



## UNREQUITED LOVE\*

BY DAVID LOWE

You're sitting on a TGV in the month of September reading this article. I'm writing this same article on a hot July day sitting out on the terrace of a Corsican villa overlooking the Mediterranean. I need therefore to use a bit of journalistic clairvoyance (or bluff) to get through this.

I'm going to talk about the "*rentrée littéraire*" – or the release of new books in the autumn, a traditional part of the French calendar. It's not an easy subject for me since I've no idea what books are coming out. Anyway I'm sure the topic will be competently dealt with in other parts of this magazine, by writers specialising in the field. "*Chacun sa merde*" (we all have our own row to hoe), as we journalists say. However, what I'm willing to stake my reputation on is that in September there will be more books written by English authors on the subject of France and the French than vice versa. There's a sort of literary unrequited love between our two countries that we're just going to have to talk about.

The English are fascinated by France and the French. We love your country, your language, your food, your way of life, and every year volumes are published about everything and anything French. But what do we get in return? Almost nothing. You ignore us. We don't seem to interest you apart from a couple of opuscles on the Royal Family, Thatcher or Jack the Ripper.

We devour books such as "*Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong*", "*What French Women Know About Love, Sex and Other Affairs of the Heart*", "*French Women Don't Get Fat*" or "*How to Dress like a Frenchman*" which seems to point to a fundamental sense of inadequacy on our behalf. You're the girl next door who doesn't talk to us. We try to vent our frustration by reading such works as "*How to Swear in French*", "*A Year in the Merde*" or "*How To Insult a Frenchman*", but we don't mean it, we're just trying to attract your attention. There's no end to the number of publications telling you how to settle down in France, "*How to Move to France With Your Children*" or "*How To Retire in France*", with even a special chapter in this one on how to get buried in France.

Every year hordes of British families abandon their homeland to come and live in your dear country on a dream or a fantasy – me included. It's difficult to imagine a Parisian family leaving their Haussmanian flat to inhabit a tiny damp cottage in the county of Yorkshire. The father of the

family abandoning his lucrative post as editor of TGV Mag to follow his dream of rearing sheep in the misty Northern heathlands just because he read Emily Bronte's "*Wuthering Heights*" as a boy would be madness. You recoil in horror at the very thought of us, brainwashed by films such as Sam Peckinpah's "*Straw Dogs*", where a couple of outsiders try to settle down in some British backwater inhabited by strange, malevolent, ugly, perverted locals bred on fish & chips and warm beer.

We counter this with bestsellers by English authors living in France describing in a jovial way their trials and tribulations with French administration, odd local customs like eating cheese before the dessert, and seeing policemen with guns. We then go on to show how everything is worthwhile because of "*le douceur de vivre*", the "*je ne sais quoi*". I'm thinking of books like Lucy Wadham's "*The Secret Life of France*" or the Peter Mayle series "*A Year in Provence*", "*Hotel Pastis*", etc. Some of these even get translated from English into French as a sort of literary narcissism, so the French can read about themselves being talked about by others. But what do we get back in return? *Rien* – apart from the usual tourist books or "*How to Speak English*" manuals, but not the English of Shakespeare of course, the English of business schools. You send us your adolescents to get drunk, your stock traders to make money, and your footballers to get out of paying the *impôt sur la fortune* (a specific tax for the wealthy).

We're loved for our money and not for what we are, it's such a one-sided relationship. You don't look at us anymore. You're only interested in playing footsie with Germany, even though she's treated you so badly in the past. A century of *entente cordiale* has dampened your passions – and the more you're indifferent, the more we desire you.

\* The inability of the unrequited lover to express and fulfil emotional needs may lead to feelings such as depression, low self-esteem, anxiety and rapid mood swings between depression and euphoria.

