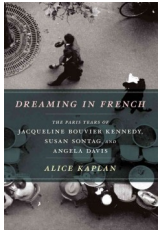


Dreaming in French: the Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis



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Confession: I tried to learn French once. Years ago, I signed up for a New Orleans Free University class in what should have been a great place to learn French or at least Cajun. But each week the instructor came to class "under the influence." Even though he shared some wild Paris stories and jumped on and off the teacher's desk, my French never improved.

I've always enjoyed books about experiencing the world through the lens of a new culture. Alice Kaplan's excellent Dreaming in French is a very fun and compelling read. In clear beautiful prose, she writes about how living in France changed the life courses of three smart and gifted women: Jackie Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis.

Each of them spent time in France on the cusp of womanhood. In many ways, France and French culture affected not only how they viewed the world but their entire lives afterward. In 1949 Jackie travelled to Paris by ship as part of a contingent of Smith College students spending the year abroad. It was soon after World War II and she was placed with a former WWII resistance fighter whose husband had died in a camp doing slave labor for the Nazis. One of the fascinating things about the book is the inclusions of a few of Jackie's letters. What an eloquent writer she was, capturing the feel of Southern France or of a typical day in Paris. Susan Sontag went to Paris, when she was slightly older. She was already married and the mother of a young son. For those days, she did something very rare, left her son with his grandparents to pursue post-graduate studies abroad. While in Paris, she also explored her homosexuality and the American beat and ex-pat life. Unlike the other two women discussed here, she studied French language independently on her own.

Angela Davis travelled abroad the same year that young black schoolchildren were murdered in a Birmingham church and also the same year that Kennedy was assassinated. Because she was from Birmingham, the first event galvanized her. She did something rare in those days of slow communications: she called home to talk to her folks. Her time in Paris brought her to a new political awareness and influenced her doctoral studies. She chose the subject of violence as her thesis project.

All three women loved Paris. What's more their time spent in France forged them intellectually. Sontag who later spent nearly half of every year in Paris said something about her studies there that could apply to all three women, "Everything is renewed when you speak in a foreign language, when you live in another country...." This very interesting book is both biography and travelogue. It will inspire and entertain you.

Reading this may spark your interest in the author's personal experiences with the French language and culture in her excellent memoir French Lessons ..

Posted by Dory L. on May 3, 2012

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