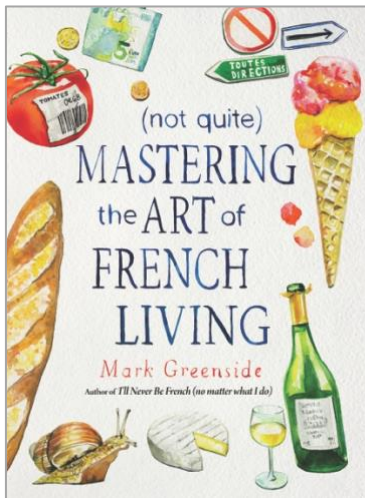


Volume 8, Number 1, May 2024



Dear Friends,

It's baseball season so there's hope. That's what I'm hoping. The A's are in Oakland one more year and the Giants are rooted in San Francisco, though that's what people in New York thought about Brooklyn and the Bronx in 1957 and 1958, and look what happened there....

As you can probably tell, winter has been more Rocky Road than Cherry Garcia. First, there was Ciarán, the 215 km/hr storm that roared through Brittany and my yard, tumbling a 100-foot-tall alder tree, splitting an albizia in half, smashing through an attic bathroom window, knocking over a wooden fence, and damaging a chimney and the slate roof around it. That was in November, which was also when I filed my insurance claim. Seven months later, in mid-May, the insurance guy is coming to review my claim. I think it takes so long because they use a triage system: the damage to my house and yard is minor compared to others (that's the good news) so I'm on the bottom of the insurer's list (that's the bad news). The other winter news is I finished my third book about living in France (that's the good news), but I can't find a publisher, because I need a new agent. (That's the bad news). The agent for my first book died. The agent for my second book is retiring.

I, like most people I know, thought if you've had four books published the fifth ought to be a snap. Ha! Unless you, meaning I, am Grisham, Sedaris, Kingsolver, or Mayle, it doesn't get easier, it gets harder. With my first French book, the publisher hoped to sell a bazillion copies and make a gazillion dollars. With my second book, they hoped it was different enough from the first book that it would take off and sell a gazillion copies and make a zillion dollars. Now, with my third book about living in France, they won't know if this is the breakout book or not, because without an agent, they'll never see it. Only Joyce Carol Oates and neophytes send books to publishers without an agent, and only Joyce Carol Oates gets read.

I get read, too—by readers....

The two books about living in France have sold 60,000 copies in the U.S., *not* including audio book sales in the U.S. and Poland, Polish and Hungarian e-book sales, and French, Polish, and Hungarian book translations/publications. The books are in over 500 library *systems* worldwide.

I'll Never Be French (no matter what I do) is almost always in Amazon's top 10 selling books about Brittany. Both books are almost always in Amazon's top 100 selling books in French Travel, French History, and/or French Cooking—often, to my great surprise and delight, topping Julia Child and Jacques Pepin. *I'll Never* has over 2,500 reviews on Goodreads and (*not quite*) *Mastering the Art of French Living* has over 900 on Goodreads and Amazon, each. The Goodreads and Amazon reviews average 4.2 out of 5 for each book. (*not quite*) was a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller.

Both books are so good that the ChatGPT stole them as part of the 150,000 cache of books they stole to teach AI how to write—or maybe how *not* to write.... Oh my.... I've included an excerpt from my new book below for you to sample yourself and decide how good—or bad—it is....

Meanwhile, I'm going to revert to incentive-based capitalism (minus the capital). When (*not quite*) was published I had a contest to encourage people to review the book.

If you reviewed the book by X date, your name would go into a pool and you would be eligible for a freebee two-week vacation at the house in Plobien. If you reviewed the book and didn't win, you could rent the house for half price. Lots of people participated and MW won. Other people rented the house for half price.... So.....

Three thousand people receive this newsletter. You are readers. You like books. You are Francophiles. You know many people in many walks and runs of life—relatives, neighbors, colleagues, friends of a friend of a friend of a friend. Plus, you've been kind, thoughtful, supporting, and generous to me.... So....

If you find an agent who represents me and my third book about living in France—*Bonjour, Au Revoir, I'm finally, Finally French*—I will give you a hearty and heart-felt special shout-out and thanks in the book and two weeks free at the house in Plobien. If you find an editor who publishes the book, you can double that. If you give me the name of an agent or editor and it doesn't work out, you can stay at the house free for one week and half price for a month.... I got my first two agents through personal connections, so why not this time?

Here's hoping, and here's an excerpt from *Bonjour, Au Revoir, I'm finally, Finally French*.

Agent Orange

Not surprisingly, my smart phone makes me feel dumb. I remember, not that long ago, when I could work all of my appliances. I didn't understand *how* they worked, but I could make them work: TV, dishwasher, stove, washing machine, the control knobs on my old Volvo. Now, I'm a touch away from disaster. Push the wrong button, turn the wrong knob, touch the wrong icon, and it's worse than HAL in the movie *2001*. There, Dave knows what he's doing and outfoxes HAL, but me, I haven't a clue. The one thing I have learned, though, is after something goes wrong to not push, turn, or touch anything else, because as bad as things are, they will only get worse, and I'll get

frustrated and further away from where I want to be: say, streaming, or using the eco-natural, energy-saving, dry cycle on my dishwasher; doing a semi-dry/semi-load of laundry with a hot wash and cold rinse.

In my younger days, I thought nothing about my appliances. They were there and did their jobs until they broke. Then I called the Sears or Maytag or KitchenAid repair man—it was always a man—and he'd fix it, and after another five, ten, or twenty years, I'd replace it with the same machine. Now, I live in fear of my appliances, knowing if anything goes wrong or the settings change, or God forbid, they break a week after the warranty runs out, I'm done for: first, because customer service has become a forty-plus-minute wait on the phone listening to a recorded voice telling me every ten seconds how important my call is to them; second, because whomever I speak to will: (a) know nothing; or (b) not be able to do anything, as the company that made the product, and the company that sold the product, and the company that delivered the product, and the company that installed the product, no longer repairs the product, and no longer has a repair department; and/or (c) try to convince me the failure isn't with their product, but with another product that is necessary to run their product, like for instance when I call Xfinity because I want to stream a show and I can't, because the modem Xfinity gave me doesn't work.

I know it's the modem because the Xfinity repair guy who arrived three hours late to repair something else took pity on me and spent another forty-five minutes—going to his truck three times, and opening the modem and breaking the code—to connect me. It worked fine for a while, then it didn't.

I called Xfinity, and after a twenty-minute wait, said, "I can't stream. Your modem won't let me stream."

"Sir, I just did a check. Your modem is fine."

"I know it's not. The Xfinity guy who fixed it told me the new modems are terrible and cause all kinds of problems."

“I don’t see a record of Xfinity repairing your modem.”

“I know it’s the modem.”

“Sir, I just ran a test. It’s your TV.”

I call Samsung, wait thirty minutes, and say, “Xfinity said my TV is broken. It won’t connect to my modem.”

I wait another thirty minutes while they run a zillion more tests, knowing exactly what they’re going to tell me: “It’s not the TV, it’s the modem.”

So I sit here with a modem that won’t connect with my TV, a TV that’s not as smart as it thinks it is, and hit and miss streaming. I live with it because it’s a TV, an ancillary instrument in my life. When it’s my computer, it’s a problem of a different magnitude. When it’s my computer, I’d be lost without my friend and techie guru, Bob, a self-taught computer magician who so far has been able to fix anything that needs fixing. That’s in the U.S. In France, it’s Éric and Manu, two guys I only recently met.

In the U.S., my writing office—the office I rent—is a three-room suite on the second floor of a locked building where I have no telephone or Internet access, because I do not wish to be connected, reached, or in any way disturbed by the outside world. There’s plenty of time for that in the rest of my life. I feel that even more strongly about my time in France: why come to France to live like I do in the U.S.?

For the first dozen-and-a-half years, I resisted. Then one day out of the blue—out of *my* blue—Donna says, “I can’t stay in Plobien for eight weeks without being connected.”

Merde. I know what this means: compulsively reading Giants scores, baseball stats, and the news; hearing from and obsessively responding to people I don’t want to

hear from or respond to; watching You Tube; Googling, Yahooing, Amazoning, and e-Baying; living my American life in France. I also know what will happen if I don't....

Amazingly, a computer store recently opened in Loscoat. When I first saw it, I was disappointed, seeing it as another invasion of the new into the perfectly fine old. Now, it seems like a sign from the Gods. If Loscoat is ready for this, then I am, I think, conveniently forgetting that French people love novelty and technology, and I don't. So after I unpack, shop for food, check my bank account, and settle in, I take my laptop to the new computer shop in town, and say, "Bonjour."

A tall, thin, wiry guy with dark curly hair and a twinkle in his eyes—which could be friendly amusement, menacing anger, or turn either way in an instant—greet me with a smile and a frown. I haven't spoken yet so I can't figure out why the frown. The store is new and no one else is there, you'd think he'd want the business. I start to explain that I need a modem for the Internet.

"Monsieur, avez-vous le modem pour le Internet?"

He looks around the shop. There are piles of modems everywhere.

"Oui."

"Bon," I say, and hand him my computer. He looks at me as if a Neanderthal entered his shop and started speaking.

"This is old," he says.

"You speak English?"

He says, "Yes, of course." Like, didn't you just hear me?

I tell him that I live in Plobien and have been coming here every summer for twenty years (so he knows I'm a regular and a neighbor and he'll see me again); that

I'm a writer, because I know it's a good thing to be in France, (but I don't tell him about *I'll Never Be French*, because I don't want him to worry or even think about what I might write about him, because I haven't yet learned *to* tell him so he *will* worry and think about what I'll write about him); that I never wanted to be on-line because it's distracting—no need to tell him I have no will power or self-control—but, “My wife insists, *Insistes!* (I emphasize in French) that I connect this year BEFORE she arrives.” I can see he's sorry he spoke to me in English.

He puts the computer on the worktable.

I say, “Ici,” and hand him the charger and power cords. Here.

He takes them and his frown deepens. He holds the cord in his hand and looks at me in disbelief. Shit. I left the adaptor plug at the house, the plug that allows the three flat-pronged American plug to fit into the two round-pronged French socket. I look around. This is a computer store, there must be an adaptor plug somewhere. I don't see it, but I didn't see the modems either, and they're everywhere. “Avez-vous le plug adaptor pour les États Unis?”

He closes his eyes and shakes his head, no.

I drive back to the house—15 minutes each way—get my adaptor plug, and drive back. Luckily, the store is new, business is slow, and this guy—Éric—has less to do than I do, though hopefully he knows more than I do.

He takes the adaptor, attaches it to the power cord, plugs it in, then plugs the other end into the computer and turns it on. He's staring at the computer, trying hard not to look at me or elicit anymore conversation while the machine takes forever to boot up.

“C'est lentement,” I say. It's slowly.

“Ouiiiiiiiiiiii...”

“C’est ancient.” It’s old.

He looks at me like, (1) I already know that, (2) you already said that, and (3) why are you talking to me in French?

Finally, it boots. I give him my password—*le passemot*—and he types it in and sees it’s worse than he expected. The laptop is Donna’s old one, at least six years old. I brought it to France three years ago, meaning nothing has been updated for the past three years. He looks at me, lowering my Neanderthal status to Cro-Magnon.

“C’est bon pour l’Internet, j’espère?” It’s good for the Internet, I hope.

“We’ll see. Come back later today.”

It’s ten o’clock in the morning. I buy bread, eat lunch, go to the beach, and return to the shop at four o’clock. It’s still customerless, and someone else is sitting at the front desk, a happy, friendly, content fellow with a man-in-the-moon Buddha-like face.

“Bonjour,” I say. He responds so softly, I can hardly hear him, not that it matters, because it’s French. “Je suis Monsieur Greenside.”

“Éric,” he calls. That’s how I know the other guy’s name is Éric.

Éric comes out of the back room, sees it’s me, goes back to the back room, yells something to the person he’d rather be talking with, and comes out carrying my computer.

“C’est bon?” I ask.

He shrugs and explains that he updated all my files—Windows, Adobe, Acrobat, Internet Explorer, who knows what else, maybe my writing as well; he cleaned out lots

of junk files—hopefully not my writing—and added anti-virus protection. He’s done everything this old computer would allow. Now, it’s ready for the Internet. He’s given me no indication of how long this took—five minutes or five hours—or how much it will cost. In the U.S., Bob does everything. Something fails (often it’s me), I call him, he fixes it (unless it’s me), I take him to dinner, then we go shopping and I buy him a digital toy, and that’s that.

“You need a modem,” Éric says, which is where I began. “You can buy,” he points to the ones in the shop, “or rent,” he lifts a box, “from Orange,” the phone company. In the U.S., I own, which is what I’m about to do here, when Éric adds, “Orange has a special three-month sale.”

Three months! Just the time I need it to keep Donna here and happy. “Bon,” I say, “I’ll rent.”

The modem, called a Live-Box, comes in a box. Inside the box are directions for setting it up and activating it, none of which I’d understand in English, but Éric, bless him, already knows this. He opens the box, asks for my phone number, makes a phone call, and we wait... and wait... and wait... fifteen minutes until someone finally answers. They talk for a few minutes, then Éric goes on-line—on *his* computer and prints out my new Live-Box contract with my name and password. All that remains is the installation, which unfortunately happens at the house, and is up to me.

Éric tells me where to plug the phone line, modem line, and power line into the Live-Box. He tells me, shows me, and draws me a diagram. “In three or four days, you’ll be activated. When you’re finished, you return the Live-Box to the Orange store in Quimper.”

I pay him—less than thirty dollars for everything—and go home and follow everything Éric said and drew, and I wait. After five days, I’m still not connected.

I return to the shop, which is still customerless, and shout, “Bonjour.”

Éric comes out of the back room, sees it's me, and says, "Hello."

"Tout est bien, mais je n'ai pas la connexion." All's good, but I don't have the connection."

He goes on-line, taps in my phone number, and says, "This afternoon."

Two days later, I'm still not connected.

I go back to the store. This time Éric is talking with a customer. Ordinarily, I'd be upset that I have to wait, but I'm so happy he has another customer, I don't mind.

When the customer leaves, I tell Éric, "I'm still not online."

He repeats everything he's done before, and says, "Today."

I'm dubious, but I figure if Éric can't make this system work, neither Bob nor I would have a chance. I go to Leclerc to buy him a gift, then go home, and *voilà!* it works. I go back to the store to thank Éric *and* give him some good news for a change. As soon as he sees me, his face falls. He immediately starts typing on his keyboard. I feel bad. No one else gets this service, because no one else needs it, and I can see he's sorry he ever got into this.

"C'est marche," I say. "Tout est bien. Très bien. Merci, merci beaucoup," and I hand him a bottle of twelve-year-old Wild Turkey.

He's beaming. He's got the bourbon—*and* he's done with me. I'm beaming. I have wifi! Soon Donna will be beaming. All is good in the world. All summer the wifi works fine. The connection is terrific. Plobien, a village of 500 people in rural France—as most of France—is well connected, and has been for years.

At the end of the summer, two days before we leave, I disconnect the Livebox and rebox everything—exactly as Éric told me—and drive to Quimper to return it to the Orange store, exactly as Éric told me, and to buy a new phone for Madame P, which she asked me to do.

After waiting in line for over an hour, a salesperson finally agrees to see me. He takes the box, checks that everything is inside, and signs and initials and stamps all of the papers that verify: Livebox returned and all is OK. I buy Madame a new phone—one with large numbers, as she requested. I'm overjoyed. I'm already looking forward to next year. So is Donna. I can't say the same for Éric.

Two months later, back in California, I get a bill from Orange charging me the non-sale price for the Livebox I returned two months earlier. I call Sharon, who after two more months of being billed for a Livebox I no longer have, stops the billing. Eight months later I'm back in Plobien and planning to drive to Quimper and Orange to get my refund.... (to be continued)



**NEWS ABOUT *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living and
I'll Never Be French (no matter what I do)***

- February 13, 2024: I met with Richmond, Virginia Alliance Française via zoom and discussed both books.
- February 20, 2024: I discussed both books at a 'Talks with Authors' event sponsored by Friends of the Piedmont Avenue Library in Oakland, California.
- April 12, 2024: I was at Bookmine bookstore in Napa, California speaking about *I'll Never Be French* and (*not quite*) *Mastering* in an event sponsored by the Napa branch of Alliance Française.

If you haven't reviewed (*not quite*) and *I'll Never be French* on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#), please consider doing so. If you'd like to contact me, I can be reached at:

- Email: mark@markgreenside.com
- Web site: www.markgreenside.com
- Facebook author page: facebook.com/markgreensideauthor
- Amazon author page: amazon.com/author/markgreenside

Please, feel free to share this newsletter with anyone. If you'd like to read previous newsletters, they are available on my website and Facebook. Thank you.

Yours Sincerely and Happy Spring,

Mark

