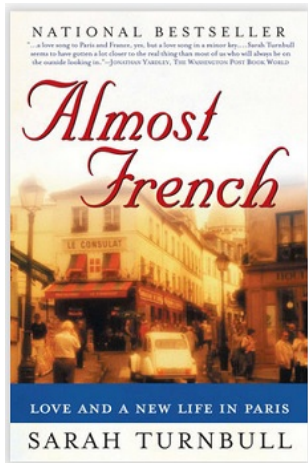


## Almost French by Sarah Turnbull (2002 - Penguin Random House)



I left Australia hoping to cram a lifetime of adventures into one unforgettable year. Instead, I ended up with a new life. I'd taken one year's leave from my job as a television reporter in Sydney to travel around Europe. If I didn't go now, I never would, warned a nagging voice in my head. Though, at twenty-seven I wasn't much interested in hanging around youth hostels. The idea was to immerse myself in fascinating foreign cultures, to work as a freelance journalist in Eastern Europe, which in my mind bubbled with unwritten, hard-hitting stories.

It was in Bucharest, Romania, that I met Frédéric. His English was sprinkled with wonderful expressions like 'foot fingers' instead of toes and he seemed charming, creative and complicated—very French, in other words. When he'd invited me to visit him in Paris, I'd hesitated just long enough to make sure he was serious before saying yes. Why not? After all, this is what travelling is all about, isn't it: seizing opportunities, doing things you wouldn't normally do, being open to the accidental?

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It was a city and culture I was familiar with—at least that's what I thought back then. When I was a child, my family had toured France in a tiny campervan and my eyes had popped at the chocolates and the cheeses. At secondary school I studied French and saw a few films by Truffaut and Resnais, which had struck me as enigmatic in a very European way, although I couldn't have said why. When I was sixteen we lived in England for a year and I came to Paris several times. In my mind, these experiences added up to knowledge of France and some understanding of its people. Then, a little over ten years later, my meeting with Frédéric drew me back, and when the time came to actually live in Paris, I figured belonging and integrating would take merely a matter of months.

Now, remembering my early naïveté draws a wry smile. The truth is, nearly all my preconceptions of France turned out to be false. It hardly needs to be said that living in a place is totally different from visiting it. And yet this blatantly obvious statement does need to be said, particularly about Paris, the most visited city in the world. A place I imagined to know after a few nights in a closet-size hotel room as a teenager and one summer holiday with a Frenchman sipping kir on café terraces.

At times the learning curve has seemed almost vertical. The social code I discovered in France wasn't just different from the one I knew, it was diametrically opposed to it. For a long time, I couldn't fathom the French and, to be fair, they couldn't fathom me either. My clothes, my smile—even how much I drank—set me apart. During my first year, dinner parties turned into tearful trials. There I was, a confident twenty-eight-year-old with the confidence knocked out of me, spending cheese courses locked in somebody's bathroom, mascara streaming down my cheeks.

It hasn't all been tears and trials, of course. The truth is, if France failed to live up to some of my expectations, in other ways the reality has been far richer, a thousand times better than my clichéd visions. My work as a journalist has enabled me to meet people ranging from famous French fashion designers to master chefs. On a personal level I'd taken a headlong plunge into new territory as well. Put a very French Frenchman together with a strong-willed Sydney girl and the result is some fairly spectacular—and sometimes hilarious—cultural clashes.