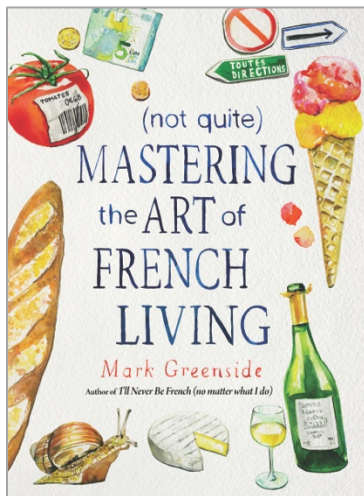




Volume 5, Number 2, May 2021



Dear Friend,

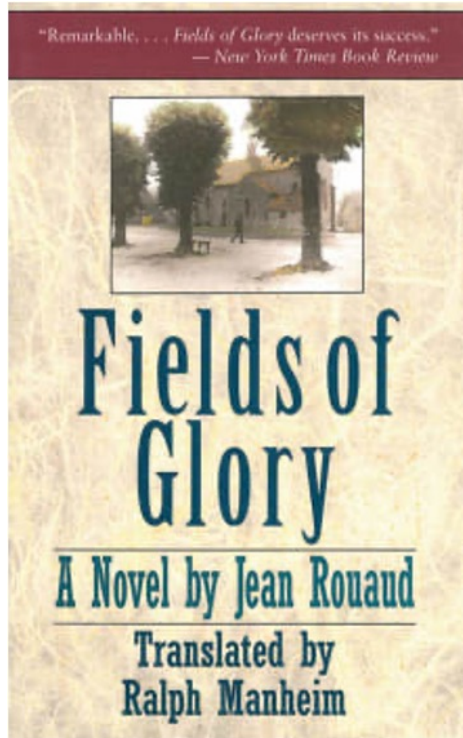
Going to France in 2021 is still more hope than reality, though I'm still hoping even though reality looms larger every day. My friend and French neighbor, Bruno, a medical doctor says probably not until 2022, but that was before Macron and the EU said France and Europe will open to vaccinated Americans on June 9. The good news is Brittany is one of the safest places to be in France. The bad news is I have to sit in a jam-packed airplane for eleven hours and negotiate Aeroport Charles De Gaulle to get there.... We'll see. But after a year of fighting Air France for refunds, we're not buying any tickets until we're sure. Here's hoping, hoping, hoping....

Meanwhile, lots has been happening with (not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living. In the last newsletter, I told you about a new, interesting, and exciting book list. I'm thrilled that I was asked to be a part of a fast-growing encyclopedia of authors on a website called Shepherd, where I'm featured with my own list of 5 book recommendations. Here is the link so you can find your favorite author or topic and browse the book list: <https://shepherd.com>

And Here is My Page...

The Best Books About Brittany France

**The Books I Picked & Why
By Mark Greenside**



Fields of Glory: A Novel

By Jean Rouaud

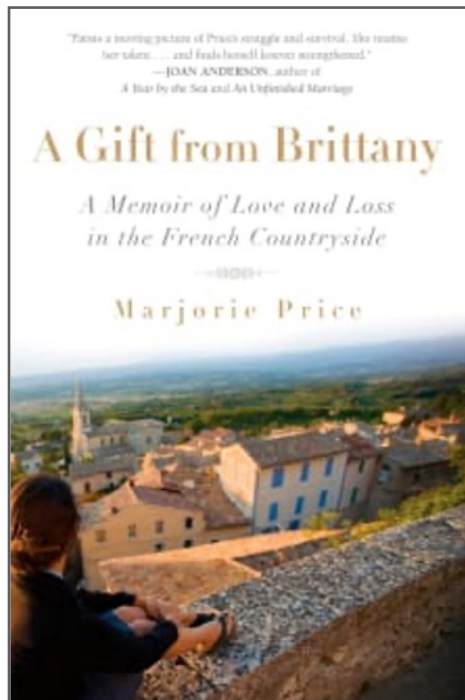
Why this book?

This is the first book of a fictionalized family history, starting with the omniscient narrator's maternal grandparents and paternal aunt, who are all born in the late 1880s: the World War I generation. The story takes place near Nantes, which until 1956 was part of Brittany, but then was administratively moved to a new department, the Loire Atlantic—though most people in Nantes and Brittany continue to believe the Nantois are Breton. As with many things French, the issue is far from settled.

Rouaud creates character through vignettes—and they're wonderful: grandpa smoking; grandpa driving; grandma complaining about grandpa smoking and driving; their car—the infamous, uncomfortable, 2CV, deux chevaux—in the rain, the wind, on hills, having to wipe the windshield by hand to see, clearing grandma's side, not grandpa's, whose vision is blocked by pouring rain, streaking mud, and cigarette smoke. The rain leaks through the windows, the vents, and canvas roof. Rain, "life's companion... the ennui of interminable drizzle," creates the sadness of personality. My favorite vignette is the day grandpa disappears from his daughter's house. Everyone, including the fire department is called to find him—he's 75 at the time. He returns, nonchalant, at the end of the day with a story about his visit to the exotic gardens in Hyères, with gorgeous descriptions of the plants and trees he has seen, touched, smelled (he's an amateur botanist). Grandma suspects a ruse, a mystery woman, someone with a slender ankle (unlike hers) and "a body conditioned by half-century of sea bathing (also unlike hers). She rifles through his pants pockets and finds a ticket stub to the Ile du Levant, a nudist paradise. No one says a word. A year later grandpa is dead.

That's when we meet Aunt Marie, bird-like, austere, a severe believer. It's Brittany, the church, rain, and death are everywhere, one or more of them on every page, but it's not morose or depressing. It's hilarious. It's the unbelieving omniscient narrator living in the land of the very believing, seeing, hearing, commenting, laughing—at himself, his family, the church, death, and life; Aunt Marie has a saint for every day and every occurrence; Uncle Remi, a non-believer is the church organist; the deaths of the father, uncles, aunt, and grandparents, told in the most beautiful and surreal language.

The final section of the book ties the family together, clarifying their history, relationships, and love: Marie, Joseph, Emile and Pierre, three brothers and a sister created, defined, and limited by the trenches of World War I. Emile and Joseph die there; Marie gives herself to God there. Pierre returns from there, marries Aline, and they have a son, another Joseph, who dies at age 40, one year after his wife Martha (the daughter of grandpa and grandma) dies in childbirth, leaving our omniscient author an orphan with a rich family history to discover and an ironic, absurd, iconoclastic voice to tell their story. I love this book.



A Gift from Brittany: A Memoir of Love and Loss in the French Countryside

By Marjorie Price

Why this book?

A twenty-year old American woman goes to Paris to paint, meets a French artist, marries, has a child, and together buy a farmhouse and make a summer home and art studios in rural Brittany: that story. A memoir.

The book was published in 2008, but the story takes place in the early 1960s when rural Brittany was closer to the 19th century than the 21st. I was in

Paris in 1967, and it was still possible to rent a hotel room for under five dollars a night, to travel in Europe for ten dollars a day. In 1967, you could not safely drink the water in France, including in Paris, and you had to have proof of a typhus vaccine to return to the U.S. It was still more Henry Miller's Paris than Macron's.

This was the time of the last of every day berets, blue workman's uniforms, electric Motobecane bikes, oxen in the countryside, Deux Chevaux on the roads, women in long black skirts and lace coifs, chicory coffee, wooden sabots, and hard cider morning, noon, and night. Not everyone had a telephone or television, indoor plumbing or central heating; it was a time when Breton could still be heard at home, agribusiness didn't yet exist, self-sufficient farms and bartering prevailed, when people gave four cheek kisses instead of the current one or two. This is before Vietnam and the Gulf War and freedom fries, when people still remembered and were thankful to Americans for Normandy, Paris, and Bastogne. Churches were full, forenames were French (not Breton), and wives were more docile. Spoiler alert: she leaves the man and stays in the village, making art, a life, and friends in rural Brittany.

A Gift of Brittany is an intimate look through American eyes at a part of rural Brittany in the 1960s. It is not nostalgic or sentimental. It is a hard, rich, full, physical life. When I got there in 1991, it was a different world, but a world everyone over forty remembered and talked about. This book brings the landscape, seascape, and people to life. It is exactly what it says it is: a gift.



The Price of Water in Finistere

By Bodil Malmsten

Why this book?

In 2000, angry at the state of the world, a fifty five year old acclaimed Swedish writer, sells her home and most of her belongings, leaves her homeland, and drives west with no destination in mind. She's alone, but not lonely, searching

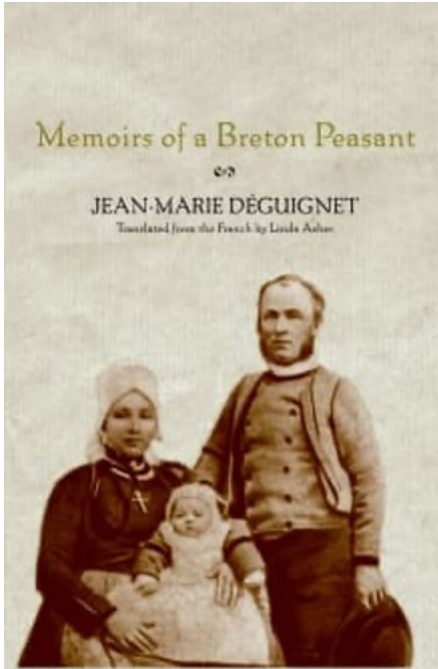
for peace and freedom and a break with the past. She stops where the land ends, at the end of the world, Finistère, Brittany, where she buys a house, meets Madame C, and plants a garden.

“It’s so wonderful here that one should write a book about it,” she tells Madame C, and spends the rest of the book refusing to write it, because to do so, she says, will diminish, simplify, and transform everything she loves about her new home. She’s like the banker who thinks money is filth and saves it; she’s the writer who distrusts words and writes—a memoir.

She writes about planting, tending, thinking, worrying about her garden—especially her tulips, roses, and wisteria, protecting them from snails, slugs, moles (whack-a-mole), and icky, sticky slimy bugs. She writes about Madame C, her elegant, opinionated, calm, reasonable, *c’est la vie*- accepting lucky charm and nemesis. Malmsten’s misuse of French tickles me, matching mine at my worst, like the time she tries to register her car and asks for the “immaculate conception” papers instead of “immatriculation de véhicule,” and gets the right papers anyhow.

She has trouble figuring out how to pay bills, as I do; trouble finding the water company, as I have; problems with her septic tank. She repeatedly calls the hardware guy Monsieur Homophile, because she can’t correctly pronounce his name. These are all things I’m familiar with, including writing her book in the first person present tense.

She, like me, finds paradise in Finistère and, like me, is as much at one with the world as she’ll ever be. This book is funny and beautifully written and has so much information about gardens and gardening that it could double as a How-to, or in my case a How-Not-To, because it’s so detailed and intimidating, I won’t even try. The book is also a primer on writing and the limits of language, and given what she has to say about words and their paucity, it’s a miracle this book exists.



Memoirs of a Breton Peasant

By Jean-Marie Déguignet

Why this book?

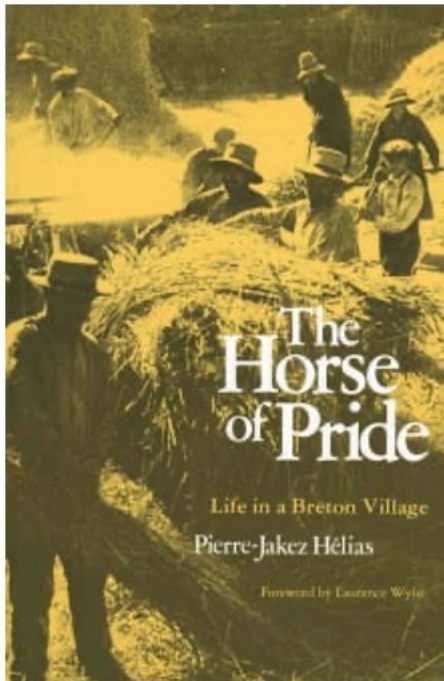
Jean-Marie Déguignet is not your typical Breton peasant. He's small and puny—and these people aren't built that way. At nine, a bee caused him to fall and hit his head, leaving an ugly wound that oozed for years and left a deep indentation in his skull when it finally healed. The result was a lifetime interest in bees and a lonely life, as no one wanted to be near him.

A curious and isolated lad, he becomes an auto-diktat, and like many auto-diktats has lots of disparaging things to say about those who are less educated and more successful and powerful than he—especially church and government officials, monarchists, and landlords: ignorant bastards he constantly fought (and lost) who controlled and ruined his life. He's an anti-cleric in this most Catholic of lands. He's a Republican in a time and place of monarchists. He understands the world as a scientist, through observation and experience, not like his dumb-ass peers, who explain the “good” that happens as God's will and the “bad” as Devil's tricks.

He learned to read and write Breton, French, and Latin. He was a beggar (an actual occupation), cowherd, gardener, inside domestic, and laborer on a model teaching farm where he learned modern methods of agriculture. Later in life, he owned a bar, had a license to sell tobacco, sold insurance, and did odd jobs. At nineteen, he volunteered for the army and served fifteen years, becoming a sergeant and traveling through France to Sebastopol (Crimean War), Italy (war of liberation), Algeria, Egypt, Jerusalem, and Mexico (Maximillian). This was when peasants rarely traveled more than ten kilometers from their homes and were illiterate in their own language. The last fifteen years of his life he lived alone and poor. He died as he lived, fighting the church, and losing. And he wrote about everything.

He is not a happy fellow: he was diagnosed with persecution mania. His observations are harsh and critical, but through them we learn about rural life in nineteenth century Finistère: the people, language, and culture (ignorant, god-fearing, stubborn, and superstitious); the terrible beginnings of industrialization; terrible diets and terrible jobs; arranged marriages; the powers of mothers-in-law; drunken fêtes, wives, clergy, landlords, and peasants; the prevalence of lice, poverty, lack of education, legends, fables, and myths; the omniscient power of the church, churchmen, and landlords—and their crimes and thievery.

I like this guy: he's a stoic complainer who writes in a very contemporary voice. He lives to see his words in print in *La Revue de Paris*, December 15, 1904, which gives him some pleasure, but given who is, not much. His last published work is a scientific treatise on beekeeping. Perfect.



The Horse of Pride: Life in a Breton Village

By Pierre-Jakez Hélias

Why this book?

Pierre-Jakez picks up where Jean-Marie Déguignet left off. This book is essentially a continuation of the story, a 20th century account of peasant family life in an area not far from where Déguignet lived a century earlier—except this book celebrates and revels and respects Breton culture, life, people, music, food, history, etc. It was published in 1975 and is part of the world-wide movement of identity politics, when ethnic groups, genders, religions, and nationalities are discovering their roots, history, beauty, and genius.

This book is a paeon to Breton life and culture, and Pierre-Jakez becomes a cultural icon and hero for writing it. By the end of his life (1914-95), he is honored throughout Brittany. I saw and heard (but couldn't understand) him at the huge, (thousands of people) annual Festival de Cornouaille in Quimper, where he was the guest of honor.

This book is a mirror image of Déguignet's book: everything Déguignet despises—the myths, legends, fables—Helias celebrates, enjoys, and heralds. They are looking at the same people, but at different times with different eyes and different voices. With Déguignet, the story is about loss and ignorance; with Helias, it's about discovery, honor, and creation: Pride.

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

- In April, the forthcoming paperback version of (*not quite*) was selected as the Editor's choice and recommended to readers of **The Connexion**, a news website and monthly newspaper for residents, second-home owners and visitors to France. It was founded in September 2002, has 16,000 subscribers, receives around 700,000 unique visitors, and 2,000,000 page views every month. The print edition has a circulation of 40,000 a month. It is also on sale in 6,000 newsagents and supermarkets across France. This is a very nice honor and coup.
- On May 18, the new paperback version of (*not quite*) was released with lots of testimonials and a funny, generous introduction by Ann Mah, author of *Mastering the Art of French Eating* and *The Lost Vintage*, two wonderful books I heartily recommend reading. She also has a delicious newsletter that I'd happily eat if I could.
- Also on May 18, Simon and Schuster and Skyhorse, the publishers of (*not quite*) and *I'll Never*, have agreed to issue new e-books in which the first chapter of *I'll Never* will be included in (*not quite*) and vice versa.

- On May 25, I have been invited to Zoom with the DuPage and North Coast chapters of Alliance Française to discuss *(not quite)* and I'll Never...
- On June 5, a friend and Newsletter reader has invited friends from Rwanda, Israel, California and the East Coast to join me in a private Zoom to discuss */// Never* and *(not quite)*.

I never thought I'd like it, but I do, and I am happy and willing and VERY available to zoom with book clubs, Alliance Française, and any other legal group, enterprise, organization, or gang. I have plenty of time, and as all writers will tell you, there's nothing we do better than finding pleasant things to do instead of writing.

If you haven't Amazon or Goodreads reviewed the book, 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:

- 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. Be careful out there, and be well.

Yours Sincerely,

Mark

