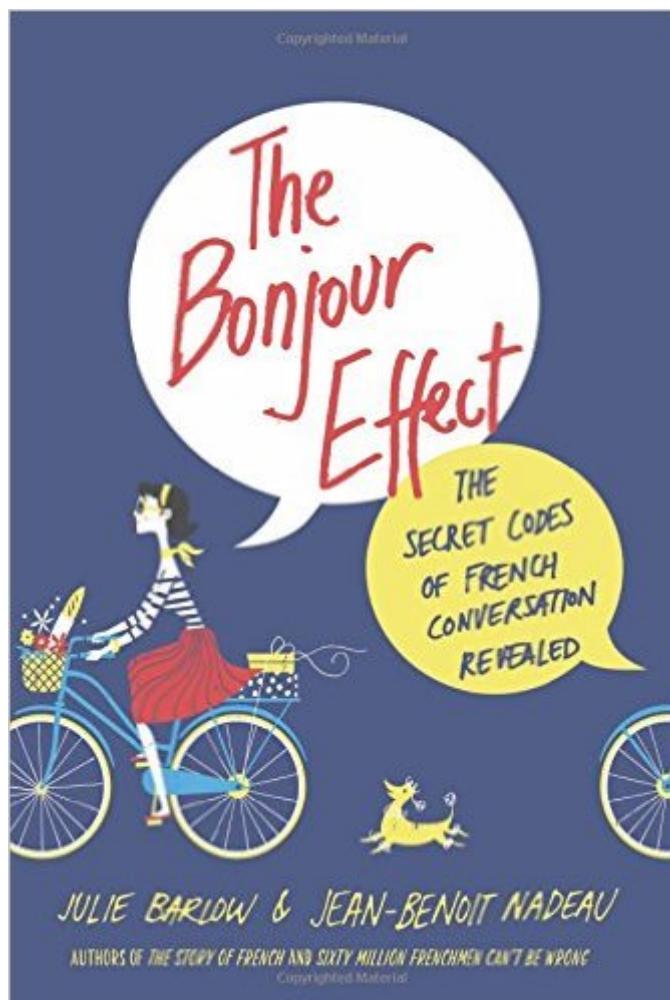


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The Bonjour Effect: The Secret Codes Of French Conversation Revealed



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. After reading *The Bonjour Effect*, even readers with a modicum of French language ability will be able to hold their own the next time they step into a bistro on the Left Bank.

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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.

I loved this book written by a French-speaking Quebecois couple who lived for several years, off and on, in France. While mostly of interest to serial francophiles and/or foreigners living in France, any reader interested in world cultures will find some goodies in this witty, insightful book. The central theme of the work is that the French place great importance on the way they communicate with each other. Schools teach the youngest elementary kids how to converse, make oral presentations and appreciate their language. This is in preparation for finding a place in society where, again, use of the language as a key to the culture is all important. Intelligent conversation is a universal objective for the French as it defines who you are and where you are going socially. If you have visited France and spent any time in an art museum there, you will probably have overheard one or more French persons going on at great length about the paintings--a work's meaning, the artist's motivation, how the piece fits into the culture of the time, etc. Chances are that the speakers are not art historians or museum docents, but simply average Frenchmen, products of an education system that places great importance on expressing ideas orally at every opportunity. For the outsider the great lesson learned from the first chapter of the book is that you never ever start an oral exchange with a Frenchman at any level without a heartfelt, sincere "Bonjour", followed by a few additional pleasantries. Inattention to that beginning can negate the whole attempt to communicate. From personal experience I can attest to the importance of this standard beginning to communication.

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