

Solange De Santis

60 Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong, by Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow, Sourcebooks Inc., 351 pages, ISBN 1-4022-0045-5, \$16.95 (U.S.)

Mr. Nadeau and Ms. Barlow, a married couple who are Canadian journalists, are enjoying serendipitous timing with the publication of their first book, subtitled “Why We Love France But Not The French.” Although they began a two-year stay in France in 1999, then spent a year or so writing, *60 Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong* arrives at one of those times in Franco-American relations when a corresponding book might be titled *But 60 Million Americans Want To Spit in Their Eye*.

So there couldn't be a better moment for an engaging, earnest, thorough, very readable examination of why the French are as they are. Mr. Nadeau won a fellowship from the New Hampshire-based Institute of Current World Affairs to study why the French were resisting globalization. He and Ms. Barlow moved to Paris from Montreal, only to discover they were barking up the wrong *arbre*. Despite the French farmers who became famous when they destroyed a McDonald's in southern France, the French weren't resisting globalization, the authors discovered. French companies were major players in world commerce and the French economy – despite levels of bureaucracy and state control that would make an American blanch – was ranked fourth in the world.

With the Institute's permission, “we ... decided to just explore France and French thinking.” The liveliest part of the book is the first third, subtitled Spirit, where the French are dissected as “aborigines” of a very old culture with very different notions of privacy, space and public display. Among the reasons that Americans seem to come down more on the French when they disagree with U.S. foreign policy (Germany and Russia didn't go along with invading Iraq, either) is that the French relish a good debate and think the relationship can stand some sharp back-and-forth.

The second part, Structure, slows a bit while examining French institutions but also contains enough anecdote and insight to keep things moving. The last third, Change,” looks at “the world according to France” and examines the nation's role in the world and the new Europe. *60 Million Frenchmen* does its job marvelously well. After reading it, you may still think the French are arrogant, aloof and high-handed, but you will know why.

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solange@solangedesantis.com