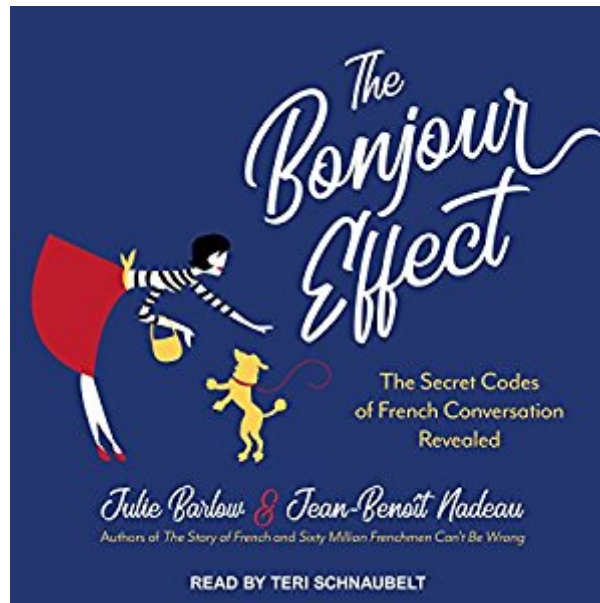


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The Bonjour Effect: The Secret Codes Of French Conversation Revealed



Synopsis

Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow spent a decade traveling back and forth to Paris as well as living there. Yet one important lesson never seemed to sink in: how to communicate comfortably with the French, even when you speak their language. In *The Bonjour Effect*, Jean-Benoît and Julie chronicle the lessons they learned after they returned to France to live, for a year, with their twin daughters. They offer up all the lessons they learned and explain, in a book as fizzy as a bottle of the finest French champagne, the most important aspect of all: the French don't communicate; they converse. To understand and speak French well, one must understand that French conversation runs on a set of rules that go to the heart of French culture. Why do the French like talking about "the decline of France"? Why does broaching a subject like money end all discussion? Why do the French become so aroused debating the merits and qualities of their own language? Through encounters with school principals, city hall civil servants, gas company employees, old friends, and business acquaintances, Julie and Jean-Benoît explain why, culturally and historically, conversation with the French is not about communicating or being nice. It's about being interesting.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When I visited Paris with my high school French class--this was back in 1976--I was very shy, and afraid of making a pronunciation mistake. It took all my courage to address the proprietress of our hostel (who, like Madame DeFarge, was constantly knitting), and recite a phrase I had practiced all

day. In my very best French, I said, "That's a beautiful scarf." She glared at me coldly, before saying, in perfect English, "I do not speak English." I blushed furiously and rushed to the room I shared with my friends. I did not speak French for the remainder of the trip. The lesson was not that I should have worked harder on my conversational skills, or that the French are as rude as stereotypes would have us believe--though both of those statements contain a kernel of truth. The lesson is that, in total ignorance, I committed a horrible faux pas, I did not first greet Madame with a sincere, "Bonjour," and I did not give her the chance to reciprocate with her own, "Bonjour." This funny and well-written book is not about the French language as much as it is about the culture of French language. There are certain topics you would never discuss in polite company, and there are certain key phrases that will open all kinds of doors. "Bonjour" is a case in point: every social transaction, no matter how brief, should start with this word. If you know that, you can use your high school French to actually talk to people. If you don't know that, you will be treated like a pariah. There is much more to the book: the educational system, navigating bureaucracy, making friends (as opposed to acquaintances), etc. It is a must-read for anyone planning to visit the country, and it should be required reading in every high school French curriculum. It's fascinating, and I can't put the book down. It makes me want to visit Paris again. And stay at the same hostel, where Madame is probably still knitting. I would march up to her desk and say, with utter confidence, and in fairly good French, "Bonjour." And then when she replies with "Bonjour," I would follow with, "Those are hideous colors for a scarf."

I'm not sure this is the greatest thing you can read about French culture, but I found it thoroughly engaging. And it makes a great case for language sophistication as a crucial skill to acquire. It shows how important it is to the French, and how it accounts for difficulties Americans have when traveling in France. I know some Americans who have genuine rhetorical vitality, and their conversation is always a pleasure. One benefit they bring to any relationship is fearlessness of conflict. People who are skilled in conversation like debate. A verbal fight can be tremendous fun, and nobody has to end up bleeding, so long as it stays verbal. So I thoroughly recommend this introduction to French verbal jousting, and why can't we Americans embrace this fun-loving attitude toward the clash of ideas? When it comes to letting ideas collide, the French aren't wimps. And we shouldn't be either.

Because I was leaving in 5 days for an academic conference in Toulouse where I was invited to give a talk, I grabbed at this book -- which was suggested by a friend who'd read the New York

Times review --like a life preserver. It did save me a lot of anxiety. Even though it was understood that I would speak in English, I knew I would have language + cultural barriers to overcome. For example, it talked about how the French believe sincerely in the importance of English in the 21st century ... but they quickly lose interest in the hard work of speaking it. I noticed the use of "bonjour" everywhere, especially as the opening greeting in e-mails. I learned that it is unprofessional to be self-derogatory or humble in business/academic settings that one should act like the expert that has been invited to the meeting. I learned about the elitist attitude of the educated class. I learned that humor, especially the American casual style, is neither understood nor appreciated. Most important, I got an immersion in French culture that permeated my actions and gave me confidence in group settings. One exception to a dictate in the book: The French did NOT avoid talking about family to a mere acquaintance; I heard a lot about their children. For anybody -- at home or abroad -- wanting to know more about the French, and who love them as much as I do, this book is full of insights.

I ENJOYED THE BOOK ESPECIALLY IF YOUR ARE TRAVELING TO FRANCE

I like the information about French culture and language. Some of the other theorizing was not so interesting. I would recommend it to anyone who is going to spend some time in France.

Lots of great info about the French people. Gives insight into why they think or act a certain way. Very helpful!

After speaking french and living in France, this book explained aspects of French culture, language and behavior I never quite understood. A delightful read.

clarified some cultural aspects I've wondered about over years spending time in France, very interesting, worth considering the authors' point of view

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