

A review of

Stanger, Ted, *Sacrés Français le Roman: Un Américain en Picardie*. 2005. Paris. Ed. Michalon.



Some months ago, I met Ted Stanger on the TGV from Paris to Aix and asked him why his two previous books *Sacrés Français* and *Sacrés Américains* had not made it into English. These personal testimonies, fruits of long expatriation, of culture shock and reverse cultural shock, are eye-opening, not only in spite of, but because of their ability to make us laugh at the absurdities of our condition when cultures collide.

Now I am again on the TGV, reading the last pages of *Sacrés Français le Roman*. It should not want for an interested publisher or market. A good novel is a good novel. It needs no other excuse to find its way into English. The US expatriate in France and certainly elsewhere will see mirrored how one experiences the dynamics and values of the people whose lives one becomes part in. It would be sad for readers without a mastery of French not to be refreshed by this story, especially given the recent and bizarre wave of US anti-French sentiment and the current tendency to forget US racial tensions and struggles in the light of the current violence in the banlieus of Paris.

Sacrés Français le Roman, studies one man's growth through expatriation. Unlike Henry James' 1877 novel *The American*, the scene for the struggle for social acceptance is now not in a Parisian drawing room but in the factory in an era of globalization. In all good will, one of Bradley's subalterns comments, "Being American is not fatal—it can be cured!" Thus is however no longer a matter of opposing American innocence to European corruption but one of American naiveté coming to grips with French savoir-faire on its own terms.

Jonathan Bradley is sent to France for a financial turn-around of his Texas company's recent acquisition, a plumbing hardware manufacturer in Picardie. His thinking, his methods and his French are not up to it, but he sees and learns—painfully but well. Ted Stanger does not abandon the sense of humor that characterized his previous writings, but having a solid story line and well defined characters behind the events that tickle us generates if not endearment, then at least respect for ourselves and those around us.

One is tempted to say that Bradley, "l'Etatsunien" succeeds in spite of himself, but that is too harsh. He succeeds because he starts to listen, to see, to learn, and he dares to apply, albeit imperfectly, what he is learning. Even, more, he allows himself to accept and absorb difference and often learns to love the people who bring it to him. And yet, one sees that he also succeeds because he is able to draw on his US-style persistence and decisiveness within the rhythm demanded by his new context. "*Avant l'heure, c'est pas l'heure.*" Cultural competence is not just adaptation but a chance for synergy.

The author raises the question in Bradley's musings as to whether he is committing the capital sin of "going native." The question is not answered directly, but we close the book's cover with the sense that perhaps he has found a lost part of himself in his exposure to the other. This is a far cry from the love-hate yo-yo of culture shock or simply romanticizing a foreign environment. And yes, it is a novel; there is romance, seduction, sweet surprise and a timely denouement.

Is there a moral to the story? Yes. To echo Thomas Wolfe, *You can't go home again, and, maybe you might not want to!* We are left to guess about Jonathan Bradley's future as well as our own as we come to grips with globalization and being abroad.

Reviewed by George Simons at www.diversophy.com