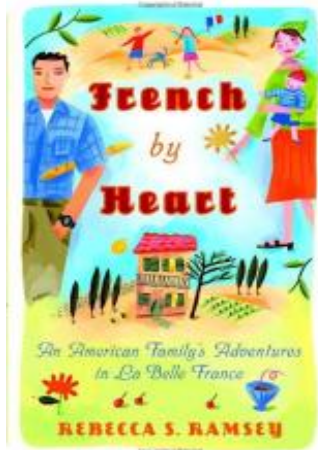

French by Heart: An American Family's Adventures in La Belle France

by Rebecca S. Ramsey



About the Book

Can a family of five from deep in the heart of Dixie find happiness smack dab in the middle of France?

French By Heart is the story of an all-American family pulling up stakes and finding a new home in Clermont-Ferrand, a city four hours south of Paris known more for its smoke-spitting factories and car dealerships than for its location in the Auvergne, the lush heartland of France dotted with crumbling castles and sunflower fields. The Ramseys are not jet-setters; they're a regular family with big-hearted and rambunctious kids. Quickly their lives go from covered-dish suppers to smoky dinner parties with heated polemics, from being surrounded by Southern hospitality to receiving funny looks if the children play in the yard without shoes.

A charming tale with world-class characters, **French By Heart** reads like letters from your funniest friend. More than just a slice of life in France, it's a heartwarming account of a family coming of age and learning what "home sweet home" really means.

Discussion Guide

1. Upon the Ramseys' arrival in France, their temporary neighbors hear a foreign accent and jump to the conclusion that the Ramseys are "les Anglais," much to Becky's chagrin. It's a mistake that's repeated not infrequently by locals. How does Becky's reaction change over the years, and what does it say about her comfort level in France?

2. When Becky admits to having her weight criticized by Madame Mallet, her friends congratulate her that this is a sure sign of friendship in France. Others advise that such a friendship among Frenchwomen is not as easily won as the friendships quickly forged between Americans—a truth borne out by Becky's experience. What do you make of the theme of friendship in the book? Who do you think Becky's friends in France are?
3. What prejudices do the Ramseys encounter during their stay in France? Do you think the negative reactions of some Frenchmen are due to xenophobia, simple misunderstandings, or something else?
4. When the tree trimmer arrives at the Ramsey's temporary home, his incomprehensible French sends Becky into a panic, as she struggles to answer him and wonders why none of her neighbors will come to her aid. At her next home on Rue des Cerisiers, she receives more solicitous knocks—on the door from the church missionaries and the painter. How does her reaction change the longer she is in France? What does the evolution of her response (and her preparation) say about her changing status in France and in the neighborhood?
5. After some initial hiccups, the Ramsey children seem to acclimate beautifully to life in France. Indeed, by the end of their stay, a delighted Becky is told that they speak French with no accent. What do you expect the children's re-adjustment to life in the United States will be like? What challenges do you think they might face?
6. How do Madame Mallet's memories of war affect her behavior and ideas in the present? How do the events of September 11 affect her relationship to the Ramseys? Are the two related?
7. Discuss Becky and Todd's experience with the movie club. How does it differ from their expectations? What do you think of their selection of *About Schmidt* as their film? In a book club or movie club, what do you think each member's responsibility is in choosing a discussion piece?
8. The course of the book traces a finite period of time—the four years during which the Ramseys reside in France—yet the narrative does not always follow a strictly chronological path. How does the narrator define the passage of time? How does any full-time mother or father mark the events of a year, as opposed to their office-bound spouses?
9. From the social activities of the local church to the statue of Mary in her home, as well as trips to Lourdes and the family's Joan of Arc pilgrimage, Becky consistently expresses appreciation and interest in the Church, if not exactly devotion to it. What role does religion play in the story? What struck you about the difference between her relationship to the local Protestant church and France's Catholic tradition?
10. Madame Mallet repeatedly instructs (and corrects) the Ramseys on the sanctity of private property, and the rules of the impenetrable garden gate. Yet her own behavior toward Becky and the children demonstrates that her feelings about personal privacy and observation are not so restrictive. Discuss some of Madame Mallet's other rules and priorities, and how they could be confusing to an outsider. Are there any that you find simply ridiculous? What do you think your relationship with Madame Mallet would have been like?
11. How does life in France stack up to Becky's expectations? Do you think she was prepared for its challenges? Does the expat life appeal to you? Why or why not?

Author Bio

REBECCA S. RAMSEY lived with her family in a small village in central France for four years, beginning in 1999, before returning to Greer, South Carolina.

Critical Praise

"I loved reading Rebecca Ramsey's account of her family's sojourn in France. **French By Heart** is that winning (and rare) combination of a down-to-earth, witty voice with a sense of the mysterious and eternal. The minute I finished the last page I started looking forward to her next book."

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