



Cavorting With Strangers: Great Ideas and Their Champions -- Paris

F. Patrick Butler

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"It could just be that we all secretly envy the French people," F. Patrick Butler suggests in the introduction to this spicy buffet of biography, history, cultural critique, and fiction.

Butler proceeds to celebrate the genius of ten great Frenchmen, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose musings on individual freedom inspired both the French and American Revolutions, to Jacques Cousteau, the French seaman/filmmaker who showed that political and ecological freedom must be balanced by responsibility. Butler blends these character sketches into the story of Charly and Jean-Michel and their friends, who engage in passionate shouting matches when not digging up dirt about this "unimpressive lot" of sometimes sleazy French historical figures. The venerable Rousseau, for example, was a sexual exhibitionist who married an illiterate laundry maid after a courtship of twenty-three years. And the great writer and prodigious sexual athlete Victor Hugo spread his seed among many wives, mistresses, chambermaids, and prostitutes, including his daughter's First Communion companion, his son's girlfriend, and his hairdresser's wife. On the day of Hugo's funeral, Butler relates, "the whores of Paris draped their pudenda in black crepe as a mark of respect."

Butler's fictional heroine is Charlene Brooks, a recently-fired American textbook editor. Too much the iconoclast to respect anything French, Charly would rather be working out, or watching Seinfeld reruns, or walking the dog. But she lands a probationary position as a travel guide, and her agency sends her to Paris for training. Her tutor is an alcoholic ex-college professor, Jean-Michel Levasseur, who likes to "find a café with tolerable coffee, and argue" with his eccentric friends. Charly and Jean-Michel seem to be heading toward more than a typical student-teacher relationship, but they clash on everything from culture and politics to art and philosophy. When Jean-Michel remarks that American capitalism is a perceived threat to Islam in that it "just keeps exporting—the low-cut jeans, violent DVDs, porn sites, salacious movies, and subversive ideas," Charly objects with, "Oh, *Finding Nemo* is subversive." She refers to mullahs as "dumb as tree stumps." Charly and Jean-Michel ramble through the cafes, museums, and parks of Paris, sometimes hooking up with Jean-Michel's noble but sexist benefactor, colonel de Monteaux, whose hatred for Napoleon adds a dimension to the common knowledge about the man. Jean-Michel's gay nephew Guy leads the discussion on Monet, and an old Irish hearing-impaired ex-pianist, Terence, proves to be an authority on Ravel. Later, the author himself becomes a character, not only to contend with Jean-Michel for Charly's favors but to sing the praises of Cousteau.

Dr. Butler was educated at St. Bonaventure and The American University. He has taught in Switzerland, Sweden, Austria, and Mexico as well as in the United States, and has written a textbook on business research. This background gives him a unique perspective on American culture, and his material gives him a springboard for discussing the nature of genius, the philosophy of art, and the compelling issues involving freedom and responsibility that confront world citizens today.

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