

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

JANET SKESLIEN
CHARLES

A Novel

THE
PARIS
LIBRARY

— BOOK CLUB KIT —



A NOTE FROM AUTHOR

Janet Skeslien Charles

Dear Reader,

Welcome to *The Paris Library*. Believe it or not, the idea for this book began in a small town in Montana, where I lived on the same street as a French war bride. Her accent made English sound even more beautiful, and I loved learning French from her. When I moved to Paris, I got a job at the American Library (the very one featured in the book). For the first time, I felt as if I belonged. When colleagues told me about the courageous librarians who resisted the Nazis during the Occupation, I knew their story was a novel, and I sat down to write it.

This book interweaves the lives of library members who grappled with moral questions. Choices as black and white as text on the pages of books quickly become murky shades of grey. We all wonder: what would I have done; how would I have behaved? Would I find myself on the right or wrong side of history? For Odile, her choices would change her life forever. My book is also a passionate love letter to libraries and librarians, reminding us that our libraries—our sanctuaries, our sources of facts in a fake-news world—are more vital than ever.

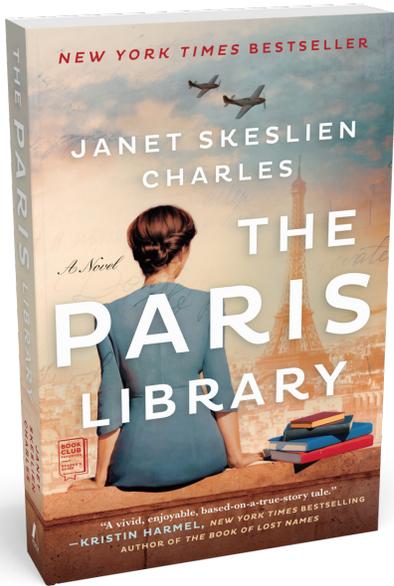
I hope that you enjoyed the book and the world of *The Paris Library*.

Merci!

Janet Skeslien Charles

Janet Skeslien Charles

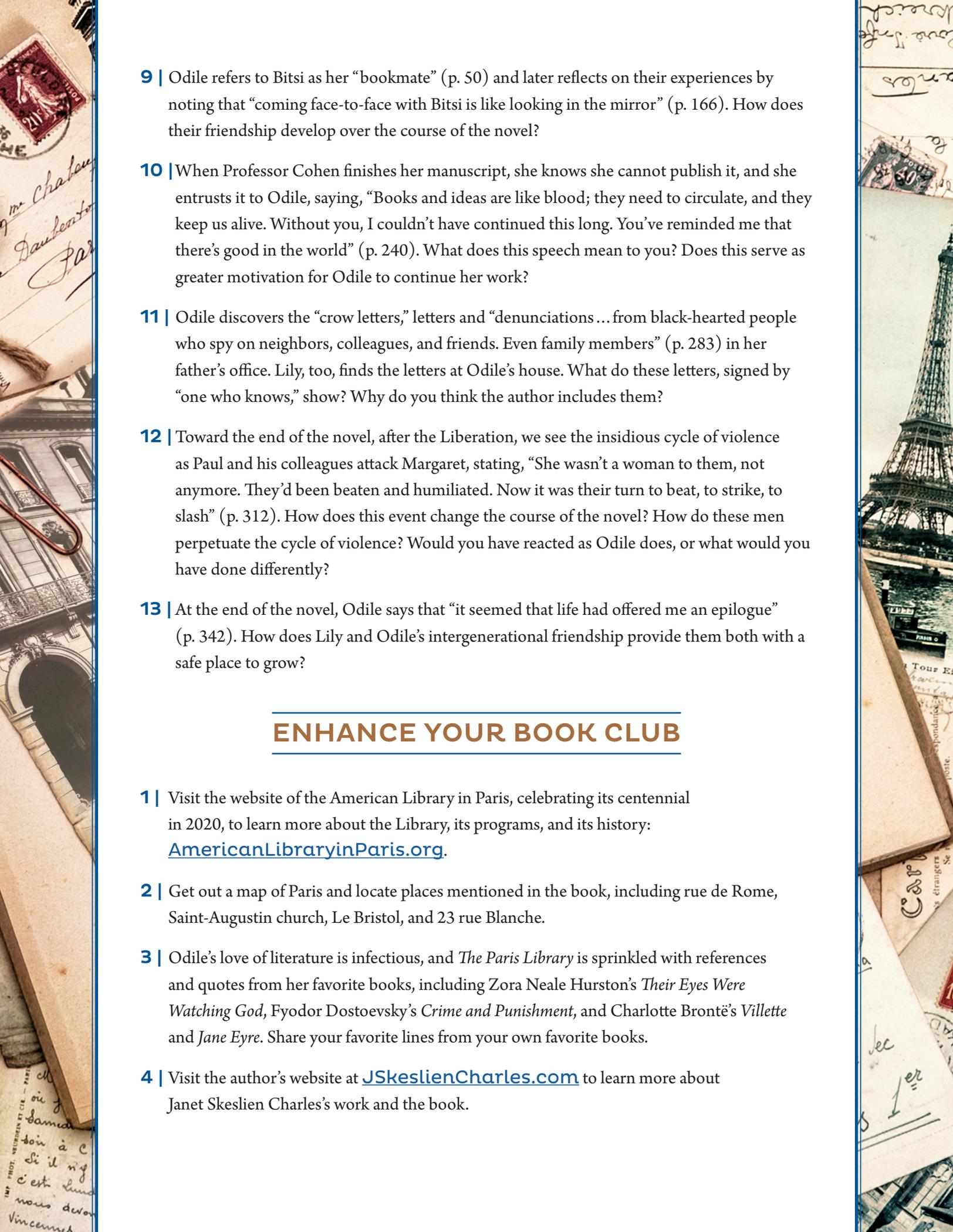




This reading group guide for *The Paris Library* includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Janet Skeslien Charles. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 | Chapter 1 begins with Odile noting that “numbers floated round my head like stars” (p. 1) as she runs through the Dewey Decimal system in her head. What does this opening say about her?
- 2 | When Odile is first introduced as Mrs. Gustafson, Lily notes that she “donned her Sunday best—a pleated skirt and high heels—just to take out the trash. A red belt showed off her waist. Always” (p. 10). What does the red belt represent? And why, at the end of the novel, does she replace “her tatty red belt with a stylish black one” (p. 344)?
- 3 | Miss Reeder “was adamant that there was a place here for everyone” (p. 3) at the Library. How do she and others like Boris and the Countess prove that throughout the Occupation?
- 4 | Odile and Lily come from very different backgrounds, different countries, and different eras. Where do they find common ground?
- 5 | Among the Library’s subscribers and habitués are many fascinating and eccentric characters, such as Professor Cohen and Mr. Pryce-Jones. Who is your favorite, and why?
- 6 | Consider Odile’s Aunt Caroline, and how Caro’s experience informs Odile’s decisions regarding Paul and Buck. Do you believe Odile’s assertion that her mother would “cast me out, just like Aunt Caro” (p. 332)?
- 7 | Why do you think Janet Skeslien Charles decided to interweave Lily’s story, set in Montana in the 1980s, with Odile’s story in Paris during World War II? What do the dual narratives reveal, and how do they reflect on each other?
- 8 | How is Lily’s adolescence in Montana similar to Odile’s own coming-of-age in Paris? How do books and learning the French language serve as a refuge for Lily?

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- 9 |** Odile refers to Bitsi as her “bookmate” (p. 50) and later reflects on their experiences by noting that “coming face-to-face with Bitsi is like looking in the mirror” (p. 166). How does their friendship develop over the course of the novel?
- 10 |** When Professor Cohen finishes her manuscript, she knows she cannot publish it, and she entrusts it to Odile, saying, “Books and ideas are like blood; they need to circulate, and they keep us alive. Without you, I couldn’t have continued this long. You’ve reminded me that there’s good in the world” (p. 240). What does this speech mean to you? Does this serve as greater motivation for Odile to continue her work?
- 11 |** Odile discovers the “crow letters,” letters and “denunciations ... from black-hearted people who spy on neighbors, colleagues, and friends. Even family members” (p. 283) in her father’s office. Lily, too, finds the letters at Odile’s house. What do these letters, signed by “one who knows,” show? Why do you think the author includes them?
- 12 |** Toward the end of the novel, after the Liberation, we see the insidious cycle of violence as Paul and his colleagues attack Margaret, stating, “She wasn’t a woman to them, not anymore. They’d been beaten and humiliated. Now it was their turn to beat, to strike, to slash” (p. 312). How does this event change the course of the novel? How do these men perpetuate the cycle of violence? Would you have reacted as Odile does, or what would you have done differently?
- 13 |** At the end of the novel, Odile says that “it seemed that life had offered me an epilogue” (p. 342). How does Lily and Odile’s intergenerational friendship provide them both with a safe place to grow?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

- 1 |** Visit the website of the American Library in Paris, celebrating its centennial in 2020, to learn more about the Library, its programs, and its history: AmericanLibraryinParis.org.
- 2 |** Get out a map of Paris and locate places mentioned in the book, including rue de Rome, Saint-Augustin church, Le Bristol, and 23 rue Blanche.
- 3 |** Odile’s love of literature is infectious, and *The Paris Library* is sprinkled with references and quotes from her favorite books, including Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*. Share your favorite lines from your own favorite books.
- 4 |** Visit the author’s website at JSkeslienCharles.com to learn more about Janet Skeslien Charles’s work and the book.



A CONVERSATION WITH Janet Skeslien Charles

You worked as the programs manager at the American Library in Paris. In the Author's Note you thank several people who helped with the inspiration and research of this novel. What led you to write this story in particular?

I love the Library and wanted to share the story of the incredible staff who stayed during the war in order to help others because they believed in the importance of community and in books as bridges.

There were themes that I wanted to explore as well. What does it mean to say you are sorry or to show you are sorry? Today, instead of issuing a real apology when we hurt someone, we may say, "I'm sorry you feel that way." We all make mistakes. How we take responsibility for our words and actions reveals who we are. Odile takes responsibility for her actions and shows she is sorry.

One of the most important elements of the novel is the transmission of stories and memories. In Lily's graduation speech, she remembers her parents and shares their wisdom with the audience. She also quotes people from Odile's past, from Paul to Professor Cohen, from Miss Reeder to Monsieur de Nerciat. They live on through Lily. I like to think that we can keep loved ones alive through memory, by sharing pieces of them.

The love of literature and reading contained here is infectious. What inspired you to write a novel about books? What are some of your favorite books?

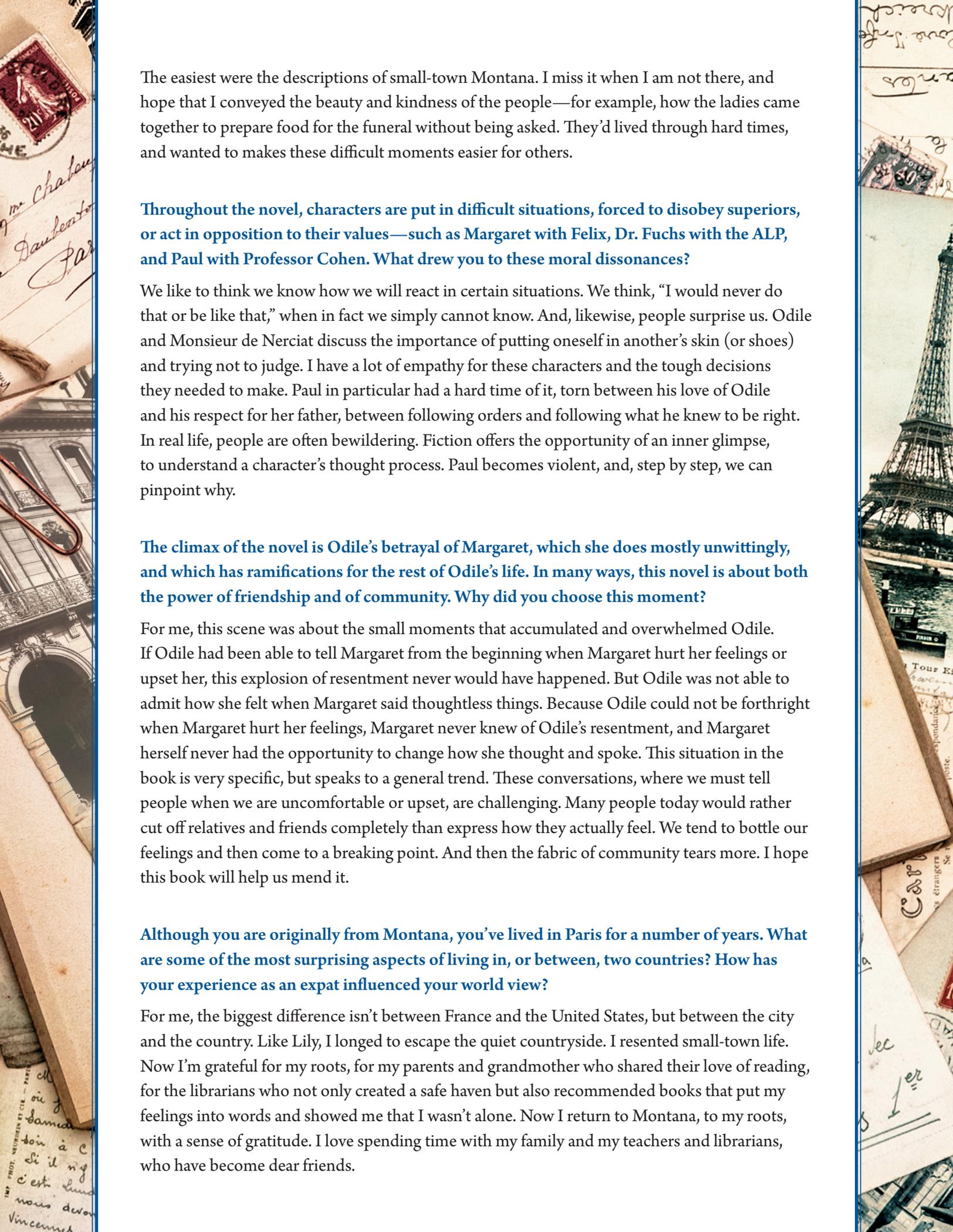
Books are my best friends. I especially love rereading novels and finding new insights and ideas. The books stay the same, but we readers evolve. When I read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a teen, I only saw the love story and how Janie refused to settle. A second reading underscored that the friendship between Janie and Pheoby is the most important relationship of the book. With another reading, I am in awe of Zora Neale Hurston's prose, so I read slowly to savor her talent. I appreciate the anthropological heritage that the author has created for generations to come, as well as the universal truth that we can't protect the people we love, and we can't make their choices or live their lives.

I love the power of *Good Morning, Midnight*. The way that Jean Rhys describes loneliness, desperation, feeling judged, and being in danger. She, too, is magnificent, and was ahead of her time. Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto* is a masterpiece.

What was the hardest scene to write? What was the easiest?

The most challenging scenes for me were the ones with Miss Reeder, Boris, and the Countess. I wanted their words to bring them back to life, but also worried about putting the wrong words in their mouths. I was reassured to receive a note from Boris's son, who wrote that I'd captured his father.





The easiest were the descriptions of small-town Montana. I miss it when I am not there, and hope that I conveyed the beauty and kindness of the people—for example, how the ladies came together to prepare food for the funeral without being asked. They'd lived through hard times, and wanted to make these difficult moments easier for others.

Throughout the novel, characters are put in difficult situations, forced to disobey superiors, or act in opposition to their values—such as Margaret with Felix, Dr. Fuchs with the ALP, and Paul with Professor Cohen. What drew you to these moral dissonances?

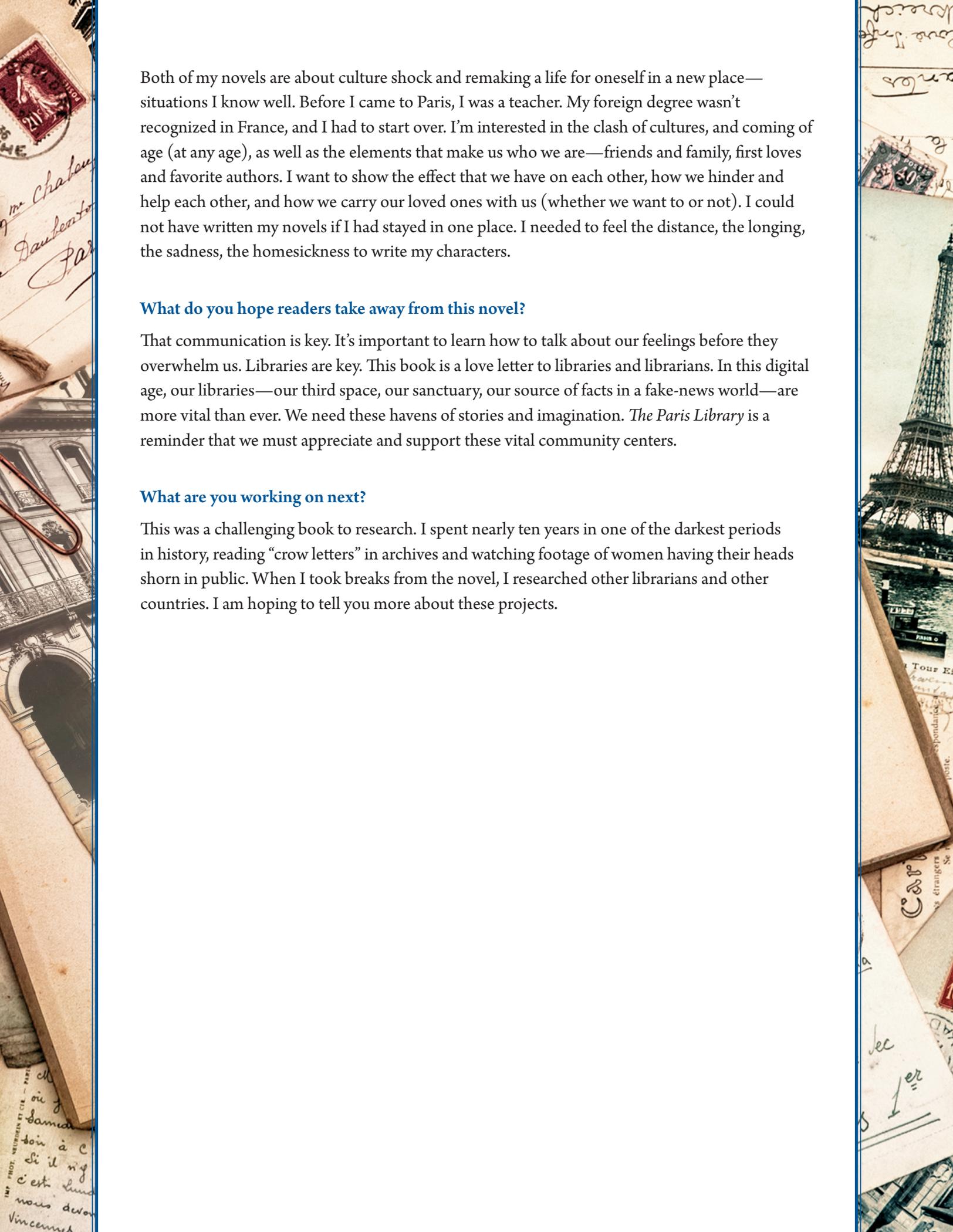
We like to think we know how we will react in certain situations. We think, “I would never do that or be like that,” when in fact we simply cannot know. And, likewise, people surprise us. Odile and Monsieur de Nerciat discuss the importance of putting oneself in another’s skin (or shoes) and trying not to judge. I have a lot of empathy for these characters and the tough decisions they needed to make. Paul in particular had a hard time of it, torn between his love of Odile and his respect for her father, between following orders and following what he knew to be right. In real life, people are often bewildering. Fiction offers the opportunity of an inner glimpse, to understand a character’s thought process. Paul becomes violent, and, step by step, we can pinpoint why.

The climax of the novel is Odile’s betrayal of Margaret, which she does mostly unwittingly, and which has ramifications for the rest of Odile’s life. In many ways, this novel is about both the power of friendship and of community. Why did you choose this moment?

For me, this scene was about the small moments that accumulated and overwhelmed Odile. If Odile had been able to tell Margaret from the beginning when Margaret hurt her feelings or upset her, this explosion of resentment never would have happened. But Odile was not able to admit how she felt when Margaret said thoughtless things. Because Odile could not be forthright when Margaret hurt her feelings, Margaret never knew of Odile’s resentment, and Margaret herself never had the opportunity to change how she thought and spoke. This situation in the book is very specific, but speaks to a general trend. These conversations, where we must tell people when we are uncomfortable or upset, are challenging. Many people today would rather cut off relatives and friends completely than express how they actually feel. We tend to bottle our feelings and then come to a breaking point. And then the fabric of community tears more. I hope this book will help us mend it.

Although you are originally from Montana, you’ve lived in Paris for a number of years. What are some of the most surprising aspects of living in, or between, two countries? How has your experience as an expat influenced your world view?

For me, the biggest difference isn’t between France and the United States, but between the city and the country. Like Lily, I longed to escape the quiet countryside. I resented small-town life. Now I’m grateful for my roots, for my parents and grandmother who shared their love of reading, for the librarians who not only created a safe haven but also recommended books that put my feelings into words and showed me that I wasn’t alone. Now I return to Montana, to my roots, with a sense of gratitude. I love spending time with my family and my teachers and librarians, who have become dear friends.



Both of my novels are about culture shock and remaking a life for oneself in a new place—situations I know well. Before I came to Paris, I was a teacher. My foreign degree wasn't recognized in France, and I had to start over. I'm interested in the clash of cultures, and coming of age (at any age), as well as the elements that make us who we are—friends and family, first loves and favorite authors. I want to show the effect that we have on each other, how we hinder and help each other, and how we carry our loved ones with us (whether we want to or not). I could not have written my novels if I had stayed in one place. I needed to feel the distance, the longing, the sadness, the homesickness to write my characters.

What do you hope readers take away from this novel?

That communication is key. It's important to learn how to talk about our feelings before they overwhelm us. Libraries are key. This book is a love letter to libraries and librarians. In this digital age, our libraries—our third space, our sanctuary, our source of facts in a fake-news world—are more vital than ever. We need these havens of stories and imagination. *The Paris Library* is a reminder that we must appreciate and support these vital community centers.

What are you working on next?

This was a challenging book to research. I spent nearly ten years in one of the darkest periods in history, reading “crow letters” in archives and watching footage of women having their heads shorn in public. When I took breaks from the novel, I researched other librarians and other countries. I am hoping to tell you more about these projects.

The Paris Library Reading List

Read like a librarian at The American Library in Paris with the following books mentioned in the novel

Their Eyes Were Watching God
Zora Neale Hurston

The Grapes of Wrath
John Steinbeck

The Metamorphosis
Franz Kafka

Crime and Punishment
Fyodor Dostoevsky

The Long Winter
Laura Ingalls Wilder

The Silence of the Sea
Jean Bruller

Beowulf

The Great Gatsby
F. Scott Fitzgerald

As You Like It
William Shakespeare

Little Women
Louisa May Alcott

Greenbanks
Dorothy Whipple

The Turn of the Screw
Henry James

The Brothers Karamazov
Fyodor Dostoevsky

The Call of the Wild
Jack London

Of Mice and Men
John Steinbeck

The Priory
Dorothy Whipple

The Last of the Mohicans
James Fenimore Cooper

Voyage in the Dark
Jean Rhys

Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day
Winifred Watson

The Age of Innocence
Edith Wharton

Bonus Title

The Little Prince
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

*The Lady and her Dog
and Other Stories*
Anton Chekhov

And Then There Were None
Agatha Christie

All Quiet on the Western Front
Erich Maria Remarque

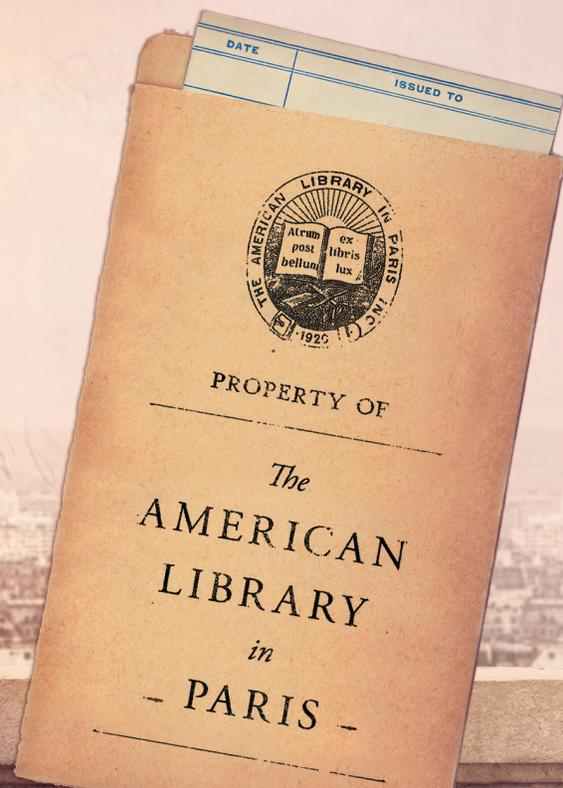
The Picture of Dorian Gray
Oscar Wilde

Villette
Charlotte Brontë

The Priory
Dorothy Whipple

Jane Eyre
Charlotte Brontë

Good Morning, Midnight
Jean Rhys



Cook Like a Parisian!

Whip up some delectable French dishes to eat while you read your copy of *The Paris Library*—or serve them to your book club!

Brown Butter Financiers

Recipe by David Lebowitz Makes 24 financiers

[VIEW ORIGINAL RECIPE ONLINE](#)

INGREDIENTS

1 cup (140g) almond or hazelnut flour

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup plus 2 tablespoons (180g) sugar

5 tablespoons (45g) flour

Generous pinch salt

4 large egg whites, at room temperature

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon vanilla or almond extract

2 $\frac{1}{2}$ ounces (75g) brown butter, slightly warm (liquified)

METHOD

1. Preheat the oven to 375°F/180°C and butter the insides of 24 mini muffin tins generously with softened, not melted, butter, making sure the butter the upper rims of the indentations.
2. In a medium bowl, mix the almond or hazelnut flour, sugar, flour, and salt. Stir in the egg whites and vanilla or almond extract, then the browned butter.
3. Fill each indentation of the mini muffin tins almost to the top. Rap the tins sharply on the counter to level the tops, then bake for 13 minutes, until nicely browned. Let the financiers cool in the tins, then remove them, using a sharp knife to help release them, if necessary.

STORAGE: The financiers can be stored in an air-tight container for up to one week. They can be frozen for up to two months.

Chocolate Mousse

Recipe by Jenn Segal and adapted from Tyler Florence Serves 6

[VIEW ORIGINAL RECIPE ONLINE](#)

INGREDIENTS

3 tablespoons unsalted butter
6 ounces semisweet chocolate,
best quality
3 large eggs, yolks and
whites separated
½ teaspoon cream of tartar
¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar
½ cup heavy cream, cold
½ teaspoon vanilla extract

FOR SERVING

½ cup heavy cream, cold
2 teaspoons sugar
Chocolate shavings

MAKE-AHEAD

INSTRUCTIONS: Mousse can be made up to 1 day ahead of time. Cover with plastic wrap and keep chilled in the refrigerator. Add whipped cream topping and chocolate shavings up to a few hours before serving.

METHOD

1. Place the butter in a medium microwave-safe bowl. Break the chocolate into small pieces directly into the bowl. Microwave it in 20-second intervals, stirring between each bout of heat, until the chocolate is about 75% melted. Stir, allowing the residual heat in the bowl to melt the chocolate completely. (Alternatively, place the chocolate and butter in a heatproof bowl and place over a saucepan containing about 1 inch of barely simmering water. Stir with a wooden spoon until the chocolate is melted and the mixture is smooth.) Let the mixture cool for a few minutes, then whisk in the egg yolks one at a time, mixing until smooth after each addition. Set aside.
2. In the bowl of a stand mixer or electric hand mixer, beat the egg whites on medium-high speed until foamy. Add the cream of tartar and beat until soft peaks form (the peaks should be just starting to hold, and will melt back into themselves after a second). Gradually beat in ¼ cup of the sugar and continue beating until stiff peaks form (the peaks will stand straight up when the beaters are lifted from the mixture). Using a large rubber spatula, fold the egg white mixture into the chocolate mixture until uniform. Set aside.
3. In another bowl, beat the heavy cream on medium-high speed until it begins to thicken up. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons of sugar and the vanilla and continue beating until the cream holds medium peaks (when you lift the beaters or whisk out of the bowl, the peaks will slightly droop down, but they won't lose their shape entirely). Fold the whipped cream into the chocolate mixture. Be sure it is fully incorporated but don't mix any more than necessary. Divide the mousse between 6 individual glasses, cover, and chill until set, at least 2 hours.
4. Up to a few hours before serving, whip the cream until it begins to thicken up. Add the sugar and whip to medium peaks. Dollop the whipped cream over the mousse and top with chocolate shavings.

Beef Bourguignon

Recipe by Cafe Delite and adapted from Julia Child Serves 6–8

[VIEW ORIGINAL RECIPE ONLINE](#)

INGREDIENTS

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil | 2–3 cups beef stock (if using 2 cups of wine, use 3 cups beef stock) |
| 6 ounces (170g) bacon, roughly chopped | 2 tablespoons tomato paste |
| 3 pounds (1 ½ kg) beef brisket, trimmed of fat (chuck steak or stewing beef) cut into 2-inch chunks | 1 beef bullion cube, crushed |
| 1 large carrot sliced ½-inch thick | 1 teaspoon fresh thyme, finely chopped |
| 1 large white onion, diced | 2 tablespoons fresh parsley, finely chopped (divided) |
| 6 cloves garlic, minced (divided) | 2 bay leaves |
| 1 pinch coarse salt and freshly ground pepper | 1 pound fresh small white or brown mushrooms, quartered |
| 2 tablespoons flour | 2 tablespoons butter |
| 12 small pearl onions (optional) | |
| 3 cups red wine like Merlot, Pinot Noir, or a Chianti (for a milder sauce, use only 2 cups of wine) | |

METHOD

1. Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C).
2. Heat the oil in a large dutch oven or heavy based pot. Sauté the bacon over medium heat for about 3 minutes, until crisp and browned. Transfer with a slotted spoon to a large dish and set aside.
3. Pat dry beef with paper towel; sear in batches in the hot oil/bacon fat until browned on all sides. Remove to the dish with the bacon. In the remaining oil/bacon fat, sauté the carrots and diced onions until softened (about 3 minutes), then add 4 cloves minced garlic and cook for 1 minute. Drain excess fat (leave about 1 tablespoon in the pan) and return the bacon and beef back into the pot; season with ½ teaspoon coarse salt and ¼ teaspoon ground pepper. Sprinkle with flour, toss well, and cook for 4 to 5 minutes to brown.
4. Add the pearl onions, wine, and enough stock so that the meat is barely covered. Then add the tomato paste, bullion, and herbs. Bring to a simmer on the stove.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Beef Bourguignon

Recipe by Cafe Delite and adapted from Julia Child Serves 6–8

[VIEW ORIGINAL RECIPE ONLINE](#)

5. Cover, transfer to lower part of the oven, and simmer for 2 to 3 hours, or until the meat is fall apart tender (adjust the heat so that the liquid simmers very slowly).
6. In the last 5 minutes of cooking time, prepare your mushrooms: Heat the butter in a medium-sized skillet/pan over heat. When the foam subsides, add the remaining 2 cloves garlic and cook until fragrant (about 30 seconds), then add in the mushrooms. Cook for about 5 minutes, while shaking the pan occasionally to coat with the butter. Season with salt and pepper, if desired. Once they are browned, set aside.
7. Place a colander over a large pot (I do this in my clean kitchen sink). Remove the casserole from the oven and carefully empty its contents into the colander (you want to collect the sauce only). Discard the herbs
8. Return the beef mixture back into the dutch oven or pot. Add the mushrooms over the meat.
9. Remove any fat off the sauce (if any) and simmer for a minute or two, skimming off any additional fat which rises to the surface.
10. You should be left with about 2 ½ cups of sauce thick enough to coat the back of a spoon lightly. If the sauce is too thick, add a few tablespoons of stock. If the sauce is too thin, boil it over medium heat for about 10 minutes, or until reduced to the right consistency.
11. Taste for seasoning and adjust salt and pepper, if desired. Pour the sauce over the meat and vegetables.
12. If you are serving immediately, simmer the beef bourguignon for 2 to 3 minutes to heat through.
13. Garnish with parsley and serve with mashed potatoes, rice, or noodles.

TO SERVE THE FOLLOWING DAY, allow the casserole to cool completely, cover and refrigerate. The day of serving, remove from refrigerator for at least an hour before reheating. Place over medium-low heat and let simmer gently for about 10 minutes, basting the meat and vegetables with the sauce.

Caramelized Onion Quiche

Recipe by A Toast and Tea and adapted from Julia Child Serves 6

[VIEW ORIGINAL RECIPE ONLINE](#)

INGREDIENTS

2 lbs. minced onions
(around 7 cups)

3 tablespoons butter

1 tablespoon oil

1 ½ tablespoons flour

2 eggs

⅔ cup heavy cream

1 tsp salt

⅛ tsp freshly ground
black pepper

Pinch of nutmeg

2 oz. (½ cup) grated Gruyère
(or Swiss cheese), divided

1 8-inch par-baked quiche crust

½ tablespoon of butter cut into
pea-sized cubes

METHOD

- 1.** In a heavy-bottomed skillet (I used an enameled cast-iron Dutch oven), heat the butter and oil over medium-low heat. Use your lowest powered burner for this. Add the onions and stir to coat with the butter and oil, then turn the heat down to the lowest setting. Stir the onions occasionally. Check around 40 minutes, and if the onions are golden yellow and tender, turn the heat up to medium-low and stir more frequently. You want the onions to brown a bit but not burn. In total this will take at least an hour, but may take longer.
- 2.** When the onions are to your desired level of caramelization, sprinkle with the flour and stir until completely mixed in. Continue cooking for another 2 to 3 minutes to cook off the raw flour taste. Remove from heat and allow the onions to cool slightly.
- 3.** While the onions are cooling, preheat the oven to 375°F, and make sure there's a rack in the upper third of the oven.
- 4.** Beat the eggs lightly in a mixing bowl. Add cream and the salt, pepper, and nutmeg, and whisk until combined. Slowly mix in the onions and half of the grated cheese. Pour into par-baked quiche crust. Sprinkle on the rest of the cheese, and dot with the butter cubes. Bake in the oven for 30–35 minutes until the quiche has puffed and browned on top.
- 5.** If using a removable bottom quiche pan, to unmold, place the quiche on top of a wide can (a 28 oz. can does the job nicely). Carefully ease the outside of the pan off. I leave the quiche on the bottom of the pan for serving, and place the whole thing onto a plate.

TO REHEAT, place a slice of quiche on a pan and reheat in a 375°F oven for 12 to 15 minutes, until lightly sizzling.

SET THE SCENE WITH

A French Playlist

1. A modern version of “La Vie en Rose” by Grace Jones
2. A lovely rendition of “La Vie en Rose” by Édith Piaf
3. A playful, modern look at “A Paris” by Riff Cohen
4. “Paris sera toujours Paris” by Zaz. Look into a translation of the lyrics because it refers to Paris during the war
5. A second song by Zaz, “Sous le ciel de Paris”, reimagining an Edith Piaf song
6. “Formidable” by Stromae
7. “Joe le Taxi” by Vanessa Paradis
8. “Mademoiselle chante le blues” by Patricia Kaas
9. “Ella, elle l’a” by France Gall. This song is a tribute to Ella Fitzgerald as well as a protest against racism
10. “Le diner” by Bénabar, who doesn’t want to go to a dinner party and comes up with great alternatives
11. “Marcia Baila” by Les Rita Mitsouko. This is a kooky song (great rhythm, sad lyrics) but hearing it puts me in a good mood
12. “Sur la route Toute la Sainte Journée” (“On the Road All Damn Day”) by De Palmas
13. “Les Plages” (“Beaches”) by Jean-Louis Aubert, about young people who watch the horizon and want to leave, while older people on the beach are happy to be where they are

Listen to the full playlist,
compiled by Janet Skeslien Charles



LISTEN HERE

[HTTPS://SPOTI.FI/3DZE3PC](https://spotify.fi/3DZE3PC)