

# AT SECOND GLANCE: ANOTHER WHIRL 'ROUND PARIS

• JENNEL WOULF

Paris did something to me that second time around. I didn't know quite what it was then, but there I was, liberated, free, simultaneously empty and full. It was late springtime, when the days were growing longer. Yves Montand floated through my head that morning, a suitably nostalgic soundtrack for my first walk along the Seine, browsing the bookstalls that line the quai. It was then, while flipping through a musty old copy of *Les Misérables*, that I realized I had finally found what I had so long been searching for in Paris, something I had given up on so many years before.

On my first trip to France, I had expected all that mad romance, dreamt of sipping cafe au lait at tiny tables situated on black and white street corners. I dreamt of being dipped into tremulous kisses by mysterious leather-scented older men, of admiring Chanel-clad ladies and touting perfectly coiffed poodles. All I found was a tangle of traffic, impenetrably icy waiters and a sandbox of pebbles crouching beneath the Eiffel Tower. I found the only thing I hadn't accounted for; my hopes curdled into an acute and pressing disappointment. Frustrated, I took my cafe on chaotic street corners, choking on diesel fumes, the dog shit on the pavement in full color.

All I expected from Paris was the perfection I had seen so long documented. Was that too much? I learned, years later, while my

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• **JENNEL WOULF** graduated in 2002 with a degree in creative writing. She traveled to Paris for a month-long study abroad with the English department in 2000.

disappointment multiplied, that it was. I've started to believe that Americans owe many a heartbreak to unrealistic expectations. Maybe it's the confidence of belonging to and being part of a "great country" that has filled us with enough security to spend time dreaming of "the other." Maybe we have so much comfort and so much time that by allowing ourselves to dream of a world so grand, so fair, so perfectly wistful, we suffer from the overreaching of our hearts and

the discordance of our reality.

The first time I went to Europe, I longed to visit a place in history, not

in France. What I eventually discovered is that no place can live up to the dream it represents. It can surprise us; maybe even sweep us a little off our feet. But any place whose allure is so well documented is altogether tainted with reality. If unblemished visions of faraway places is what it takes to get us out of the armchair and down to the passport office, then so be it. I certainly still cherish the images of what I wished Paris could still be, but once the veil lifted, I found I was able to discover incredible new things about the city.

Less-than-ordinary things began to catch my eye. All around the city, on concrete walls and chimney flues, on abandoned storefronts and in empty alleyways, I began to recognize the works of the city's more prolific graffiti artists. My favorite was a very simple yellow cat, ever-grinning a Cheshire smile. Whether lazing about on his back or curled up neatly in a stairwell, I'd spotted Monseieur Chat's works all across the country from the Riviera to Brittany. I was struck by the modernity of my new little pleasure, shocked to find that something in such brazen defiance of my classic vision could be the one thing to finally open my eyes.

The morning I spotted the ancient copy of *Les Misérables*, I opened the tattered cover and discovered a list of names, alongside the year each had read the book. Monique LeMaitre, Guillaume Bouvier, Annik Charmont ... each had held this book in their hands for many hours, probably loved and hated it, and eventually gave it away. The book's past had been thoroughly documented, and its future was left to me. I considered the length and depth of the novel, and the fact that I would almost certainly never finish translating it in my poor French. Ultimately, I knew I had to be a part of the history of this book, and of this place. So I handed the gray-bearded man his 13 Francs, slipped the book under my arm and drifted away in search of a pen to add my name to Paris's past, present and future.