

French connections



Avalon is now her base, but author Sarah Turnbull will always keep Paris and the South Pacific close to her heart.

Story by Rosamund Burton

In her captivating memoir *Almost French* (2002), Sarah Turnbull, an Aussie journalist backpacking around Europe, meets and falls in love with French lawyer Frédéric Venière. This entertaining account of her years in Paris captures many hilarious moments of cultural incomprehension between Frédéric and herself.

He is horrified when she goes to the local bakery wearing tracksuit pants.

“But it’s not nice for the baker,” he exclaims in the book. And after 30 years together, and 20 years of marriage, it appears that they still have different views on appropriate clothing. Only now in Sydney it is Frédéric’s beach outfits that cause consternation. “Oliver [their

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son] and I throw on swimmers and grab a towel but Fred likes to go to the beach fully dressed – trousers, shoes and socks. Sarah laughs and shakes her head. “He goes to the change rooms and then changes back after the swim.”

Both Frédéric and Sarah, 54, were deeply ensconced in Paris. She had lived there for 10 years and he for many more, so my immediate question is why they moved away.

“We had done years of IVF in Paris and failure after failure had taken its toll. We needed a change.”

That came when Frédéric was asked by his law firm to set up an office in French Polynesia. The couple moved with their West Highland Terrier, Mad-

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die, to the island of Mo’orea, a short ferry trip from Tahiti’s capital, Papeete. Sarah began each day with a long swim in the clear blue lagoon, which their house overlooked. She wrote a series of travel articles while in French Polynesia. She explored the Marquesas Islands, and Frédéric and she visited the Tuamotu atolls. She describes diving at Fakarava and being pulled by the current through passes teeming with sea life including sharks, manta rays and wandering Napoleon wrasse.

“It’s one of the most extraordinary experiences I’ve had.”

But her unspoken dream of naturally conceiving on the beautiful lush tropical island of Mo’orea was unfulfilled. In her

pittwater **life** *The Local Voice Since 1991*



second book *All Good Things* (2013), she describes in exquisite detail the high and lows of the three years they lived on Mo'orea, not only the generosity and inclusiveness of their Polynesian neighbours, but also the isolation combined with their aching longing for a child.

"I think every move has an element of escape, but, of course, you take your problems with you, and a small tropical island can be a pressure cooker."

Deciding to give IVF one more go, Frédéric and Sarah journeyed to Sydney for the procedure, and despite what she describes as "only one measly embryo" she did fall pregnant - and Oliver is now 15.

After the posting in Tahiti, Frédéric was offered a job in Sydney. When the position fell through, the couple took their two-year old toddler on a nine-

month road trip around Australia. For Sarah it was an opportunity to reconnect with home after 14 years away.

They named their small caravan with its folding wings, Château Pliant (Fold-up Castle), and much of their journey was dictated by where a childcare centre had a vacancy. "We spent two blissful weeks in Kalgoorlie, and Oliver was in heaven, because he just wanted to be with kids."

Another highlight was Lake Ballard, in the WA goldfields region, where 51 stylised steel figures created by English sculptor Anthony Gormley dot the vast saltpan. "It was magical," says Sarah. "A pastel coloured sunset and these figures casting their deep shadows."

Art is a theme that runs through Sarah's life and work. Their house in

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Life Stories



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Sarah's first two books; her mum with baby Oliver at six weeks; husband Frédéric with Oliver in Australia; the family's trusty 'Chateau Pliant' caravan; Oliver learning from a young age; Sarah in Paris on Rue Montorgeuil; Sarah with her sister Anna on beautiful Mo'orea; celebrating their outback adventure; curious Oliver with steel-figure sculpture in the WA goldfields region; another Paris happy snap.



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Avalon was formerly owned by the Blau family. The sculptor, Robin Blau, welded his metalwork in the small outhouse at the front, which now stores firewood and boxes of Sarah's books, and his brother, artist Simon Blau, had a studio at the bottom of the garden, where Frédéric paints in his spare time.

"We saw this house in 2008 after going around Australia, and we both fell in love with it," Sarah says. "It felt like our spiritual home." But it wasn't to be, as two other parties were also bidding for the place, and Sarah and Frédéric missed out. However, a couple of years ago it came back on the market and this time they were able to buy it.

Sarah puts another log on the fire, as it's a cold afternoon, and I notice the primitive, carved wooden sea creature standing on the sandstone fireplace. Beside it is a small oil painting of Avalon beach painted by Frederic. The house is spacious and uncluttered despite abounding in interesting artefacts. On a side table is a metre-long three-masted replica of the ship of French explorer, La Pérouse. Frédéric is on his laptop at the dining table, as he has been working from home since the start of the COVID situation, and behind him is a collection of coloured-glass soda siphons from France.

Followed by the newest addition to

the family, West Highland terrier Louis, Sarah takes me outside down a couple of steps to office with its large window overlooking Pittwater.

"It's such a treat having a studio to work in, as in our last place my office was in our bedroom."

More recently, this gifted writer has put her journalism on hold to focus on a doctorate of creative arts through the University of Wollongong, which involves a research paper and a biographical novel. The novel is about the Australian Impressionist artist John Russell whose work she first saw 25 years ago in France. In Paris, Russell became friends with Vincent Van Gogh and Rodin; he lived on Belle Ile in Brittany for many years where he taught Henri Matisse.

"His paintings stayed with me, and also his story," Sarah tells me. "My experience of moving home after 15 years made me think about how difficult it must have been for him coming home after 40 years. I think the move home is always tricky, because you have to re-create a life."

The author has done that in Avalon, where she feels a deep sense of belonging. Driven by her love of Pittwater and commitment to a sustainable future she has become involved with the local environmental group Our Blue Dot. Frustration with the Federal Government's

position on climate change prompted her involvement with Mackellar Rising, a grassroots movement promoting community-led, values-based representation in the Mackellar electorate.

"I care deeply about this area, I feel so lucky to live here, and these local groups have been a wonderful way to channel my energy. But I'm still writing furious letters to federal politicians! I feel we have a moral obligation to speak up."

Ironically, when Frédéric and Sarah came to live in Australia, Sarah's parents moved to France, but they are now back in Australia and living in Avalon; and Sarah's sister Anna and her family are also on the Northern Beaches in Balgowlah. The two sisters recently saw the film *Rosemary's Way* about the Kenyan-born Australian Local Hero 2021, Rosemary Kariuki, and the issues of domestic violence, isolation and loneliness in Sydney's migrant community. They were both moved by the film and wanted to raise local awareness of it. Anna suggested to Sarah they organise a screening, and the film is showing at United Cinemas Avalon on Wednesday 11 August to raise money for Rosemary Kariuki's work supporting vulnerable migrant women in Sydney's western suburbs.

It's clear Sarah has a strong engagement with her community, family and life in general; a great local ambassador!

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