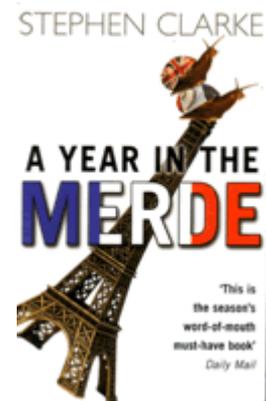


Book reviews

Reviewer	George Simons , SIETAR member
Review	March 2006
Author	Stephen Clarke
Title	A Year in the Merde Merde Actually
Publisher	Black Swan, Bantam
Details	-
Links	Black Swan Books Bantam Books



When the SIETAR Europa Board of Directors buys a birthday present for a member and it is merde and more merde, should the recipient of two books with this word in the title be suspicious that it is a commentary on the work to be done or on one's performance as a board member? In this case, hopefully neither, especially since merde, despite its literal meaning, is also a French expression for good luck, used much as actors in English bless each other with the expression, "Break a leg!"

So here I am, the grateful recipient of two merde novels by Stephen Clarke, a Paris based British journalist who has turned his experiences in France into the fictional serial of a certain Paul West, expat. Paul's professional focus is that of creating a commercially viable English Tea Room in the French capitol while privately shagging his way through diverse colors of Parisian womanhood, licking his wounds and drowning his sorrows as needed in the local abundance of Irish pubs.

I have to admit that I approached the first volume with a sense of caveat lector, especially as an interculturalist who both delights in and fears contamination from association with the politically incorrect.

Fears allayed. A Year in the Merde is the story of the young expat's acculturation first to a French enterprise and its ways told with a great deal of pokes and prods and more than touches of irony otherwise known as Brit wit. Externally maintaining a stiff upper lip, Paul goes from being piss proud to taking the piss, from being being had, to playing the cultural game, and finally starting to like it. This is, after all, a good description of the curvature of culture shock, from romance to recuperation. It is in novels and life stories, our own and others, rather than theoretical descriptions that we really see, in all its messy meanderings, what culture shock really means.

At first the reader suspects he is being tutored more about Brit behavior than about survival in France, but as Paul, like a rather raw Beaujoiais, spends time not only in corporate Gaul but also in the cellar bars of the Left Bank, he begins to take on some a touch of refinement and an oakey savoir faire. His course suggests that, after a few years, he might go over somewhat

well in good French company. However, the fun is in the gaffes of his ripening, not his ultimate success.

The book is full of observations about French and British behavior that cause the reader who has experienced both, to nod and say, “Ah, yes!” as well as “Aha!” as the nut of one or other cultural behavior is cracked to reveal its kernels of meaning. There are insightful glimpses, usually not without irony, into work habits, real estate, the medical system, politics and play in the French capitol and the countryside.

A Year in the Merde is in a sense parallel to Ted Stanger’s recent *Sacrés Français le Roman: Un Américain en Picardie* which appeared last year, but the protagonist, besides being a Brit instead of a Yank is considerably younger and lower in the pecking order in his French employment, so the dynamic offers a different and more haphazard view of the comedy of mores.

In short, culture light, but not without a payoff that is more than an entertaining read.

Turning our attention to the sequel, *Merde Actually*, we find Paul West now firmly in tow by his French-Indian amie, Florence. Together they set out for a holiday on the l’Ile de Ré when a minor road accident causes them to take shelter with Florence’s family in rural Corrèze, a land overflowing with strawberries and zucchini and dominating motherhood.

Having negotiated freedom from his employer, Paul is still on his way to constructing and opening an English Tea Room in Paris, but as his own boss, and with fewer restraints on his testosterone. Gaffes and fallings out with Florence, her mother, father, architect ex-boyfriend, construction workers in Paris and the language police are the fabric in which Paul ultimately succeeds in opening his tea room and making it a success.

The undertow of *Merde Actually* is Paul’s search for true love and indeed he succeeds in returning to his challenging ex-girlfriend Alex, a photographer artist who appeared in the first book. Much of Paul’s relationship to Alex is about his putting his foot in the merde via his tragi-comic drinking and sexual distractions whose description verges on soft porn.

Culturally speaking, the book suffers from sequelitis--less coherent than the first and a bit repetitious. When Paul makes a trip to London, however, it becomes clear that the author is no less merciless with his descriptions of and commentary on British behavior than he is with the French. I closed the book wondering whether Clarke was reporting some reverse culture shock or this was just an expression of British fair play, and, of course, to what degree the author was being autobiographical...