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## Mise en Seine

Deborah J. Pike

*University of Notre Dame Australia*, [dpike@nd.edu.au](mailto:dpike@nd.edu.au)

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# AWAY WITH WORDS

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In Paris there is no experience more enchanting than wandering along the Seine on an Autumn afternoon, stopping every now and then to rifle through the stands of a bookiniste, only to discover a treasure: a 17th century map, a book of poems by Jacques Prévert, France's most pleasing poet of the mid-20th century.

While travellers might be intoxicated with the music of Parisian streets or awed by the ornate architecture, the city can appear cold and frustrate with its inaccessible beauty and the seeming remoteness of its people.

The best way into French culture is through its literature. Enjoy a potent moment alone in a crammed café sipping a chocolat and dip into one of the delights of French literary history.

Stendhal's *The Scarlet and the Black* (*Le Rouge et le Noir*) offers a fascinating portrait of 19th century France, described by one critic as "the most perfect novel ever written". It is the coming-of-age tale of Julien Sorel. Inside the covers is nothing more than love and death, revolution and peace, religion and the law, poverty and wealth, illusion and disillusion. Written soon after (and considered an absolute scandal) is Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, a scrumptious story of one married woman's doomed affair, the first of the great narratives of "fallen women".

If you are planning a trip to the south of France, Peter Mayle's charming *A Year in Provence* will offer delightful *divertissement*. A series of hilarious tales documenting his encounters with the local folk, the book is stuffed with tales of goat races and goat's cheese, vineyards, mushroom hunting and the best of cuisine Provençale.

For a classic picture of 1920s Paris, you can't go past Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, an animated selection of snippets on Hemingway's early experience living on \$5 a day on the Rue Mouffetard with and his wife Hadley. We also get to meet Gertrude Stein, the artists of the *avant-garde* and an alcoholic F. Scott Fitzgerald.

One of the most fascinating books on Paris and France is without doubt Lucinda Holdforth's *True Pleasures: A Memoir of Women in Paris*. Holdforth journeys to Paris, the "headquarters of femininity" that seduced leading women of letters such as Edith Wharton and Nancy Mitford. The lives and loves of Colette, Coco Chanel and Napoleon's Josephine are elegantly disclosed.