France and eat in great restaurants. In a more perfect world I would have been their child.

She concludes with a remembrance of that first, marvelous meal in Rouen

...the sole meuniere I ate at La Couronne on my first day in France, in November 1948. It was an epiphany.

In all the years since that succulent meal, I have yet to lose the feelings of wonder and excitement that it inspired in me. I can still almost taste it. And thinking back on it now reminds me that the pleasures of the table, and of life, are infinite -- toujours bon appetit!"

I gotta say, I got a little teary at the end of this book. And I just ordered my first ever copy of Mastering the Art of French Cooking. Both volumes.

Kelly says

I did not grow up on Julia Child. I'm too young to have watched her TV show, and my mom wasn't the type to own any of her cookbooks (we stuck to mostly Italian recipes handed down from my dad's mom and ranch-style cooking- or, if we were unlucky, my British nanny's "traditional" English dishes she insisted we try). I barely knew who she was before I started cooking a few years ago. I admit that I wasn't really interested in her until the recent movie *Julie and Julia*, which definitely made me want to know more. What can I say? Meryl Streep's powers are infinite.

I say this just so you're aware that I don't have any childhood memories that mean that this book is illuminated in a shiny, impenetrable blanket of nostalgia (not that there is anything wrong with those blankets. I have them for other things! Just not for this). Nonetheless, I really liked this book. I don't want to overstate this. The book is what it says it is, and you should sign up for it because you would like to read about what Julia Child did in France, what came of her trip in France, the writing of French cookbooks, and how she got started as *The French Chef*. There is food, and a lot of it. Everything from incredibly detailed memories of menus she ate or cooked for people in France in 1950, to explanations of her experiments with translating French foods to the American market to the trials and tribulations of publishing her cookbook. So far, so expected. And, frankly, so good. She is excellent at describing a sense memory of taste so that even if you're not quite sure what a dish is, you're very sure that you want to eat it.

The unexpected part, which I loved, was Julia's personal transformation. I don't necessarily mean the inspirational tale of finding happiness in going native in a foreign country that inspired a thousand imitators of the *Under the Tuscan Sun* variety. I meant the other side of the story, her prickly growth as a person. The

way these stories are told (and it should be noted that they are written by her great-nephew, though with her approval), her very distinctive voice seems to express not only the sort of warmth and charm that drew people to her, but also the other woman hiding behind that. I really identified with that other woman that she seemed embarrassed to talk about too much. She was the girl who was smart and restless enough to long for more than the slot that life had lined up for her (housewife in unthinking Republican Pasadena), but, so it seemed, with a self-esteem low enough that she didn't think herself as smart as the artsy, literate people that she longed to be around (like her husband). I could relate to that- I've been that girl. Forever in-between in your own mind, not good enough for what you want, but knowing you need more than what would be acceptable. It was fascinating to hear her talk about politics of the time period (and this was a surprisingly political book), whether French or American- and then stop herself with one of her patented sweet exclamations ("Phooey!", "Whew!")- as if she was suddenly self-conscious of talking about something that she was not an expert about and didn't want people to think she was getting above herself or something. She was extremely self-aware about her limits, too. There was a wonderful passage from when she was about 40 or so when she was arguing with a man of conservative opinions when she realized that she had "emotions instead of opinions," which was why she couldn't express herself very well. She didn't come out and say it, but it seemed implied that she was still a young girl rebelling emotionally against her Republican father- which had seemed to her sufficient opinion until that point. She immediately resolved to educate herself and read, with Paul, a wide assortment of French and American newspapers. How many people are willing to admit that kind of ignorance and take on such a deep project of self-improvement at that age? In my experience, that seems to be about the time where people start to get set in their ways and are all, "Oh well, too late not to suck at life now!"

Once she had found her new passion, she also became the most amazingly hard worker. She spent months perfecting a mayonnaise recipe that no one had ever written down, and then had to find a way to translate it to an American market that has ingredients that make for a completely different chemistry. She was the first person to write down a recipe for French bread in English, and it took her over 200 pounds of flour to get it right. She wrote to scientists who worked with Hershey's to get a demonstration of the chemical reactions of chocolate. It was the most amazing thing- like she finally found a little niche that she could make herself have enough self-confidence to succeed in, despite her doubts, and suddenly we find out that she's probably way smarter than the people she's been writing about in awe the entire book, whether chefs or otherwise. She eats this amazing meal when she first arrives in France that starts her on this journey towards her ultimate career as a French chef, and about halfway through the book (and twenty years later), she goes out to a restaurant and has another amazing meal- but instead of reacting in awe and worshipping the magic of the French character, she guesses, accurately, everything that is in the dish and goes home and reproduces it almost exactly, and it is just as good as the lady in her restaurant who has been making this dish since the dawn of time. The way she talks about her obsession with these details of why food works is still almost...defensive, like she had to explain it to someone a half-century later, when she's been proven right about having done it over and over again. It's so true- once the insecure girl who is too tall, too smart, too something- always that girl, successful or not.

Ultimately, you love her because she always brings things back to this place of happiness and, "oh well, the show must go on!" no matter what- but the way she told the stories and negotiated herself to that place was very realistic. This was not an unrelenting "always look on the bright side of life," montage. There were difficult people in her life, difficult spots in her marriage, difficult moments in her career- the fact that she still remembers verbatim quotes and fights from forty years earlier is telling- and she's clear about it when she doesn't like something or someone and why. She doesn't have an American sense of everything will turn out all right in the end, but rather this very French *tant pis* acceptance that shit happens and life is shit and oh well, wade through it like a big girl. She doesn't try to deny anything or erase it or obsess about appearing perfect when she wasn't- which is something I find irritating about American self-help books and TV

fantasies. Her philosophy about serving your food even if it comes out bad and not apologizing for is sort of the epitome of this rejection of the hide your dirty laundry ideals of the mid-century. She's perfectly frank about her fights with Paul Child, her problems with her co-authors on the book, her difficulties with her Republican father, her failures in the kitchen and on her TV show. It isn't in the exhibitionist way that you see so often these days either. She's a good girl, but she won't let herself be walked all over- she is going to have her say and that's just fair. I don't know if I am doing a very good job describing this voice, but believe me when I say that it is as captivating in print as it is on television.

All in all, a surprisingly down to earth book from a classy lady who was much more complicated than I thought she was. Come for the food, stay for the voice of the woman telling you about it- and don't let her talk herself down! She's worth the price of admission and more.

Agnes says

I love Julia Child, it turns out! This memoir is fun and I want to live her life. I want to live in Paris, Marseille, Oslo and Boston too, creating sumptuous recipes, hanging out with James Beard and decorating a summer house in Provence. Seriously, why am I not her? I wouldn't even mind being dead since 2004.

I am totally convinced that her cookbooks are the foremost authorities on French cooking, now that I've seen how many times she would experiment with a basic recipe to get it right. Makes me want to read her cookbooks cover to cover to actually learn how to really cook. Good thing her "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" vols. 1 and 2 have been on my Amazon wishlist for a year...and my birthday is coming up...these might be fun for several people to go in together on...there are also her "The French Chef" dvds, also conveniently located on my wishlist...

I am nothing if not subtle.

GoldGato says

"Let's eat!"

Okay...I didn't grow up knowing much about Julia Child. To be honest, it was Dan Aykroyd's SNL impersonation of Mrs. Child that first drew my attention. I don't consider it insulting, but a tribute to someone who was obviously a media icon of the 20th Century. That in itself is amazing, as Julia Child would never have been considered the emblem of stardom. She wasn't thin or beautiful or full of herself, but she blossomed into a star of public-funded television.

We had expensive hairdos, put on our nicest dresses, chicest hats, and best makeup. Then we looked at each other. "Pretty good," we declared, "but not great." We had tried, and this was the very best we'd ever look.

That's why I love this book and that's why, after reading it, I grew to love Julia Child. She never tried to be something she wasn't. She didn't believe she was the greatest cook who ever lived. She simply enjoyed bringing her love of French food to the Americans, at a time when most people living in the United States were well into frozen tv dinners and the ever-growing fast food world. It was her obsession with *practice*,

practice, practice that made her experiments with food so fascinating.

By the end of my research, I believe, I had written more on the subject of mayonnaise than anyone in history.

I was simply enthralled with this book, so much so, I tried not to finish it, which is what happens when I love a book. Her memories of post-war Europe are tantalizing, yet it was just a fantastic journey for her. While others would have become upset at the way life unfolded, she saw everything (and I do mean everything) as sheer adventure. As fun! Even when failure hit. Ouf!

So now I am YouTube-ing Julia Child. And I have chosen to focus on "pulling a Child" with peach ice cream. Not able to find any at the local store, I will make it myself with the same obsession to detail that Julia Child brought to her food and her life. Hooray!

Book Season = Spring (save the liver)

Tim says

Lighthearted and fun recollections of Julia's first years in France. Highly recommended for anyone already enthralled by Julia, whether by her television programs or her excellent cookbooks.

Readers who do not know Julia may find the book a little too rambling, and a little too focused on food they've never tasted and have no idea what it even is (often she does not give translations for food names).

As noted in the introduction, the book was pieced together from conversations Julia's nephew had with her. He made notes at these conversations and then arranged the events described into some kind of chronological order. It is rather ingenious, because you are only reading the high points, the things an eighty-something year old woman remembers forty years later. Due to this, however, the narrative is not in any sense a complete autobiography, more like a series of remembrances arranged chronologically.

The book is an excellent portrait of the wonders of France just after World War 2, when the country was not as modernized as it is today. Also, the story is inspiring in that it starts when Julia and Paul are already nearing what some would call middle-age. It is not just young people that discover new things and live a life worth enjoying. Of course this is obvious anyway, but it is nice to see an example of it now and then.

Petra X says

I didn't know anything about Julia Child apart from having heard her name and that she was 6' tall until the book *Julie and Julia*. I read that and whereas I didn't think much of Julie at all (I think she should go back to blogging, a book's a bit much for her) I was curious about Julia.

The book is beautifully written by her nephew Paul Prud'homme and illustrated with many photographs from

her talented ex-diplomat husband Paul. Its a lovely story of a life through cooking and inspired by France and full of surprises that you wouldn't expect for someone of her monied, patrician background.

One one of the Goodreads groups I belong to, where everyone besides me is American and, it seems strongly Republican, the book Julie and Julia got many negative comments owing to Julie's total disrespect of Republicans and not being respectful enough of the construction of a memorial to 9-11 (I didn't feel that, I thought she was just pissed off with her job, but I'm not an American and there may have been nuances I missed). Needless to say, I don't think that group would enjoy My Life in France either - Julia Child is fiercely anti-Republican and critical of many aspects of American politics which she sees as hypocritical. This causes if not a rift in the family, then her father's coldness and uninterest in her life and husband, as he saw anything less than full enthusiasm for all things Republican (and racist, anti-academic, anti-semitic and xenophobic) to be a betrayal by her of his and his friends' lives and the cultural milieu he had brought her up in. Julia's politics were important to her and she studied assiduously so that she could hold up her end in dinner-table debates with her more knowledgeable friends, often over one of her wonderfully-cooked meals.

The story of how she learned to cook and the various places she and Paul lived in, is beautifully told without either undue self-praise or false modesty. She had a lovely personality, a burning drive to educate people as to how good food (French food) could be and why it was worth the time and effort to make it, and attracted a rich variety of friends whose only link seemed to be they really, really liked food. But it was just as interesting viewing American politics and France through the half century of her life from the 50s until her death five years ago in 2004.

I'm so enthusiastic about reading Julia Child that I've ordered Mastering French Cooking, a huge and expensive tome, and I don't cook, not ever, but I do want to read it.
