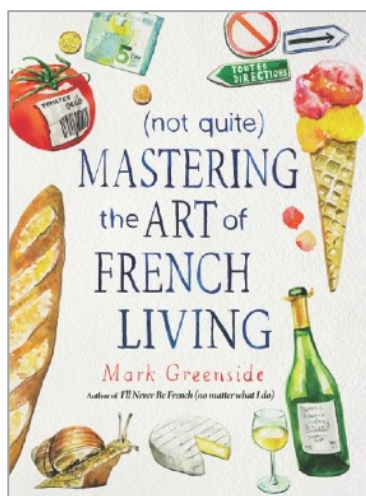




*Volume 3, Number 1, April, 2019*



Dear Friend,

Happy Spring, though in much of the country (not to mention the world) you'd hardly know it. To distract or entertain or beguile you, I'm going to tell you what's been happening with me and (not quite) Mastering....

Two months ago, I received a lovely e-mail from a reader who had recently bought a house in France. She told me how much she enjoyed the book—a sure hook to grab me—and she asked some questions. The questions began a mini correspondence, which became on February 12, 2019 a published interview with the Los Angeles Public Library. Here is the [link](#) to the interview—but if you wish to read the unexpurgated version, here it is:

### **Wendy Westgate interview for LA Library, 2/12/19**

#### ***What inspired you to sit down and write these two books on living in France?***

When I bought my house, I promised myself I'd do three things: pay all my bills on time, no questions asked, as nothing ruins relationships faster than bad money, except maybe good sex; not sleep with any of the local women, which turned out to be easier than I hoped, as none of the local women seemed interested in sleeping with me; and not writing about my life in France. Two out of three's not bad.

I didn't want to write about it because I wanted to live it. Writing about it meant separation, meant observing and commenting, judging and evaluating, and what I wanted was to be there and experience it. So I kept no notes, no journals, no diary—

but I did tell lots of stories, and the more I told them the more I realized (1) they were funny, and (2) people wanted to hear more. So after fifteen years of being there, I started to write about my life in France.

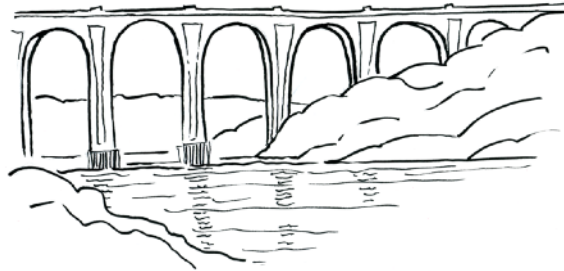
***In fact, what inspired you to buy your house in Brittany?***

Two things: me and Brittany. I was 47 at the time and owned nothing but an 18 year-old Volvo and the clothes in my closet. My father died a few years earlier and another of my serial monogamous, sort of, relationships was ending. All I can figure—retroactively—is I was approaching fifty and I was looking for a place to nestle or nest. Why Brittany? Because it's gorgeous: plush-Irish green (because it rains a lot) heathered hills; long, white, soft, sandy beaches; pristine seas; huge tides—some of the largest in the world—and the light, the light, the shimmering north-sea light, cotton-candy clouds, and endless horizon, where Gauguin, Monet, Seurat, and Pissarro came to paint; the people, the friends I met, their humor, curiosity, warmth, genuineness; and the house: a three story 120 year-old stone house with five fireplaces and original wood and tile floors on  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an acre of land, facing a river, and the last lock before the sea for less than the cost of a high-end Mercedes. All of this (and more) is the subject of my first book about living in France, *I'll Never Be French (no matter what I do)*.

***Does it make life more confusing or disjointed to have lives going on in two places?***

Originally, yes, because I often wanted or needed something that was where I wasn't. After a while, that happened less and less as more and more I doubled up and kept the same key items in both places: pen refills, yellow pads, certain books, computer files, American keyboards, Blackwing pencil sharpeners and 602 Palomino pencils; knife sharpeners, cherry pitters, measuring cups and spoons in ounces, 8.5 X 11 inch paper.... The confusion and disjointedness were about missing things, *not* about missing life. Life in California and Brittany feels complete. The truth is I like the bifurcation of rural village life—my village has 600 people—and city life. I like what both have to offer, and I like how I live in both, though Donna, my wife, and all of my friends say I'm nicer in France. I tell them it's because my language skills—or lack thereof—keep me in line. Whatever it is, they're happy, and so am I. In the U.S., I work as a union grievance officer, which allows ample time and opportunity to release and express

aggression. In France, because I can't do much or say much, I'm humble—and humbled. Living in both places makes for an interesting life.



***Was it difficult to distill down all of the many funny/crazy/frustrating experiences you had into what could be contained in one (and now two) books?***

No. I knew what I wanted to do—which is not the same as knowing what I wanted to say—in both books. The first book, *I'll Never Be French*, was about reluctantly going to France, surprisingly falling out of love with my girlfriend and in love with Brittany, buying a house when I don't speak French, don't like to fly, and have no money, and fixing the house up. It is a series of single event stories: redoing the floors, dealing with a flood and house insurance, almost drowning, a fiftieth birthday party. When the book came out a friend of mine said, "There's nothing here about day-to-day life," and I realized he was right: it was a series of very funny (and hopefully illuminating) one-offs. The second book, *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living*, is all about the day-to-day: driving (and accidents); shopping (and different accidents); banking (getting *my* money out of *my* bank); eating (things I wouldn't eat anywhere else); cooking (for French people, which is not like cooking for Americans); medicine and staying healthy; speaking (and not speaking) French. The first book felt like it was channeled. I'd told so many of the stories so many times it just flowed. The second book, I had a mental outline and organization, and I knew what I wanted to do. Once that was done, it was fill in the blanks, none of which means writing the books was easy: each book took five years to write and each book went through multiple, multiple iterations.

***What were your criteria for choosing which anecdotes to include?***

Before writing these books, I wrote short fiction and had a collection of stories, *(I Saw a Man Hit His Wife)*, published. Writing fiction taught me a lot about voice, character, point

of view, setting, dialogue, plot, theme, and story. In deciding what to include and exclude, I followed the dictum: if it doesn't add, it detracts, so I included pieces that I thought were funny, well-written, and interesting; pieces that moved the story and added to the whole—and I eliminated (I hope) everything that didn't.

***Did you decide to omit certain experiences in order not to alienate a friend/acquaintance?***

Yes. Lots. First, there was the girlfriend who “made” me to go to Brittany with her. Do I tell that story or not? Do I write the break-up scene? Do I write a payback, Kathryn Dearest book? The answers were No, No, and No, three of the wisest decisions I ever made. Second, were my new French friends, none of whom signed up to be written about or have their private lives disclosed. I was so concerned about this that I sent every French friend who could read English a copy of the manuscript before it was published and asked each to read it for accuracy and offense, which they did, and made the book better and more accurate. Third, was Peter Mayle. I'd read *A Year in Provence*, and thought it hilarious and outrageous—and not something I wanted to emulate. His book is based on French stereotypes, making fun of French people. I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to lose any French friends over the book (though I did), and I didn't want to have to move (I didn't). I figured if *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong* the problem is probably me, not them. It's their country and culture after all. I'm the outsider, so in my books, I'm the foil, not they. These were all conscious, writer's choices that took me a long time to make.

***What's currently on your nightstand?***

In no apparent or conscious order: Lucia Berlin's *A Night in Paradise* and *Welcome Home*; Donald Westlake's *Why Me?*; Rupert Christiansen's *The Making of Modern Paris*; Colin Jones' *Versailles*; Mary Gabriel's *Ninth Street Women*; David Yaffe's *A Portrait of Joni Mitchell*; Walter Isaacson's *Leonardo Da Vinci*.

***What was your favorite book when you were a child?***

Old Testament Bible stories with lots of smiting and smoting, good triumphing over evil, and eye for an eye righteousness and vengeance: David and Goliath; Judah and the

Maccabees; Esther and Haman; Samson; Joshua, Moses, the story of Passover. It was a simple black and white world of right and wrong, good and bad, presciently preparing me for the politics of today. Who'da guessed?

***Was there a book you felt you needed to hide from your parents?***

Mickey Spillane's books, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *God's Little Acre*, *Peyton Place*, books I read for the "bad" parts, which were very good. I didn't know it then, but my parents, especially my mom, was happy I was reading anything, as I wasn't much of a reader as a kid. There was nothing I had to hide, though I suspect hiding them made the 'bad' parts even better.

***Can you name five favorite or influential authors?***

No. How about twenty? In no particular order, off the top of my head: Joan Didion, Joseph Heller, Raymond Carver, David Foster Wallace, Phillip Roth, Paul Auster, Samuel Beckett, Julian Barnes, Italo Calvino, Alice McDermott, George Saunders, Tobias Wolfe, Richard Russo, Nick Hornby, Jhumpa Lahiri, Albert Camus, Ferdinand Celine, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Alice Munro.

***Is there a book that changed your life?***

A single book? No—but having four books published changed my life. Each one validated my writing—and me as a writer. I don't know why, but after four books and multiple stories, I'm still/always in doubt about my work.

***Can you name a book for which you are an evangelist (and you think everyone should read)?***

No. There are too many. Every year, I give my favorite book of the year as a holiday gift. Recent books I've been evangelical about include: Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier*; Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*; Elena Ferrante's *The Days of Abandonment*; Junot Diaz' *This Is How You Lose Her*; Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*; Andrew Greer's *Less*; Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*; James Salter's *A Sport and a Pastime*; A.J. Liebling's *Between Meals*; Anna Burns' *Milkman*; W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*; Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an*

*Ending*; Lucia Berlin's *A Manual for Cleaning Women*; Patti Smith's *Just Kids*; Luke Barr's *Provence, 1970*; Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*.

***What do you like to do in your spare time?***

Read, walk, travel, visit art museums, visit friends, go to the sea, sit in the sun, write angry letters to the editor, not answer my phone...

***What other jobs/occupations have you had prior to your career as a writer?***

Window washer; camp counselor; coat check guy; weighing heavy people for diet experiments; community organizer; teacher of political science, U.S. history, American literature, and creative writing; teacher's union president and grievance officer.

***What's the best thing about being an author?***

Writing well, channeling a voice, finding the right word, entertaining myself, making myself laugh, looking in awe at something I just wrote, marveling and wondering, 'where in the world did that come from?'; the joy of finishing something that was difficult and important that I didn't know or think I could.

***What's the hardest part about being an author?***

Not writing and self-doubting.

***What are you working on now?***

A third and final book about living in France. The working title is: *Hello, Goodbye, I'm Finally French*.





## MORE NEWS ABOUT (not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living

A discerning Hungarian publisher has bought the rights to the book and will publish it in May. Donna and I will go to Budapest—where my father and grandfather were born—for the annual Budapest book fair in June. The language is Magyar, linked to Finnish and Ugric, and the money is the forint (280 forint = 1 dollar; 1 forint = .0036 dollars). Wish me luck. I'll tell you all about it in my next newsletter.

The blog *The Good Life France* recently reviewed *I'll Never Be French* and (not quite) *Mastering*... click [here](#)

The blog *My French Life* reviewed *I'll Never Be French* in March, and will review (not quite) *Mastering* in April. click [here](#)

Most important and meaningful, though, are your emails and reviews on [Amazon](#) and [Goodreads](#). If you haven't reviewed the book yet, please consider doing so, as those reviews are critical for the book's success and my mental health. If you'd like to contact me, I can be reached at:

- Email: [mark@markgreenside.com](mailto:mark@markgreenside.com)
- Web site: [www.markgreenside.com](http://www.markgreenside.com)
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Thank you.

Yours Sincerely,  
Mark

