

the Write Stuff

Plenty of opportunities now exist in France to become involved in literary activities. **Vanessa Couchman** explores the thriving writing scene

Whether you are a writer, a reader, or both, you probably enjoy interacting with like-minded people. Moving to France might appear to reduce the opportunities for doing this with English speakers, even if it allows more time to pursue your literary ambitions. However, the growing number of English-speaking expats in France means that such opportunities have multiplied in recent years. You'll find book groups, creative writing meet-ups, workshops and courses, literary festivals and bookshops and libraries with English book sections. France is an endless source of inspiration for writers, with its fascinating history and culture, and scenic countryside, towns and villages.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Although a lot goes on, finding out about it often involves spadework and a reliance on word of mouth. The local library or *médiathèque* is a good starting point, since they often organise author events and know about English groups. English-speaking clubs have also sprung up in parts of France favoured by British inhabitants. For instance, Friends in France International (FiFi), is a group for women living in the area around St-Antonin-Noble-Val in Tarn-et-Garonne. FiFi's activities include two book groups and a creative writing group.

Victoria Corby is a *Times* best-selling writer of



Vanessa Couchman

humorous romantic fiction and has lived near Bordeaux since 1993. Victoria's main concerns back then were the lack of English libraries and the difficulties of buying books. "I would raid charity shops in London and return with 30 books in my suitcase. The internet has transformed how I buy books! Pre-internet, it was also difficult to find out about local literary events," she says. "Now, I have many contacts in the English-writing community in France. I've made blogging 'friends', some of whom I've met, and others are people that

have come to events I've organised or I've gone to theirs."

Novelist and creative writing tutor Tracey Warr spent a winter in a friend's house in the Tarn valley while she researched and wrote part of her first historical novel. She then moved from Pembrokeshire to the riverside market town of Laguëpie in Tarn-et-Garonne. "I had published a lot of non-fiction, having had a career teaching art history in universities, but France was the inspiration for my fiction," Tracey says. "I didn't expect my literary network to develop so swiftly, so I've been pleasantly surprised. The various local writers' groups and literary festivals have provided many fruitful contacts. Several novelists live nearby and have become friends and writing buddies."

Tracey and Victoria agree that living in France has enriched their creativity. Tracey's first two historical novels (a third is in the pipeline) are set in early medieval France. "Being able to explore the castles, landscapes,

bastide towns and rivers of southern France contributed significantly to my fictional medieval worlds," she says. The only downside Tracey experiences is the occasional need to use a well-stocked UK library. "I just save up a list for an intensive week at the British Library or the Bodleian in Oxford now and then," she says.

Victoria considers that she would probably have never written a full-length novel if she hadn't moved to France. "The lack of enough to read prompted me to try writing what I'd enjoy. I discovered that writing 100,000 words isn't a problem when you write for yourself." She is currently writing a historical novel set during the Napoleonic Wars.

CREATIVE WRITING GROUPS

The growing number of writing groups in France offers the chance to improve your writing and share common ground and mutual support. Writers in English find this particularly important, since they are much fewer and spread further apart than in the UK.

Victoria Corby organises the Bordeaux Writing Group, the only English-language group in the area, which meets monthly. "Several members say how lovely it is to be able to 'talk writing' again and they make a journey of up to two hours to attend meetings. We have around 18 members of different nationalities who occupy the spectrum between budding writers and more experienced novelists, bloggers, poets and short story writers. Those writing in a second language often have a startlingly good use of words."



The Parisot Creative Writing Group

The group also invites other writers to give talks about their work, and forges links with creative writing programmes in Bordeaux schools.

Another writing group that has developed rapidly since it started in 2012 is the Parisot Creative Writing Group in Tarn-et-Garonne, led by writer Anita Goodfellow. It now consists of two groups of about 10 members each, which demonstrates the popularity of writing as an occupation among British expats. The group usually meets in the Parisot *médiathèque* and regularly invites published authors such as Jacqueline Yallop, who lives locally, to run workshops. Anita also runs day-long critiquing sessions at her home in Mazerolles, Aveyron, which is - aptly - a former school house.



The Bordeaux Writing Group enjoying the sun at their monthly meet-up



This page from left: The Parisot Creative Writing Group often invite published authors to their writing workshops in Tarn-et-Garonne; author Tracey Warr organises creative writing workshops and events

WRITING WORKSHOPS AND COURSES

For those looking for intensive bursts of writing tuition, a wide range of residential or shorter courses are available in France. They are usually listed in writing magazines or can be found via an internet search engine.

Tracey Warr has put her experience of university teaching to use by presenting one-off creative writing workshops or taking part in larger programmes. These include Writing at the Castle, an annual event that offers five days of professional tuition and private writing time in a medieval château in Gascony – a setting that befits a Gothic novel.

LITERARY FESTIVALS

French *salons du livre* sometimes give space to local English writers. But, until recently, few literary festivals catering for an Anglophone audience existed outside of the French capital. Now, enterprising expats have seen that there is an appetite for Anglo-French events that bring together authors, readers and aspiring writers in a friendly environment.

Kate Rose is the co-founder and creative director of the biennial Charroux Literary Festival, which first took place in 2015. Kate moved to France full-time to spend more time writing, travelling and walking and divides her time between a tiny hamlet in Vienne and the small town of Champagne-Mouton in Charente. The idea for a festival grew out of open mic poetry events and creative writing workshops that Kate organised with her friend, the author Christine Collette.

“Living in France, you miss many UK-based festivals and writing events,” Kate says. “Over three days at Charroux, we had 15 French and 15 British authors, including Kate Mosse and Sarah Harrison. We offered author talks, coaching sessions, discussion groups, book signings, writing, poetry and drama workshops, evening entertainment and a children’s poetry competition. The first morning, we knew it was a reality when we heard people arriving. There was a great mix of authors who engaged with the audiences and each other.”

A series of literary lunches is an offshoot of the festival. “We wanted to continue to promote authors and bring them and their readers together,” Kate says. “A lunch is ideal as it’s intimate and allows time for the authors to expand on their writing and themes. So far we have had Susie Kelly, James Vance and Alison Morton and more are planned.”

Other festivals include the biennial St Clémentin Literary Festival in Deux-Sèvres, founded in 2012, and the annual Parisot Literary Festival in Tarn-et-Garonne, inaugurated in 2013. Both are now established landmarks in the literary calendar and attract well-known authors and rising stars. Best-selling novelist Amanda Hodgkinson has appeared at the Parisot Literary Festival. “I thought the festival was great,” she says of the first one. “I was really pleased with the crowd that came to see me – a wonderful, interesting group of people and I felt there was a really warm ambience.” These events are always looking for volunteers to help run them, so it’s worth contacting the organisers to offer your services.

"France is an endless source of inspiration for writers"

ONLINE COMMUNITIES

It's not always feasible to find a group, workshop or literary event within easy travelling distance, but possibilities exist online. Internet-based writing communities such as Wattpad and Scribophile allow authors to upload their writing and readers to discover it. Scribophile requires writers to give thoughtful critiques of others' work before uploading their own. A small online community, Writers Abroad, specifically offers expat writers the chance to review each other's work in a secure environment, improve their writing skills and network.

Several Facebook groups also exist specially for readers and writers living in France, for example, 'Writers Groups in France' and 'Writers in France' (both run by Victoria Corby), 'English readers living in France' and 'French Focus Friends', which has a separate book club. They enable you to make contact with like-minded people and find out what is taking place in your region.

So the opportunities are there, as Kate Rose says, "Living in France has given me the chance to do what I have always dreamed of doing: thoroughly immerse myself in writing and encourage others to write, in books and in literary festivals. There must be something in the French air..." **LF**

USEFUL WEBSITES

Friends in France International:
fifi82.org

Writing at the Castle:
writingatthecastle.tumblr.com

Charroux Literary Festival:
charrouxlitfest.wordpress.com

St Clémentin Literary Festival:
stclementinlitfest.com

Parisot Literary Festival:
festilitt.com

English Library in Villefranche-de-Rouergue (Aveyron):
bluemoonweb.net/English-Library

Writers Abroad:
writersabroad.com



The Charroux Literary Festival brings together authors, readers and aspiring writers