



French like Moi: A Midwesterner in Paris

Scott Dominic Carpenter

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This quirky travel memoir uncovers the lesser-known facets of Paris with verve.

Scott Dominic Carpenter takes the role of a bemused American on sabbatical in his humorous memoir, *French Like Moi*. Using social norms, language, and a tiny Paris apartment as animating grist—with chic line drawings by Liam Golden that distill the book's exaggerations—he points out how the storied City of Lights is often closer to the prosaic “City of Light Bulbs.”

Armed with a Midwesterner's “You betcha!” enthusiasm, Carpenter settled into the thirteenth arrondissement with his wife and daughter, where he delved into his neighborhood's down-to-earth character. Brief essays divide into those that embellish encounters with locals; domestic mishaps that illuminate cultural differences through common objects; musings on gastronomy, such as tracking down the right onion for coq au vin; and the city itself, including its layout, transport, and abandoned underground quarries.

The blend of familiar and novel topics is enlivened through Carpenter's persona, which is full of heroic bravado, leading to improvisations, though he's also sometimes puzzled and wary. Everything's ripe for commentary. Carpenter meets unpredictable adventures with ease, zigzagging from intriguing opening setups to good-natured tangents and pithy conclusions.

Back problems lead to reflections on healthcare and acquiring a girdle, while buying the wrong light bulb shows how Americans have come to expect easy exchanges and refunds. A home improvement project reveals limited hardware options, as well as a plumber whose solutions are nonchalant. A visit to the police station inspires wild imaginings about being caught, then turns out to be an inquiry about Carpenter's visa status.

In one of the funniest episodes, joining his condo association board allows Carpenter to witness people's indignation, feigned ignorance, confidence, and righteousness over encroached-upon space, down to the last centimeter. French neighbors are drawn in saturated color; their pettiness and foibles are mostly their own, and only sometimes attributed as national traits. Carpenter's careful to include himself in the jokes, too, as when he feigns worldliness to help Americans on a subway, only to be unmasked as a fellow “meerikin.”

On occasion, reality is glossed for the sake of a charmed anecdote, as when homelessness is reduced to “assaults on picturesqueness.” Immigration and terrorism are also recounted; Carpenter's status as an outsider, and as an American, allows him the privilege of flouting visa protocols and looking away from violence.

French Like Moi tours the everyday Paris that's found away from the Eiffel Tower's tourism. With an entertaining guide at the helm, bon mots and corny puns find a home alongside solid timing, curious anecdotes, and self-aware mocking. This quirky travel memoir uncovers lesser-known facets with verve.

KAREN RIGBY (April 10, 2020)

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