



## Paris Light

Author: Moira McCarthy

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**M**oira McCarthy is a Catholic teacher, award-winning photographer, Francophile and now author. She has spent much of her working life in Melbourne.

*Paris Light – A dream of discovery, a city in transition* is her first book, a slim, elegant journal of reflection and history of the great city.

A regular visitor to Paris, Moira wrote *Paris Light* during a seven week stay immersing herself in French history and culture during the Spring of 2008. Hoping to capture memorable photographic images, she experiences much more as she records her impressions of a society confronting significant challenges.

While Moira's affection for Paris is clear, her treatment of her subject is never sentimentalised or overly romantic. Her prose is sharp with historical and political detail. Her observations of the complexity of Parisian people and life astute.

Noting that the city is 'at times struggling to reconcile its past traditions and future direction', Moira describes the tensions surrounding the impending 40th Anniversary of the May 1968 student/worker uprising. She attends a National march for workers who are striking against changes to Labour laws to increase the age of retirement:

"I had never intended to march, but I am swept along with them, stopping to take photographs, moving back to capture each union. And so they come in their thousands, wave upon wave, workers of Paris; train drivers, transport workers, airport workers, cleaners, student unions, educators, opera singers, Air France pilots and so on... This is the real Paris of historic struggle for human rights and a great confidence in power through unity."

"Paris, tu as oublié les ouvriers qui t'ont construite" (Paris, you have forgotten the workers who constructed you). So much of working class history has been erased, swept away as if they had never existed. The Opéra District of Paris, the reconstruction of the Haussmann period...the dismantling of the Stade de France into Saint Denis, all supplanted a history of struggle, poverty and working class identity. Today the famous flea markets of Saint-Ouen exist on the margins of Paris because the poorer traders...were expelled beyond the city walls."

Moira also finds time to connect with her faith by attending Mass in various churches, witnessing another side to Paris life: "I attended 11am Mass at Saint Eustache ... the parish was welcoming home their pilgrims from Spain. The idea of pilgrimage is actively promoted here – even walking the streets of Paris can be seen as a deeply spiritual experience; to be free of constraints, to be mobile and in harmony with one's surroundings."



And of families nurturing their children's cultural upbringing: "Children here are initiated from an early age into an appreciation of art and their national heritage".

Moira McCarthy's writing had a great effect on me. With each page I felt that I was there, on the streets of Paris, right with her.

*Paris Light* is not a coffee table book and it is unusual in that the author's artistic eye for description fleshes the pages out with such lush detail that her photographs are (nearly) made redundant. But of course, they are not. Moira's photography is masterful – her ability to capture the city's delicate light is exquisite, and I wonder if, perhaps, this book could be re-released down the track in a larger format to give the photographs their due justice.

**Reviewer: Pip Atkinson**