FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

A Corner in the Marais: Memoir of a Paris Neighborhood
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Contrary to the claims made by its subtitle and foreword, Karmel's A Corner in the Marais is more an informal history of a Paris neighborhood than it is a memoir, per se. With the exception of the first chapter, which treats the author's own discovery of Paris, the events it documents are decidedly public, not personal.

That said, Karmel has much to offer in the way of information unavailable through a more standard history or tourist brochure. Karmel's enthusiasm and desire to "recreate a sense of what it was like to be an ordinary person living in a given era" (based on legal records to which he had access), make reading these pages feel more like an active investigation than a rehashing of established facts. Rather than conform to strict chronological order or confine himself within the borders of the Marais, Karmel allows the book's course to be charted by his own curiosities and associations, as when in the last chapter, he decides to discuss the adjacent arrondissement encompassing the Ile Saint-Louis, presumably because it makes for an interesting literary tangent: "Baudelaire lived there, as did Daumier…. In Swann's Way, Proust has Swann living in an apartment on the Quai d'Orleans, the bank of the Ile Saint-Louis with the view of Notre Dame." Earlier on, Karmel devotes nearly half a dozen pages to the distinctive construction of a "half-timbered" house, only to "rush forward through the following two centuries, since the neighborhood … remained physically unchanged for quite a long time," thus accommodating roughly a thousand years in 150 pages, without sacrificing specificity.

Handsome black and white photographs and period engravings illustrate Karmel's detailed descriptions of several principal buildings near where he now lives in the Marais; unfortunately, a street map is not among these, which, given the intricate configuration of this medieval district's narrow passageways, makes it difficult to relate one landmark to the next. Also lacking is an index which would have made this just the book to have on hand in anticipation of a visit or while in Paris, when one would take pleasure in matching facades with Karmel's anecdotes. Accessible and unsentimental, A Corner in the Marais couples the conversational tone of a tour guide with the concrete facts of a reference text.

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