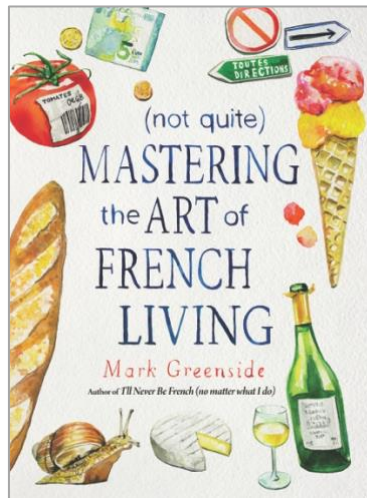


*Volume 4, Number 1, May 2020*



Dear Friend,

Donna and I were supposed to be getting ready for spring—May and June—in Brittany. Instead, like everyone else, we're locked down, trying to kill time before it kills us. We take long, healthy, mind-clearing walks then eat, drink, and watch too much mind-numbing television. In France, it's worse. They're living the *une, une, une* rule: one outing a day, for one hour, no more than one kilometer (.6 mile) from home—and for that and all outings (doctor visit, pharmacy, food shopping), they need a signed note—like a get out of jail card or a high school pass to go to the bathroom. If they are caught without that pass, they will get a ticket and be fined 130 euros (about \$150) each time.

Meanwhile, until we get better news, Donna is working from home, and I am too, reading and writing. I've read *Parisian Lives*, *Samuel Beckett*, *Simone De Beauvoir and Me* by Deirdre Bair (an excellent account of their lives and the art of writing biography), *The French at Table* by Rudolph Chelminski (a hilarious review of the history of French eating and cooking), and *The Food of France* by Waverly Root, (a serious review of the varieties of French food and cooking). I've also read two non-French themed novels, *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham and *Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, both of which are gorgeously written with very inventive plots. Reading good writing inspires me.

I'm hesitantly working on French book # 3. Given the daily, months-long horrible news, it seems trivial to be writing about living and traveling in France—but, given the daily, months-long horrible news, trivial may be exactly what's needed. Below is a piece I wrote several years ago. I used part of it in *(not quite) Mastering*—you'll remember it, I'm sure—and I'm using another part in book # 3. It's a little longer than other excerpts I've sent to you, but I figure most of us have more time now, and hopefully you'll welcome the diversion. Here it is: let me know what you think.

### **Jamais Je Ne Serai Français**

I made plans to return to France as usual—wired money to my account, leased the car, and bought my plane ticket—though nothing this year is usual. I have bees in my chimney, probably need a new furnace, and my book, *I'll Never Be French (no matter what I do)*, is being published in French.

I'm sitting in Terminal 2G at Aeroport Charles DeGaulle, thinking about these things, waiting for my flight to Brest. 2G is large and barren, like a train station waiting room, with nothing to do there except sit, eat pre-packaged sandwiches, read, sleep, and think. I've been here three hours—it's a four hour lay-over—and I've eaten a ham and gruyere sandwich, read, and napped, which leaves lots of time for thinking, which for me means worrying. Usually when I fly, I worry about the plane, the weather, turbulence, the pilot, if this is when and where I'm going to die, but not today. Today, dying doesn't scare me, living does: like, what's going to happen to me after my friends and neighbors read my book? If the reaction is anything like the reaction to the English version a year ago, I'm in trouble.

Unfortunately, French privacy laws preclude me from telling you what happened. How do I know about French privacy laws? *Two* letters from a lawyer—even in French—make them perfectly, frighteningly, clear.

In the U.S., everything discoverable is public, especially if qualified with an “I believe”, “I think”, or “I feel”; if quoted from another source, even *The Star*, *National Enquirer*, or Fox News; if found on-line, in public documents, or in your garbage can. Slander, libel, and malicious gossip are almost impossible to prove, as proof depends

on intent as well as content, and the burden of proof is on the aggrieved. Not so in France.

In France, there is Article 9 of the Civil Code, which everyone, except me, seemed to know, though I certainly know it now.

When I received the first lawyer-letter, I asked Jean, Sharon, Gilles, and Bruno what it meant and quickly discovered Article 9 is the French version of “Possession is nine-tenths of the law”, meaning, ‘If I have it, it’s mine, and you have to get it from me.’ In the U.S., this pertains to what we value most: property and objects of monetary value. In France, it pertains to privacy, and anyone who violates it does so at his or her own risk. What does this mean for a writer? I’ll tell you.

In the U.S., money is a public matter: price, cost, salary, income, probate—people want to know, and they do. In France, money is private—no one has the right to know. In the U.S., reporters follow the police to the crime scene and take incriminating photos of the person captured, the suspect, because it is considered news, and the public has a right to know. In France, this is *interdit*. In France, the person really is innocent until proven guilty, and photos like this are viewed as prejudicial and in violation of the person’s—*the suspect’s*—rights and privacy.

When dapper, powerful, Dominique Strauss-Kahn was pictured unshaved, in handcuffs, being arrested for rape on the front page of the *New York Times* and most of the world’s leading newspapers, people in France were outraged: how can you do this? How can you show a person as guilty before he has had his trial?

In the U.S., after I submitted my manuscript to Simon and Schuster, the first person to contact me was their lawyer. She wanted me to verify, under penalty of perjury that (1) I was the author, (2) everything I wrote was true, as I understood it, and (3) if the content was challenged, it was my responsibility to defend it, not theirs.

In France, I have yet to speak with the publisher’s lawyers and section 15 of my contract says, they, the publisher is responsible for the content, not me. When I first read that, I was relieved. Then I remembered what I’d read about James Joyce and

*Ulysses*: Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier could not find anyone to publish the book—the publishers and printers were all afraid of being sued. And I remembered a story I recently read.

A man wrote a book about a small village in Brittany. In the book, the author identified a man in the village as the son of a German soldier who was stationed in the village during the occupation. The story was common knowledge in the village, and it was true, which is enough to protect the book and the author in the U.S., truth being the best defense against anything. Not in France. In France, truth matters less than privacy. In France, it doesn't matter if Gizelle is sleeping with Noel. It's private and none of your business. The man took the publisher to court and won. The court ordered the publisher to stop printing the book, confiscate all copies, remove them from the public, and shred them. This is in France, where my book is being published in French, and everyone in Plobien and Loscoat can read it for him or her self.... I hope I'm not in for a shredding, or worse, a hammering....

The previous year, I gave a copy of *I'll Never Be French*—in English—to all the French people who are in the book even if they couldn't read it—*especially* if they couldn't read it. I didn't want them to learn about the book's existence from someone else and worry about what it said about them.

I met with the oil guy's son, the floor guy, the *notaire*, the restaurant owners who hosted my fiftieth birthday dinner, my neighbor, Monsieur Charles, Madame P, the insurance guy, and gave each person a signed copy, saying, "C'est une cadeaux pour tout vous ave donne moi." It's a gift for all you have given me—and I hoped if they were offended by anything I wrote, they would know it was not intentional and forgive me.

The reaction was universal surprise for the gift, and that I, a functional illiterate in France, could write. I pointed to my name on the book jacket to prove it, and said, "J'ai ecrie cette livre, pas que j'aime beaucoup mon vie en France." I have write this book because I love my life in France.

They looked at me as if I was giving them porn.

Once they got over their shock, I showed them where I'd written about them. I showed my neighbor the chapter about the trees and where it says he was right about cutting them. I showed the oil guy's son the chapter about his father and him installing the oil tank, and Gilbert and Monique the chapter on my fiftieth birthday party at their restaurant. I showed Hugo, the floor guy, the chapters on cleaning the floors and repairing them after the flood—and I walked Monsieur and Madame P through everything: from our first meeting and getting the keys to Chez Sally, cleaning Sally's house, buying my house, the first time there were bees in my chimney, repairing the washing machine, almost drowning at Île Callot, and my fiftieth birthday party.

Given my French, who knows what I actually said or what they heard, but everyone laughed, and no one seemed angry or upset or about to claim their rights under Article 9. The only person I worried about was the insurance guy, who I didn't know as well as the others. Other people I saw socially. I ate and/or drank with them—but not him. Ours was a professional relationship, and I worried about how I portrayed him, especially with all the blinking and squinting. To American eyes, I know he is kind, sympathetic and funny, but to French eyes—*his* eyes—I hadn't a clue.

I waited until the day before my return flight to California to meet with him in case I had to get out of town in a hurry. I entered his office unannounced, as usual—guaranteed to be upsetting—and handed him a copy of the book. Like everyone else, he was surprised that I could write anything. I showed him where I'd signed the book for him and pointed out the chapters with my insurance questions about the house and the car and the flood. He seemed happy, and I was too, and relieved, until he shook my hand and said, "Merci," and added, "My wife reads English very well."

"Bon," I said. "Bien. L'annee prochaine." Good. See you next year, and I hoped time and distance would temper his and her response, if it was negative.

All in all, I thought I'd done OK. I hadn't made any enemies, and didn't make a fool of myself—at least as far as I knew.

That night, at Sharon's and Jean's, I told them what I'd been doing and saying, proudly concluding with, "J'aime beaucoup mon vie en France."

Jean shook his head. “Marc, do you know what you’re saying? You love your dick. You love your dick in France. *Mon vie* is your dick. *Ma vie* is your life.” All the while, he was pointing to his crotch, repeating, “Mon vie, mon vie....”

No wonder people looked like I was handing them porn—and that’s when the book was published in English.

Over the next six months, I worried about the insurance guy and his English reading wife’s silence—and their reaction to the book. At Christmas time, I received a card from them. The handwriting was more American than French, so I knew it was from his wife. I opened the envelope with trepidation, hoping it wasn’t a subpoena, and I didn’t need to find a new insurance agent, and read, in perfect English, that they enjoyed the book, laughed a lot, and gave copies to their family and friends as holiday gifts. I was surprised, happy, and relieved, especially since I’d recently received my first Article 9 letter from a lawyer....

This is what I’m ruminating about while I’m sitting in Terminal 2G. I’m ruminating about it as I walk up then down the long ramp out of the terminal to the plane, on the fifty-minute flight to Brest, and the forty-minute drive to the house. It’s what I’m thinking about when I unpack, shower, dress, and drive to Loscoat for dinner... And it’s certainly what I’m thinking about when I see, in the center of town, where the bridge meets le Grand Rue, in the middle of the giant picture window of *La Maison de la Presse*, sitting on a shelf, like a pedestal, a statue, like an *objet d’art*, a single copy of my book with its glaring red cover boldly proclaiming, *Jamais Je Ne Serais Français*. *Never Will I Be French*, something I’d be afraid to say in English.

“It’s guaranteed to sell books,” my French editor said when she told me the title she selected. What else it would do, she didn’t say, but looking at it in the window, I don’t think it’s going to win me any friends.

I just hope I don’t lose any, and, so far, I haven’t.





### **MORE NEWS ABOUT *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living***

- Interview with *Bonjour Paris*, February 6, 2020, [click here](#).
- Reading at the Alameda Public Library, March 11, 2020, the last event before the lockdown.
- Excerpt from “I Cooked This for You” to be published in *Flash Nonfiction Food* in spring 2020.
- Invited to speak and read at the Los-Gatos-Saratoga chapter’s luncheon of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) in January 2021.
- Audio book sales on *Audible* are very good.

Most important and meaningful, though, are your emails and reviews on [Amazon](#) and [Goodreads](#). Whenever I need a boost, I reread them. If you haven’t reviewed the book yet, please consider doing so, as those reviews are critical for the book’s success and my mental health. If you’d like to contact me, I can be reached at:

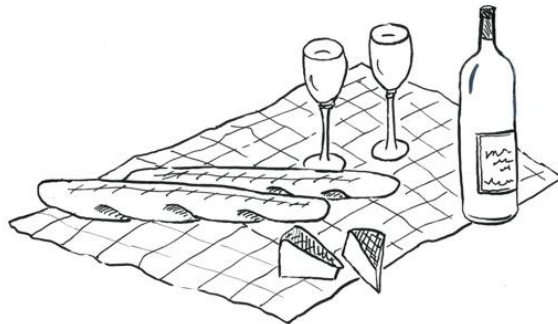
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Yours Sincerely,

Mark



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