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City-Lit
Paris

Published by Oxygen Books

Extract

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Published by Oxygen Books 2008

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978–0–9559700–0–9

Typeset in Sabon by Bookcraft Limited, Stroud, Gloucestershire

Printed and bound in India by Imago

A ‘piece of passion’ from series editor Heather Reyes, exclusively for Lovereading…

I’ve been in love with Paris since my very first visit as a teenager. In those pre-Eurostar days, it seemed an adventure just getting there — the slow, musty train down through Kent, struggling your luggage onto the ferry at Dover, the worry about the weather for ‘the crossing’ (would I need the Kwells?), watching the white cliffs recede and searching the horizon for the first glimpse of the French coast, the wind pulling your hair and putting salt on your lips. Then those magical letters, SNCF, on the side of the oddly high-up train from Calais, the long stop at Amiens and finally … finally …(the excitement overcoming the fatigue of the journey)…PARIS.

But, oh the relief of that first, fast, simple Eurostar journey! The exhilaration of knowing you could get THERE so quickly and easily. But still the same feeling, stepping onto the platform at Gare du Nord, of life moving into higher gear. That’s what Paris is to me — life lived more intensely, more vividly, both in the senses (that smell of strawberries from the stall at the foot of rue Moufftard) and in the mind (favourite bookshops … La Hune, Gibert Jeune, Shakespeare and Company, … the streets haunted by the ghosts of writers and philosophers past … Abelard, Montaigne, Diderot, Voltaire, Hugo, Balzac, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus …)

So, to have the opportunity of choosing and editing material for a collection of writing about the city was a dream come true, *and I had the time of my life*.

Some of the passages I chose were from books I already knew — pretty standard stuff: the restrained eroticism of that scene in Proust where Swann joins Odette in her carriage after an evening of frustrated searching for her; the passage near the start of Queneau’s *Zazie in the Metro* (one of my favourite novels ever), extracts from Colette, Jean Rhys, Cocteau, Balzac, Flaubert, Aragon, Simone de Beauvoir, Julian Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Edmund White. But wanting to make the book largely contemporary gave me the perfect excuse to ‘research’ new material (i.e. buy and read lots of books). This not only deepened and expanded my view of Paris: it also reminded me just how essential good writing is for getting under the skin of a place and its people.

My main criteria in putting together the collection was quality and variety, along with an element of surprise. It was fun placing side-by-side Janelle McCulloch’s delicious evocation of the famously delicate Ladurée macaroons and Edmond de Goncourt’s diary entries during the 1870 Siege of Paris when the inhabitants had to resort to some pretty disgusting comestibles. And it was great to discover a diary entry by Hans Christian Andersen recording his visit to a Paris brothel so the name of this ‘children’s writer’ could be found in the ‘Sex in the City’ section … along with an account by twelfth-century philosopher-monk Peter Abelard of his passionate affair with a beautiful, intelligent and highly educated Parisian girl.

I also wanted lots of variety in the kinds of writing used, so as well as novels and short stories, there's autobiography, travel writing, journalism, history, humour, diaries, memoirs, letters, and just plain description.

It gave me the chance to wallow in Kate Muir's novel *Left Bank,* Kate Mosse's *Sepulchre* and Joanne Harris's *The Lollipop Shoes*; to be hard up in Paris with Jeremy Mercer (*Books, Baguettes and Bedbugs*), and a hopeful student again with Shusha Guppy (*A Girl in Paris*); to see some of the places I knew best through new eyes — the Canal Saint-Martin brought to fresh life by Daniel Maximin, Belleville as known by Catherine Sanderson (well-known Paris blogger, 'Petite Anglaise'); to be reminded of the delights of French food by Michael Booth (*Sacré Cordon Bleu*), Alex Kapranos (*Sound Bites*), Stephen Downes (*Paris on a Plate*) and Colette Rossant (*Return to Paris*). I could go on and on …

Among my favourite discoveries was Muriel Barbery's *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, the English translation of which was about to be published by Gallic Books. All I can say is read it! It's been a runaway, prize-winning success in France and deserves to be here, too. And the short but moving novel by Abdelkader Djemaï, *Gare du Nord*. As it hadn't been translated into English, we did this especially for *city-lit PARIS* … along with the pieces by Hans Christian Andersen, Daniel Maximin and Gérard de Cortanze.

There's enough good writing to produce half a dozen anthologies on Paris. Who knows: maybe one day I'll get the chance to create *city-lit PARIS 2* …

Heather Reyes, series editor of the city-lit series

www.oxygenbooks.co.uk
http://thecity-litcafe.typepad.com
http://twitter.com/citylitParis

Praise for *city-lit PARIS*

'Brilliant … The best way to get under the skin of a city is to read a novel, a short story, a poem set slap bang in the heart of things. This literary guide to Paris, with the best of contemporary and classic writing about the most elegant city of them all, Paris, is the perfect read for travellers and book lovers of all ages. And a fabulous way to expand anyone's reading list!'

Kate Mosse, best-selling author of *Sepulchre*

'A great and eclectic set of writings and an original book on Paris.'

Sylvia Whitman, Shakespeare & Company, Paris

'It's terrific – all the best writing on this complex city in one place. We will be putting it on the reading list for our MA.'

Professor Andrew Hussey, author of *Paris: The Secret History*

'An essential guidebook to Paris without which you would be intellectually lost. It maps the Paris of the imagination.'

Kate Muir, best-selling author of *Left Bank*

'I really love the idea – when taking a trip, to have a book that offers just what you are offering … short pieces by good writers that capture the essence of a place.'

Orna Ross, author of *A Dance in Time*

'For readers who don't want to leave their minds at the airport.'

Celia Brayfield, novelist, journalist, and author of *Deep France*

Editor's Note

Paris: the most written about city in the world. There's enough good writing for at least six anthologies – which makes choosing difficult. But I hope readers will find plenty to fall in love with in our word-portrait of this most alluring and complex of cities.

The *city-lit* series aims to give you the most entertaining, lively, and fascinating writing about our greatest cities, bringing them to life … whether you visit them in person or from your armchair. As well as Paris, 2009 takes us to London, Dublin, Berlin and Amsterdam. We hope you'll follow us there.

For those with an eye for detail, I have followed the spelling and punctuation of the original texts, which are not always consistent with each other (e.g. some use a lower case 'r' for *rue*, some an upper case).

So, enjoy Paris!

Heather Reyes

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A few words about Paris … from STEPHEN CLARKE

Paris is not entirely unique. You can sit in cafés, wear designer clothes and even have sex in lots of other towns.

It just *feels* unique, as if everything you do, from buying underwear to chewing a hunk of baguette, is somehow more stylish because you're doing it in Paris. Certainly Parisians act as if they're unique – not as a community but each individual one of them. It is the city of *moi*. As they walk down the street they're thinking, look at *moi*. Even when they're kissing a friend on the cheeks, they're saying it – *moi*, *moi*.

And the obsession driving each *moi* is its lifestyle. Parisians have elevated lifestyle to an art – no, more than an art, it is (as only the French can say properly) a *raison d'être*. In summer, they close off a whole chunk of the road running along the right bank of the Seine – the city's main throughway – to create *Paris Plages*, a chain of imported beaches, riverside cafés, performance spaces, even *pétanque* pitches. Block a main inner-city artery so that people can play *pétanque*? Not many capitals would do that.

Similarly, the new *Vélib* scheme – cheap bike rental – was instantly adopted by Parisians as a chance to glide about the city looking stylish, as well as being a great new chat-up opportunity. "*Bonjour*, you have rented a *Vélib*? So have I, what a coincidence. Destiny has obviously decided that we must sleep together."

Admittedly, this love of lifestyle does have its downside. As soon as the *Vélibs* were introduced, you saw impatient Parisians jostling around, trying to push in front of each other to get a bike. Because waiting is not part of their lifestyle. The person in front is preventing *moi* from being where *moi* really wants to be.

So when a chic Parisian office worker barged in front of me to get his *Vélib*, I knew that he wasn't just being bad-mannered. No, he had an urgent appointment with himself and his lifestyle. It was probably imperative for him to go and sit outside a café before shutting himself away in the office. If he waited for me to fiddle around selecting my bike, he'd miss the chance to watch that new

secretary walk past in her tight skirt. One of these mornings she is sure to notice him, and then who knows what will happen.

It is the city's addiction to the *moi*-first lifestyle that has attracted writers to Paris for so many centuries. The average writer is, after all, even more egocentric than a Parisian. What's more, Paris is the true home of the intellectual, a place where you can talk total arty-farty twaddle and, as long as you are passionate about it (and preferably squinting through a haze of cigarette smoke), people will actually take you seriously.

Fortunately, though, there have been plenty of brilliant writers either visiting Paris or living here, and the book you're now holding is full of anything but twaddle, except perhaps for the samples of my own writing.

And what strikes me about reading Balzac, Flaubert, Orwell or de Beauvoir on Paris is how little the city changes. Superficially, yes – Balzac's heroes didn't have to battle their way onto a metro during a travel strike – but deep down things are always the same. There are still foreigners getting mistreated in swanky kitchens exactly as George Orwell was. Even some of the streets in Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* are almost unchanged, and the darker ones can certainly smell pretty medieval on a Sunday morning before the cleaners come round.

My own first visit to Paris was inspired by a book – Zola's *Le Ventre de Paris* (The Belly of Paris), a novel about the often unappetizing things that went on in the city's food market at Les Halles. Being too hard up to buy a decent guidebook, I marched off in search of the market using only the free Galeries Lafayette map they give you at the railway station, and was disappointed to discover that the glass-framed market halls had been knocked down and replaced by a hideous shopping mall about twenty years earlier.

However, as I wandered away, deep in literary mourning, I stumbled into the rue Montorgeuil and was confronted with bloody hunks of horsemeat, skinned rabbits, live lobsters and heaps of pungent mushrooms with the soil still clinging to their

roots. A *boulangère* had set up a stall in front of her shop and was gleefully handling money and bread while sneezing into her palm with a disregard for hygiene that would have brought out the bacteria police back home. I was in Zola's novel.

These days, people moan that the area around the rue Montorgeuil has gone posh – there is now, for example, a trendy Japanese restaurant that does mango sushi. *Merde alors*. But Zola would recognize the epicureanism of a street where every other business is dedicated to food. And you can still buy a baguette that has been fondled by a baker's dubious fingers. Mango sushi, OK, but polythene bags for baguettes? *Non merci!*

The area of Paris where I now live has many timeless qualities to it. It's the Butte aux Cailles. A picturesque name, I thought when I first moved in – Quail Hill. But no, a friend explained that quail was an old word for prostitute. Apparently the hill used to be a prime cruising zone. And in a modern way, it still is. There's a small gang of ladies who go round sticking massage ads on trees and lampposts. Hand-written, too. None of your new-fangled colour printing technology for these quails.

I often see people filling water bottles outside the Butte aux Cailles swimming pool. There is a spring beneath the hill, and a fountain where you can collect the water, free of charge. These days it is checked for purity, of course, but even so, it is a part of daily life that must go back hundreds of years.

Nearby is the small local bookshop, which advertises an in-house "public writer". No, not a resident author who will lecture you on the problems of the omniscient narrator – this is a person who writes your letters for you if you can't spell too well yourself. What century are we in again?

And the wonderful thing is that none of this is done for tourists or because the state or UNESCO has provided a grant to ensure that future generations will always be able to witness ancient French folk customs. It is simply unchanging, everyday Paris.

There is, however, one quaint folk custom that is state-

subsidized. Every year, generally in winter, the French government workers go on strike, and the nearby Place d'Italie comes alive with balloons, revolutionary songs and the fragrant odour of *merguez* sausages being cremated on barbecues. The atmosphere is usually very festive, with old friends meeting up and comparing banners. Last year, I went and interviewed some of them for a French TV programme, and the protesters were in a hearty mood despite the rain. I met a group of strikers from a suburb of Paris who were sitting out a shower in a café.

"How many times have you been on strike?" I asked one man.

He had a think and replied, "this year?"

Next I found a chanting Parisian social-security worker and interrupted him to ask about his all-time favourite strike or protest march. He consulted his colleagues and they decided that "it was last year, when we went to Brussels." Yes, these demonstrations are such an integral part of their lifestyle that they even go on striking holidays.

So if you come to Paris hoping to visit some of the places mentioned in this book, and your trip is disrupted by a transport strike or protest marches, don't be disheartened. It's just one example of Paris imposing its lifestyle on you. All you can do is adopt the strategy I used with the *Vélib* queue-jumper – accept that *c'est la vie* and give a resigned Parisian shrug.

You don't know how it's done? It's very simple. You put on a facial expression that says "what do I care, we're all mere grains of sand in the infinite desert of the cosmos," you imagine that a pair of overweight parrots has settled on your shoulders, and then try to lift them six inches higher without tipping them off. Get practising before you visit Paris – it's a key exercise in all the city's yoga classes, so you'll have some catching up to do.

STEPHEN CLARKE is the author of a number of novels set in France, including *A Year in the Merde* and *Dial M for Merde,* as well as *Talk to the Snail*, a handbook for anyone wishing to get the best out of the French lifestyle. He lives in Paris.