



Through Parisian Eyes

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For those passionate about French arts and culture, Melinda Camber Porter's "Through Parisian Eyes" is like a daylong trip to the candy store. It is a collection of 33 interviews with some of the most prominent Parisian writers, philosophers, directors and actors – François Truffaut, Costa-Gavras, Jean Anouilh, Eugène Ionesco, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Louis Malle, Marguerite Duras, Bertrand Tavernier, Breyton Breytenbach, Françoise Sagan, Yves Montand and Jean-Paul Sartre are all included.

Unlike most question-and-answer interviewers, Porter does not simply reproduce a transcript of each conversation. Instead, she offers the interviews in prose with background material to clarify, for readers, the territory she is about to cover. Porter doesn't let the notoriety of her subjects dictate the length of each piece. Sartre, for example, is given one page, while the lesser-known Françoise Giroud (France's first Secretary of State for Women) is given 14 pages. Because her subjects often refer to each other, an overlapping of ideas and topics in "Through Parisian Eyes" forms one steady conversation that progresses with absolute fluidity.

All of Porter's subjects spend some or most of their interviews discussing the Parisian tradition of intense political polarization. Film director Marcel Ophüls ("The Sorrow and the Pity") says: "It is fashionable to be of the extreme Left or extreme Right, and centrists are considered to be ineffectual liberals, Truffaut was one of the few who refused to follow this fashion. He defined himself politically as a man of the extreme center."

Director Costa-Gavras ("Z," "Missing") believes that political extremism is now the main obstacle to progress in France: "... the real impediment to understanding is extremism. People catalogue you as being Left or Right Wing. Automatically. And that makes absolutely no sense ... It's a dogmatic fanaticism."

In the section entitled "Decisive Women," Porter cleverly situates side-by-side interviews with actress Delphine Seyrig, film director and "doyen of erotic feminism," Roger Vadim and feminist author Monique Wittig ("The Lesbian Body"). Seyrig's honest and unassuming feminism, "Actresses represent clearly what men want ... an image which is impossible to live up to," and Wittig's veteran stance, "The French language is grammatically and semantically saturated by the sexual dominance of men," frame Vadim's arrogance perfectly: "In my films and in private life I have always wanted women to be free, and not only sexually." Porter juxtaposes the complete range of the Parisian feminist dialogue so that readers may draw their own conclusions.

Porter's eclectic gathering covers topics that include French xenophobia, politics, feminism, creativity, intellectualism, structuralism, imagination and the arts, providing an area of interest for almost every palate, "Through Parisian Eyes" is a well-rounded, intelligent look at the contemporary Parisian spirit.

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