

**Juliana de Nooy. *What's France Got to Do with It?: Contemporary Memoirs of Australians in France*. Australian National University Press, 2020. 204 pages. AUS\$50.00  
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Scholars of literature and related disciplines should feel at least a *frisson* of interest when a colleague signposts a 'new' area of writing, publishing and academic interest. Not that an emerging genre may have gone entirely unnoticed, but others have perhaps passed it by with only a backward glance, or even a thought that it may be unworthy of their professional interest.

The sense of crossing new ground is encountered in Juliana de Nooy's *What's France Got to Do with It?: Contemporary Memoirs of Australians in France*. This is, however, a byway that de Nooy herself has explored over the past decade in a series of journal articles reflecting on the growing number of memoirs by Australians featuring tales of encountering, embracing and settling in France. In these articles de Nooy developed an argument that finds its full expression in this book—that these texts are only incidentally a form of travel writing, and that their analysis needs to be situated within discourses of memoir and life writing, gender studies, and intercultural studies.

This is a genre that is often associated with Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* (1989). While Mayle was certainly not the first to write such a book, the spectacular international success of *A Year in Provence* ensured a steady flow of travellers with literary ambitions trawling the French countryside, together with publishers eyeing off the sizable readership looking to indulge fantasies of Mediterranean escapism. The resulting nexus of creators, consumers, and commercial opportunists was further encouraged when Australian titles such as Mary Moody's *Au Revoir: Running away from Home at Fifty* (2001), and Sarah Turnbull's *Almost French: A New Life in Paris* (2002) hit bookshop shelves. And as Turnbull's book indicated, Australian writer-expats have been as eager to embrace dreams of a stylish *pied-à-terre* or bohemian garret in Paris or Lyon, as they have the bucolic attractions of *la France profonde*.

De Nooy approaches her task of describing this genre somewhat instrumentally, by detailing a corpus of 45 post-Mayle titles that serve as the texts on which she undertakes her analysis. Only one title is published prior to 2001, so in its Australian context this genre is identified as an almost exclusively twenty-first century publishing phenomenon. Indeed even that sole pre-2001 title, Alistair Kershaw's *Village to Village* (1993), is an uncomfortable fit with others in the corpus. Kershaw moved to France in the immediate post-war years and was therefore an expat of nearly fifty years' standing when his memoir was published—hardly someone assessing France as a lifestyle whim.

From the outset de Nooy reconfirms her belief that, 'although the memoirs are ostensibly about France, they are in a sense more interesting for what they reveal about issues of gender and identity' (3). In casting an introductory eye over her corpus she indicates where her analysis will fall when noting the preponderance of female authors of books that are 'clearly marketed to women' (13). She also notes—perhaps contrary to expectations—that rather than using France as a canvas for 'nostalgic rediscovery,' authors are engaged on 'a future-oriented project' focusing on the creation of new identities shaped by the 'cultural paradigms of femininity and gender relations that the move to France brings into play' (23). Across the central chapters of *What's France Got to Do with It?* de Nooy then teases out the various components of identity that allow female authors to redefine themselves through their

relationship to France, including culture and style, love and romance, language, class, gender, and food and wine.

De Nooy's analysis of the numerous texts she deploys is insightful and convincing. She is thorough in compiling 'evidence,' even if the presentation can be a little leaden when reduced to the heavy-handed use of quotations or examples to 'prove' a point. But this meticulously compiled detail is useful as de Nooy not only maps the genre in its numerous variations, but also challenges the notion of 'Frenchness' as it emerges in the authors' imaginative lives. For as de Nooy deftly points out, if these memoirs record (and enable) a form of identity creation, then in many cases they do so by embodying 'post-feminine' values that embrace established female interests. In other words, she examines how authors rely upon a set of geographically and culturally specific expectations associated with 'France' in order to propagate identities associated with traditional ideals of female desire.

It is, however, no easy task de Nooy faces in trying to bring even this degree of coherency to her corpus. As she acknowledges, the authors and their texts represent a range of backgrounds, ages, life trajectories and ambitions. That authors have been to France, and presumably emerged as Francophiles, does not in itself ensure that they have a homogeneity of experience or response. And as de Nooy is also well aware, one of the important differences is the degree of ironical self-awareness they possess with regard to their experiences of 'becoming French.' As she puts it, 'the memoirists are not simply or uniformly duped by their own tales' (172).

Even with this comprehensive accounting for internal genre variation that de Nooy undertakes, some texts are inevitably marginalised. For example, books by men remain outside her central focus, and are largely discussed in order to establish their differences from those written by women. Others by chefs such as Stephanie Alexander and Shannon Bennett, or an epicurean such as John Baxter, are sidelined by virtue of belonging to literary traditions that owe more to Elizabeth David or Richard Olney than to Mayle and his followers.

With this in mind it may be that de Nooy's corpus would have been enriched by including the self-published books which she has elected to exclude. While any selection of relevant texts encounters the need to set boundaries, the exclusion of self-published titles has the result of omitting such a distinctive 'forerunner' as Beverley Wills's *Oz on Provence* (1994), and titles that would otherwise sit at the heart of de Nooy's interest in post-feminist identity construction, such as Carolyn Tate's *Unstuck in Provence: The Courage to Start Over* (2014).

Another fault line that runs through this genre is the result of the sometimes-cynical realities of contemporary publishing. In Australia, Penguin redefined the field when they opened it up to the large format, high-production values of their Viking and Lantern imprints. The effect was to align coffee-table aesthetics with forms of decadent desire that created a subgenre expressing distinctly different goals and values to those associated with a standard mid-life search for a renewed identity. These books are not so much memoirs of France underpinning an identity-in-formation, as they are a display of an already developed, enviably presented identity which relies upon France for an additional touch of exotic glamour. In other words, they are not books about 'how I became me,' but rather 'wouldn't you like to be like me?' De Nooy is cautiously disparaging of these books in her discussion of the post-feminist revival of traditional forms of female (or feminised) consumption. But while she is clearly attuned to the influence of publishers on the manner in which these books (and indeed the whole genre) are designed and marketed, her discussion might have benefitted from closer scrutiny of the

mechanisms by which authors and publishers have colluded in this none-too-subtle ‘exploitation’ of a carefully targeted female readership.

*What’s France Got to Do with It?* is an interesting, and in a sense quite ground-breaking, if specifically focussed, foray into issues of identity and Australian women in the twenty-first century. And despite de Nooy’s well-justified claim that this is a genre not essentially about travel, it is nonetheless useful reading for anyone interested in learning about what has become of travel writing as mass globalised travel and transient expatriation have been normalised. It is also a pity that de Nooy’s timing in writing this book robbed her of the opportunity to speculate on the future of the genre in a post-covid (or at least covid-normal) world. No doubt relationships with travel, expatriation, foreign cultures, and even personal identity formation, will be at least temporally recalibrated as new relationships to ‘home’ and ‘away’ emerge.

*Paul Genoni, Curtin University*