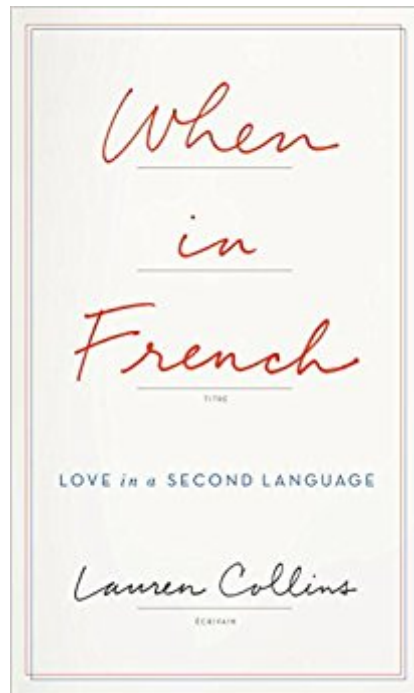




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# When In French: Love In A Second Language



## Synopsis

A language barrier is no match for love. Lauren Collins discovered this firsthand when, in her early thirties, she moved to London and fell for a Frenchman named Olivier. A surprising turn of events for someone who didn't have a passport until she was in college. But what does it mean to love someone in a second language? Collins wonders, as her relationship with Olivier continues to grow entirely in English. Are there things she doesn't understand about Olivier, having never spoken to him in his native tongue? Does "I love you" even mean the same thing as "je t'aime"? When the couple, newly married, relocates to Francophone Geneva, Collins is fearful of one day becoming "a Borat of a mother" who doesn't understand her own kids. She decides to answer her questions for herself by learning French. This is a laugh-out-loud funny and surprising memoir about the lengths we go to for love, as well as an exploration across culture and history into how we learn languages and what they say about who we are. Collins grapples with the complexities of the French language, enduring excruciating role-playing games with her classmates at a Swiss language school and accidentally telling her mother-in-law that she's given birth to a coffee machine. In learning French, Collins must wrestle with the very nature of French identity and society which, it turns out, is a far cry from life back home in North Carolina. Plumbing the mysterious depths of humanity's many forms of language, Collins describes with great style and wicked humor the frustrations, embarrassments, surprises, and, finally, joys of learning and living in French.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

An Best Book of September 2016: Lauren Collins was an expat from North Carolina, living in London, when she met and fell in love with the man who would eventually become her husband. Olivier hailed from France (in case the name didn't give that away), and *When in French* chronicles Collins's fascinating and often hilarious journey learning his native tongue. Along the way she discovers that this endeavor isn't a simple matter of translating "I love you" to "je t'aime," for example, and adding an enthusiastic haw-haw! at the end. In America, the meaning of love is vast. We are just as likely to express our extreme ardor for our partners as we are a bag of Cheetos. For Olivier, this sort of impreciseness was infuriating, which pointed to an important cultural difference that required careful negotiation. To say that *When in French* is mainly a meditation on language would be accurate (which I'm sure Olivier would appreciate). But that description makes it sound as boring as evidently Geneva is, and this memoir is anything but. You will laugh, you might even get misty-eyed, *vous allez l'adorer.* --Erin Kodicek, *The Book Review*

"New Yorker staff writer Lauren Collins's terrific memoir, *When in French: Love in a Second Language*, depicts bilingual romance with fresh asperity: "What was an expat but an immigrant who drinks at lunch?" "A thoughtful, beautifully written meditation on the art of language and intimacy. The book unfolds like several books in one: on moving abroad, on communication in human relationships, on the history of language, and in the end, on the delights of cross-cultural fusion." --The New York Times Book Review "An ambitious and entertaining meditation on the ways in which love and language make us who we are [Collins] weaves together personal, historical, and sociological anecdotes with ease, roving nimbly between awkward interfamilial interactions, neo-Whorfian theory, the comically tortured inner workings of the Académie française, and far beyond Collins's writing is endlessly, delightfully rich. She's mastered love in her second language and crafted a masterpiece in her first. Surely you'll fall for this book too." --Buzzfeed " [The book] takes off when Collins throws herself into language classes and funny Franglish conversations with her in-laws. She takes an amusing side trip to L'Académie Française, France's language police, to watch a committee try to come up with a substitute for the invasive English expression "business as usual." Gradually, fitfully, it all comes together." --Minneapolis Star

Tribune

“[An] engaging and surprisingly meaty memoir

When in French ranges from the humorously personal to a deeper look at various theories of language acquisition and linguistics

There’s far more to Collins’s book than screwball comedy, and those who have weathered linguistic crossings themselves are apt to find particular resonance in its substantive inquiry into language, identity, and transcultural translation.

•NPR.org

“Collins offers up her own love affair as a case study, applying the tools of the social sciences to her life, and offering, along the way, a primer on linguistics and semantics and a cultural history of language. But if that makes When in French sound boring or academic, I’ve given you the wrong impression: Collins’s memoir is anything but dull. She’s analytical, but never clinical, with a reporter’s keen ear for nuance, and her curiosity about words—the meaning beneath their meaning—is infectious.

•Vogue

“Collins’s memoir, frequently funny, overflows with ideas about culture and communication.

•Newsday

“This gorgeous, finely woven memoir explores the gaps between words and worlds.

•Refinery29

“We can’t all fall in love with a dashing Frenchman and move to France, but that’s what Lauren Collins found herself doing when she met Olivier. This delightful memoir explores the New Yorker staff writer’s experience learning the French language—and the culture and people besides.

•Elle.com

“In her emotional, erudite memoir [Collins] documents her linguistic labors, including the missteps she accidentally tells her mother-in-law she gave birth to a coffeemaker on the road to mastery. At times she expounds on the history and philosophy of language; at others, it feels like catching up with a clever friend you haven’t seen since college. But the most intriguing question posed is as much about identity as language: Are you someone else when you speak and live in a non-native tongue?

•TIME

“A collection of musings on translation, linguistics, and cultural identity, all underpinned by a satisfying love story

Collins’s is the best kind of memoir: the kind that uses the author’s own experience as an entryway to—and a bridge between—a number of universal topics.

•Brooklyn Rail

“Part memoir, part cultural exploration, this heartwarming read will appeal to romantics and lovers of language alike.

•RealSimple.com

“Woven into Collins’s poignant—and often laugh-out-loud funny—personal story of trial and erreur is a primer on pop linguistics, with meditations on whether the language we speak affects the way we think and feel.

•Departures

“An exceptionally insightful meditation on how language informs culture and personality. It’s a lovely read that gets

better the more you sit with it. — Jason Zinoman, *The New York Times*

“[A] wry memoir — [Collins] unearths other tidbits of trivia and history that will fascinate lovers of words and language — The heart of the book lies in Collins’s personal story, which she tells with humor, humility and a deep affection for the people and cultures involved. Whether she’s describing the grinding exhaustion of learning a foreign language or the euphoria of a breakthrough, her determination makes the reader root for her. When in French is both an entertaining fish-out-of-water story and a wise and insightful look at the way two very different people and families manage to find common ground. — BookPage

“Cleverly organized, well-written — As the memoir unfolds, Collins does not spare herself, sharing her apprehensions and her missteps with candor and frequently with humor — Filled with pleasing passages in every chapter. — Kirkus

“[A] smart memoir — on how the languages we speak shape who we are — [Collins’s] writing is elegant and exact. — Publishers Weekly

“A memoir of the *New Yorker* writer’s experience falling in love with a French banker and winding up in Geneva, recounted in [Collins’s] distinctive and deeply intelligent mix of insight and humor. — Thomas Chatterton Williams, *The Nation*

“What to Read This Summer — A linguistic love story — Lauren Collins captures the thrilling vertigo of trying to be yourself in a foreign language. She’s an expert storyteller and an excellent traveling companion. — Pamela Druckerman, author of *Bringing Up Béatrice*: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting

“Lauren Collins is one of the smartest, most humane, most charming writers I know. Nobody is more observant of fine details, or more curious about the big picture. In *When in French*, we finally see her mad skills and effortless touch on display in a book-length memoir — a love story about a person, a language, and a whole form of cultural knowledge. Collins makes the world seem like a bigger, more effervescent, more intoxicating place. — Elif Batuman, author of *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them*

“As a (sadly) monolingual American, I devoured Lauren Collins’s sharp, funny tale of bilingual romance and learning to speak French. Part acerbic love letter to that language and part meditation on language itself, *When in French* is so charming it made me want to learn French too. — Adelle Waldman, author of *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.: A Novel*

“That anyone can actually communicate with anyone is a miracle. *When in French* is a hilarious and intelligent book that delves into the history of language, falling in love, and by the way includes words like *Ribuy-tibuy*. Gumusservi. —

Komorebi and Schnapsidee. • Maira Kalman, author and illustrator of *Beloved Dog* and *The Principles of Uncertainty*

The book can be divided into two parts -- the first part is Lauren Collins telling of her struggles to learn French and not being able to make any progress. There she is, stuck in Switzerland with her French husband who is at work long hours and she is helpless because she can't speak the language. Even when she tries to speak French, she is thwarted by well-meaning people who recognize her accent and switch to English. This part of the book is gloomy and you want to give her a nudge and say "Get out there and take a language class, talk to strangers, it'll get better!" The second part is where she actually does these things and soon she is speaking and understanding French and finding a different dimension to her husband when he speaks in his native language and she can understand him. She finds a new dimension to herself as well and the story picks up and becomes more upbeat. Meanwhile Collins takes us down many side roads, discussing linguistics and language learning and the history of French. I found these diversions very interesting and if you've read any Steven Pinker, Guy Deutscher, or Julie Barlow and Jean-Benoit Nadeau, you'll enjoy hearing her take on their theories. Also of interest on the subject of the difficulty of learning French is *The Philosopher's Demise* by Richard Watson.

An excellent, informative, and entertaining read about the author's moving to London, meeting her future husband, who is french, and moving to Geneva where French is a primary language. Along with the very interesting memoir of seriously learning French so she can converse intelligently with her in-laws, husband, and new friends, Ms. Collins blends in the history and evolution of language. I found both her new life, having moved from North Carolina, to New York, to London and settling into daily life in Switzerland, and her research and study of language a perfect balance of delightful reading. Having written for the *New Yorker* for over a decade, she knows what she is doing. I highly recommend this book.

Lauren Collins has officially raised the bar for any and all books in the travelogue/francophile genre, both through her incredibly astute observations and her unparalleled writing style. She's intelligent and witty, cultured and down-to-earth, well-traveled and centered, artistic and precise. As an American who has been spent a fair amount of time in France myself, also alongside a French boyfriend and his family, I felt she captured the experience in words so beautifully that they deserve to form a language of their own. Damn, the girl is good with metaphors! By the end of the book, I

found myself wanting to hate her, if only because I want to be her. Some reviewers have noted the back and forth nature of her memoir, but if you're curious about language and linguistics I think you'll find it fascinating. If thoughts are like monkeys, her monkeys are enlightened, highly entertaining, and a joy to follow whenever they go. They give the book significantly more substance than the average book about life in France. As a seasoned Francophile, I found it incredibly refreshing. Anyway, when even Gad Elmaleh is plugging your book, you know you're doing something right!

A Readable balance of experience and scholarship. Especially interesting to a student of cultural and linguistic encounters. I found myself alternating between Amen! And hmmm! Wish I could sit for a conversation with the author. Gifted it to a friend to give them insight into my own Perceptions.

This is an excellent memoir. Ok, I have to admit that I have a lot in common with Lauren: I am married to a non-American, and I live in a foreign country so I empathize with a lot of what she has gone through. I am a polyglot and love to learn about language in general so this book speaks to me on so many levels. The book is about 2/3 memoir and 1/3 anecdotes about language and culture, which apparently annoys some people, but I loved it. The anecdotes are interesting and based on scholarly research. The memoir has the right mix of insight and personal details without being a tell all tale. This is the first cultural memoir I have read where the author talks about a person having different personalities in different languages and that once you learn a language well enough, it informs how you think. Collins learned to be more precise in expressing emotion because of all the nuances in French whereas English is simply ebullient (awesome!). You get a very visceral sense of what it is like to navigate life in a foreign language. I don't know if anyone else teared up reading this but Collins' telling of how her American and French family learned to get along, how she passed the French language and culture exam, how she eventually felt confident enough in French to argue with her husband in French (That's quite an accomplishment in my opinion!) made me tear up. I would really like Collins to write another book about their move back to Paris and raising their daughter there.

Since I am studying French, I found this book to be quite interesting. The author has a tremendous English vocabulary and I regret not getting the Kindle version in order to more easily use a dictionary. I am now reading the French version of this book called 'Lost in French' which should have been the title of the the English version as well. As the author wrote, it is frequently difficult to

understand the subtle differences in meaning between languages. The screw-ups can be both horrendous and hilarious, not even considering the use of incorrect words and grammar. Her experiences are in some ways the experiences of all of us trying to learn a second language. She made me feel a lot better.

The author's choice to intersperse her own stories with those of everyone else who has ever visited Geneva finally proved too much for me. It made the read seem stilted and dry, and I finally gave up on it a little over half-way through.

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