

# PARIS IS BORING

Claiming France for the new homebodies

By Cristina Nehring

Discussed in this essay:

*Paris to the Moon*, by Adam Gopnik. Random House, 2000. 338 pages. \$24.95.



Scot over Hemingway; here comes Mr. Rogers. Or, rather, here comes Mr. Gopnik, *New Yorker* correspondent and author of the world's coziest recent book on France, *Paris to the Moon*. He's come to reclaim Paris for the new homebodies, and, God knows, they are grateful. Finally, they sigh in reviews from L.A. to Boston, someone "has loosened the death grip Hemingway had on the place" and "given us back a Paris we can enjoy, a Paris as it surely must be."

What Gopnik has given us is a Paris

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as many of us clearly want it to be. In essays on everything from his son's swimming lessons at the Ritz to his own kitchen tours of Arpège, Gopnik has given us a new and unthreatening Paris—a place that neither challenges nor upsets us; a place we can move to with cable TV, super-babies, and prejudices intact and feel just fine. It is a Paris bled of both legend and difference—a castrated capital of befuddled salesmen and quaint customs, bourgeois dainties and wide-eyed restaurateurs waiting to learn from their avuncular American customers. You too can live here, Gopnik's essays cry: Forget all that Paris lore of love and genius, sex

and starvation. Forget Hemingway selling his coat for a baguette, Henry Miller bargaining with a prostitute over a franc. Forget late-night literary debates and having to hold your drinks and wives. Paris is just a little dollhouse town these days, and you don't have to be a lover, a poet, or an alcoholic to live there. All you have to be is a snob in slippers—and with the exception of a few hurdles involving hot chocolate at the Ritz, you'll fit right in.

Did Gopnik fit in during the five years he spent on the Left Bank, from 1995 to the spring of 2000? One would expect he might have, given his "lifelong infatuation" with the city. One would be mistaken. In many ways, *The New Yorker* could not have picked a Paris correspondent less likely to immerse himself in French culture. There is not a jot in Gopnik of that generous old instinct "When in Rome do as the Romans do." When in Paris, the first thing Gopnik did was get CNN—which, there is reason to believe, became his chief source of intelligence about the city from that time forth. (On the eve of the new millennium, he even watched the Eiffel Tower sparkle on television—and never realized that it has continued to sparkle every night since . . . in real life.) The second thing he did

was to order a turkey special-delivered, so that he could enjoy an American Thanksgiving. Next, he looked for a New York-style gym, raked the city for the coffee bean he had had in Soho ("Our old Dean & DeLuca blend is gone now," he laments, "and we must find a new one"), and bribed a local restaurant into providing U.S.-style takeout. (Unequipped, they brought him dinner on porcelain plates, which he forgot to return. A month later, the place went out of business. "We feel very guilty," Gopnik assures us.)

If this is a "love affair" with Paris, as some have said, it is a love affair entirely on Gopnik's terms. It is the love

affair of Bluebeard with his fainting mistresses. It is the love of colonizers for the colonized. "Serve me," it says, "become me, and I will adore you."

Not that Gopnik comes off as an oppressive monster. Quite the reverse. He is genteel, self-deprecating, suave. He is also possessed, time and again, of a formidable turn of phrase. Take how he describes the way visiting chef Alice Waters eyes the watercress at a Parisian market: "not with the greed of a hungry man seeing dinner but with the admiration of William Bennett looking at a long marriage." Or how he compares the French relationship to technology with the American: "It is as if all American appliances dreamed of being cars while all French appliances dreamed of being telephones."

Such observations abound with cultural suggestion: The French, it is true, place infinitely more emphasis on sociability than Americans. No meal is consumed without animated conversation. Where Americans hide behind tinted car windows, the French connect on ubiquitous cell phones. In America, distance from one's neighbor is the ultimate commodity. French people crowd together on every occasion—the smaller and more crowded a bistro, the better. Even the solitary writer works in a café, on a table not much bigger than a Frisbee, at a proximity to smoke and gossip most American writers would find prohibitive. Gopnik does not always pursue the implications of his *bons mots*, but he proffers them for us to ponder. And in many cases they are, well, *bons*.

The problem is not the book's wit. Nor is it Gopnik's method, which is to present small points of his experience and try to tease larger truths from them. This was the approach, after all, of Montaigne, and it can be at least as rewarding as plowing right in with the Big Truths—more rewarding than lingering fetishistically on the details, as is the manner of many contemporary essayists. The problem lies in how fundamentally limited Gopnik is as an observer of Paris, with his cultural expectations (astonishingly parochial), habits (homebody), class (high), and identity as an overachieving yuppie dad (increasingly irksome). It is these limitations—more than his latent colonialist impulse—that mangle his at-

tempts to interpret Parisian culture.

Let us begin with the most obvious target: Gopnik's conspicuous consumption. Now, there's nothing wrong with frequenting the most expensive restaurants in Paris if your pockets are deep enough. And it's easy to romanticize poverty—as Hemingway does in *A Moveable Feast*. A pauper can live as colorlessly as a prince—and at as complete a remove from local life. One need only recall James Joyce, as described by Malcolm Cowley, who visited Joyce's Parisian digs in 1923: "The great man lived in a cheap hotel, not picturesquely sordid, but cluttered and depressing.... He had no companions."

It's when your upper-class sensibility becomes so restrictive a master it no longer allows you to loiter on the street between pay-stops that it reaches the level of minor tragedy. If you can't stop to smell the pastries in the cheaper patisseries because you're being taxied to the Ritz, then you're missing the more potent charms of Paris. And this, increasingly, is the picture we get of Gopnik's years in the city. For all his drollery, his is in fact a sheltered existence in Paris—sheltered not just from the ordinary but from the truly extraordinary aspects of Parisian life.

Gopnik's take on Paris is, in many ways, an intelligent version of that offered to an in-flight magazine a few months back by supermodel Elizabeth Hurley. You *must* have breakfast at the Ritz! gushes the self-proclaimed Paris expert. In fact, you must have dinner at the Ritz too (spaghetti Bolognese: "I special-order it as soon as I arrive"). Indeed, if at all possible, you must *stay* at the Ritz. The pool is "magnificent," too, wouldn't you know.

Without scaling the same heights of uselessness, Gopnik does spend an extraordinary amount of time talking about the many things he did at the Ritz (frequent its health club, snack, subscribe to that magnificent pool, and buy drinks—especially for his kid's friends from "baby gym"). When not at the Ritz, Gopnik can be found debating the distinctions between the once and now most fashionable cafés in Paris (the Deux Magots and the Flore, respectively), dining at the best restaurants (which he disparages: French cuisine isn't what it used to be), and enlisting one celebrity chef to cook

for another at his pad in the expensive St.-Germain quarter. Except for his forays to the Ritz, he does not, for that matter, appear to have emerged from this quarter in his half decade in Paris. Such vibrant areas as the Marais (which many say represents what St.-Germain used to be before rich tourists and corrupt politicians took it over) go entirely unmentioned in his narrative—as, indeed, do most of Paris's twenty arrondissements.

Even the modes of public transport used by Parisians (almost without exception) remain mysterious to Gopnik. Summer and fall cede to winter. Gopnik hires nannies, hunts down engravings, and has cable TV installed. All this before, one fine day, he decides to take the metro to the Clignancourt antique market—and marvels, a little bizarrely, at the pretty names of his local stations. Orléans-Clignancourt is, after all, the line that serves his exclusive neighborhood, not to mention that it's the busiest line in the city. He reminds one of Marie Antoinette poking her head out of her palace for the first time and exclaiming at all the colorful people in front of the Bastille. (Not coincidentally, Gopnik hails a taxi on his way back. Pretty names or no, it was just too cold for a *second* trip on that metro.)

What does Gopnik miss as a result of his aristocratic tourism, other than a vocabulary of metro stops? Sadly, he misses what's best about Paris: the street life, the *vie de quartier*—stamp-size cafés, reeking *fromageries*, doggy bistros, and shockingly lovely views that open at so many crooked turns; he misses the barroom brawls, the idiosyncratic boutiques (often open only one day a week), and the honesty of Parisians not in the routine of stroking tourists. "That's going to make you fat!" explodes the *boulangère* at my favorite bakery as I retrieve my daily walnut tart. In California, she'd be fired—and I'd return my tart. In Paris, neither crosses anybody's mind. "You smile too much," a chef tells me on the Rue Montmartre. "Too American. Cut it out." Gopnik moves in a country of compliment, a Disneyland of tourist-driven agreeability. "Ah, you mean you wish to [subscribe] for an infinite number of visits?" asks the incredulous staff at his gym, which allows only one vis-

it a week. Why, of course, *monsieur*. And this in a country where the customer, notoriously, is not king.

Not that this servility satisfies Gopnik. The food, for instance, bothers him; it is not innovative enough. At this point in culinary history, French cuisine should be more, well, multicultural. Like all good things in right-minded America. The irony of this criticism—its source in the pieties of his own social stratum—escapes him. He would have the French more influenced by their Asian cousins and Arab *confrères*. Of course they *are*, in a hundred ways, and Parisian streets teem with the food of these countries. What the French have not done as vigorously as Gopnik would find appropriate is *mix* their cuisines: they have not learned how to accommodate curry to, say, their *canard à l'orange*. Thus, on the one hand, he repeatedly decries “globalization”—the disappearance of regional difference in Europe—but on the other he militates against the preservation of uniqueness.

But the point about Gopnik and French food is this: in some ways he is looking for the best of it—certainly the most innovative of it—in all the wrong places. High-class restaurants are going the way of high-class hotels. With a few exceptions, they increasingly resemble one another across national lines. A five-star restaurant in Paris isn't all that different from a five-star restaurant in London (with which Gopnik unflatteringly compares it), which isn't all *that* different from one in New York. But walk down the *street* in Paris, and you see some drastic differences. In L.A. you have mini-malls with a 7-Eleven next to the nail salon—or, if you're lucky, a Thai takeout. In Paris you have—toppling over one another—the most multifarious stacks of red, blue, and yellow cheeses; of smoked, cured, creamed, marinated, sliced, or jellied meats; of breads in every shape, texture, and size.

**T**he problem with writing about French cuisine, whether you get it or not, is that you risk turning France not merely into a theme park but into the food court within a theme park. From Peter Mayle's best-selling *A Year in Provence* to Mort Rosenblum's highly enjoyable *A Goose*

in *Toulouse*, Anglo books about France look more and more like love letters to the French kitchen. No other room in the Gallic household has gleaned such homage; none, one fears, even gets a second glance. Yet the French forte is not just *l'art de table*; it is, for lack of a more precise phrase, *l'art de vivre*.

The French know how to take their time. With their per capita GNP among the world's highest, they take two or three hours off for lunch a day. Parisians bring a ceremony to everyday life that is counterintuitive to many other peoples. They take pains, as Gopnik points out, to construct a perfect paper parcel around the smallest pastry—in full awareness that it will be shredded instantly by a hungry child. The moment matters in Paris. Parisians do not look primarily to the future—to their unborn progeny's college education, the next day at work, the possibility of lung cancer; they enjoy that cigarette, that double espresso. They dress fashionably and flirt fearlessly. Americans, finally, tremble before the majority of pleasures—sex evokes sexual harassment, food suggests fat, love threatens betrayal (“I'm afraid of being hurt,” is almost untranslatable into French)—but Parisians embrace them without visibly greater damage to body or soul than the rest of us sustain.

Perhaps for this reason Paris has always been a magnet for artists. It is a land of beauty. Maybe a land of too much beauty. For what draws the artist is not always the same as what makes the artist. Paris has hosted more geniuses than it has produced. Picasso, Modigliani, Chagall, Dali, Hemingway, Stein, Fitzgerald, Joyce, Pound, came here; they weren't born here. And at least while they lingered, they rarely met their peer among the French. Life, perhaps, is a jealous god. If, from earliest childhood, you have pledged to it your inventiveness, imagination, and perfectionism—if, as Milton would say, “you yourself are your poem”—you may have less incentive than the next guy to write another poem. “I have,” said Oscar Wilde at one point, “put all my genius into my life. To art I have given only my talent.” This sentiment is quoted with regularity only in France, where Wilde's reputation rides far higher than in England or America.

France, as Gopnik points out in the introduction to Peter Turnley's evocative new book of photos, *Parisians* (Abbeville, 2000), is a country where you look forward to a civilized, *deeply felt* adult life. “Paris is a place,” Gopnik writes with slight indignation, “where the forty-five-year-olds are having all the fun.... I see the same look on the face of a forty-year-old Parisian having a two-hour lunch on the rue de Sèvres that I see in New York only on the face of an eighteen-year-old....” For all his cosmopolitanism, he instinctively feels—in what he rightly identifies as American fashion—that the world belongs to kids. “There are very few Americans not haunted by youth,” he writes. “It explains a sight so ludicrous to Parisians: middle-age Americans strolling in the city in sneakers and shorts....”

But if Gopnik shuns sneakers and shorts, he manifests his country's youth-haunted culture in more problematic ways: he defers his entire experience in Paris to his three-year-old. When he considers what he likes about Paris, he finds, to his own surprise, that he considers only what his child likes. When he defends Paris against charges of being too old, too fraught with history, he defends it only in the name of his son: “Luke,” he says, “is young in Paris right now.”

What about Gopnik? At forty-two, is he really so insensible that he can perceive the seductions of Paris only through his toddler? “No story of Paris would be complete without a love story,” declares a reviewer. But in the city of romance, Gopnik finds no other specimen than Luke's fleeting fancy for a girl from baby gym, which he follows in all but embarrassing detail and encourages, somewhat painfully, with fortunes spent at the Ritz restaurant (when his wife gets the bill, she thinks he is having an affair), and the end of which he bewails with far greater pathos than Luke. Cute? Maybe. But in the least French way possible. The French, as Gopnik himself remarks in an interview with a Canadian newspaper, do not indulge their children *à l'américaine*. More importantly, they do not live vicariously through them. They do not see themselves as failed teenagers, guilty servants of their valuable offspring. Half of Gopnik's book is

devoted to recounting Luke's movements, and if at the beginning this is slightly charming, by the end it is frankly grating. It is the more grating when one sees that it comes at the expense of insight into adult life in Paris.

**T**he French," Gopnik claims, "romanticize only politics." About "private life," they are "disillusioned." He says this, one can only suppose, because they have a laxer view of "family values" than most Americans. They admit a larger spectrum of romantic behaviors in good part because they value these behaviors too much to caricature or circumscribe them. Gopnik thinks Parisians cynics because his own brand of idealism does not resonate with them. He overlooks the fact that they are in love with love in all its manifestations: as flirtation, courtliness, adultery, family loyalty; in jokes, in advertisements, in public displays of affection, and in secret liaisons. The moment it's love—no matter how carnal, ethereal, or doomed—the French adore and, in good measure, accept it. Where Americans are more inclined to hide their loves (public displays of affection are eschewed) and showcase their competitions (public debate is prized)—where, one might say, they put their light under a bushel and their chamber pot on the podium—the French do the reverse. Couples fall into each other's arms over café counters and under bridges, in youth and in age. When the flower boy comes by with two armfuls of twenty-franc roses, an ardent Frenchman will ask how much for *le tout*. Romance, in Paris, is still a religion.

When Gopnik looks at Paris, he sees the shrunken figure of his own homebody hopes, his own commodified realities. He sees a bourgeois amusement park, a perky little country studying to be the United States, and aiming, a little clumsily, to replicate its gyms and service philosophy. Earlier writers went to Paris to find something different from home, but Gopnik seems to have gone there in search of the same old thing, with a few flaws, of course—to show that the U.S.A. is still ahead—and a few compensatory graces to make it all worthwhile. Hemingway's Paris was hardly perfect—nor was it necessarily more real than Gop-

nik's, for all its grunge—but what it had (and what Miller's and Fitzgerald's and Stein's had, too) was an element of mystery, a recognition of difference, a feeling of possibility.

"You must change your life," goes the last line of a Rilke poem. Once upon a time, that was part of the reason people traveled—to welcome the unknown and wrestle transformation from it. Today this sort of traveler is rare. We travel abroad to enjoy what is quaint and to change—or avoid—what is challenging. Wrapped in a robe of dollars and dogmas, we keep the world from our skin.

Gopnik's book says more about the qualities of our contemporary dreams than it does about anything else. Our dreams, the dreams of a generation of educated Americans, have become small and sober. We no longer need so much as a glass of wine to believe in them: they are all about things and services; creature comforts, not ecstasy; stability, not genius, not romance, not adventure.

"He who would carry out the pearls of Arabia must carry in the pearls of Arabia." For those with the dream of love and genius, Paris is still, again, and ever-afresh, the city that fosters and feeds them. Yes, it has its share of bores and boors. But had Gopnik looked, he would have seen that the store that slept, fed, and helped Anglo writers from Joyce to Miller sleeps them still. Nothing is past. Write a poem, go to Shakespeare and Company, ask Walt Whitman's grandson for a bed, and he'll give you one between his stacks—view of Notre Dame included. Make yourself known in your local bistro as a screenwriter waiting for a break, and chances are the owner will start a tab for you—to be paid next month, or year, when that break comes through.

Did Gopnik look at the book of Turnley photos for which he wrote an introduction? It's all still there, if you're looking for it—the couples on the *quais*, the mystery, the possibility of a Rilkean moment of change. But you can't find any of that on CNN. On television, the Eiffel Tower sparkled once and went dark. In real life, it sparkles every night, and always—from year to year—in a different color. As I look at it now, it is blue. ■

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