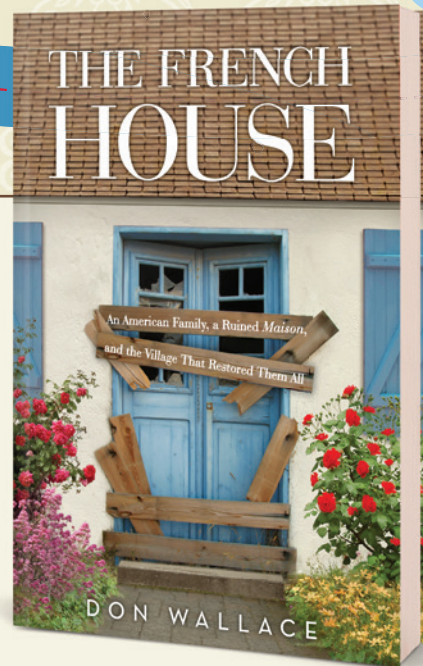


# THE FRENCH HOUSE

BY DON WALLACE

## Book Club Guide



### AUTHOR Q&A

Can you tell us a bit more of the backstory behind this book? What made you decide to take the plunge and buy a house sight unseen, on a tiny, beautiful French island half a world away?

We were pretty worn down and overwhelmed in Manhattan, where we'd moved to attempt to create some kind of literary or creative career path. Working entry-level magazine jobs at age 32 isn't for the faint of heart, but we were feeling uninspired and close to despair when the letter about a house for sale came from my wife Mindy's old college abroad professor, Gwened. We already had a spiritual connection to the village and island from a previous winter's stay. From there we sort of fantasized about it, talked ourselves into a mildly delusional state, never really considering that momentum was building—and that Gwened had powers of persuasion, almost witch-like. Suddenly, after a year of dallying and dithering, the dollar rose sharply against the franc and the owners, five quarreling siblings, lowered the price. It was like fate; to turn down this mysterious confluence would be to risk our souls, because we'd be exposed as cowardly dreamers. We held hands and jumped off the cliff into the unknown, confident that the village and island would be a way out of the daily grind, and a way into a different future.

After you realized you'd accidentally bought a ruin, did you ever consider backing out of the deal or selling the house to someone else and going back to America? What made you decide to stay?

I found out five minutes after signing the agreement that the roof was going to cave in, bringing down the house's stone walls with it, unless we put on a new slate roof (that's about 10,000 slates wired and hammered into place by human hands). A couple hours later I found that our mentor and sponsor in the village, Gwened, had what she called a



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terminal cancer, and was getting divorced. It was a lot to digest, for sure. But I was on Belle Île by myself, so I had to relay it to Mindy back in New York City, and she simply wouldn't get alarmed. Maybe she didn't trust my French (for good reason) and so thought I was exaggerating about the direness of the situation. But even if she had those thoughts, our spirits were so high from saying "yes" to the adventure that I think nothing would have dissuaded us.

### How would you say the French islanders on Belle Île are similar or different to Americans and why?

First, though the islanders are French nationals, they have a complex regional identity they are fiercely attached to. They are Breton, natives of Brittany, which was for centuries a powerful empire with a culture and language all its own. Bretons are perhaps plainer-speaking than the urban French of, say, Paris or Tours or Dijon; they are also darker in hair, with a resemblance to their Celtic brothers in Ireland. Close to the land and especially the sea, they are tough and self-sufficient. Never rich, they have been relatively ignored by Paris politicians for a couple centuries and so aren't as accustomed to the lavish gifts of public aid that other regions have received. If you think the Bretons sound independent and tough, the Bellilois islanders are twice that, at least in their own minds. They have been called the *insulaires*, or the "insular ones," for this proud and separatist attitude. They tolerate Parisians, thinking them soft and snobbish. They appreciate Americans, for the most part still grateful for the sacrifice in blood to free France from the Nazi occupation, but also because I think they see similarities in our love of sport and activity, and the way we tend not to put on airs.

### What is the biggest lesson you learned from this experience?

What I have discovered writing the book is that we should never doubt our strength before we try some great enterprise; strength isn't a finite number, it can grow during a challenge. Maybe that's the only way it grows.

### What would you like readers to gain from reading *The French House*? Any advice or life lessons they should take away in particular?

I would say, live your dreams—but not without digging deep into your souls and your marriages or partnerships, and asking each other if this is what you really want and are willing to pursue. A shared dream is a wonderful thing because it only grows richer over time.



### What is the most wonderful moment or memory you experienced in this process or while living on Belle Île?

So many moments Mindy and I stopped to look at each other and say, almost shyly, “Isn’t this wonderful?” But the ones with our son growing up in the village will always be the best. A day on the beach comes to mind: Rory, age 7, announces he’s going up to the village to get a book. Mindy and I look at each other to see which one will go with him. He says: “I’m going alone.” Very manly, very intrepid. But—okay. I get up to give him a key and he shakes his head. “I go in the window,” he says. “You’ve done this before?” we ask. He nods and off he goes, running full speed, knees pistoning, up the beach, through the pastures, across the creek, up the road through the valley of trees... We can trace him in our mind. We’re a little anxious. There is a herd of cows roaming the pasture. Strangers may be on the path or in the wood. Just as his absence is getting nerve-wracking, here he comes, running down the sand hill to our towels. He’s shining and hot and happy. Mindy says something about giving him a piece of chocolate, only to discover that she forgot to pack it in the straw bag. As soon as he hears it, Rory jumps up. “I’ll go get it!” And off he runs, knees pistoning, up the 20 minute route through sand dune, pasture, road, and village.

### What would you do differently?

The whole rickety project always teetered on the edge of disaster at first, and it still bothers us that we couldn’t finish the job right off the bat. Instead it took seven years of doing what we could afford only after we’d taken care of our lives in Manhattan, our son’s education, and our family relationships. If we’d won the lottery we could’ve done it faster...but we don’t play the lotto.

### Did you always want to be a writer, or did you start off in a different career?

In fourth grade I stayed in class to finish writing an assignment while everyone went out to recess. It was a story, a true one, about a weekend adventure on our family motorboat. We were overtaken by a storm, an engine quit, we almost sank in the rough ocean, and we made it home in time for hot chocolate. A perfect formula for a novel. After that I always had an ace in the hole when it came to being bored or needing to improve at school: I could tell a story. It worked splendidly except in math class. I became serious about writing at age 20 and wrote continually after that. At 25 I began freelancing articles for City Sports, a San Francisco weekly. At 27 I was hired as a sports editor and writer at a small rural newspaper. I went on to work in Silicon Valley as a tech writer, as an assistant editor at a Stanford-affiliate publishing house, and then, at 32, got my first magazine editing job at Motor Boating & Sailing. All the while I was writing fiction and memoir, and reviewing novels. It wasn’t a case of wanting—I just was a writer.



What are your favorite genres to read? What did you read while you were writing this book?

I love to read history, and did a lot of research for the book: about Neolithic history, French and Breton history, the history of the island's architecture, religion, owners, and economy. I like to read novel series, like Hilary Mantel's *Cromwell* trilogy, or Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*. I have a fondness for tough swaggering Mexican, Chilean, and North and South American fiction—Raymond Chandler, Paco Ignacio Taibo, Dashiell Hammett, Cormac McCarthy, Roberto Bolaño, Luis Sepúlveda. Perhaps to make up for all the testosterone, I am a lifelong fan of Jane Austen, Margaret Atwood, and Laurie Colwin; nor am I averse to a spiritual book like Dani Shapiro's *Devotion* or Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain*, a travel book by Robert Louis Stevenson or Paul Theroux, a trial of the soul story like Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*. Military history and accounts of war and battle interest me; some science fiction clears the bar.

How would you describe your writing style in one word?

Wry and witty.

What is the most challenging part of being a writer?

To say this may sound a little depressing at first, but the biggest challenge is making a living. During the decades I was working on getting better as a writer, challenging myself in so many ways, I was also making a decent living as a magazine editor and journalist. The two disciplines had good overlap. Now journalism is practically dead as a paying profession and, at age 62, I'm scratching. But here's the thing: the collapse of the economy in 2009 forced "free" time on me that I used profitably, to write *The French House*, which I feel is a true advance in my writing—the book I was born to write. It has also not gone unnoticed that scraping by to do something meaningful can also describe our process in renovating The French House. I guess struggle is a condition for a well-lived life.

Which person in the book (outside of your family) do you feel most closely connected to?

This would be a toss-up between all our friends in the village and in other villages were it not for the towering presence of Gwened Guedel, the woman who lured us here, perhaps conned us (not maliciously) into buying the ruin, certainly challenged us to finish it, and filled our heads and hearts with rules for living deeply, fully, and always with sensitivity to our environment and our fellow islanders.



## READING GROUP GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. In the story's "Instructions on Opening the House" it becomes clear this is not exactly a luxury situation that you, the reader/visitor, are getting into. How did this make you feel? Have you ever stayed in a resort, a rental, or friend's vacation home that was less than you bargained for or expected? How did you react? Were there compensations in the culture, the natural beauty, or the activities there that made up for this?
2. Don and Mindy started off with almost nothing and admit they were living paycheck to paycheck when they began to consider buying the house. What kind of people do they seem like, and what sort of partnership do they have? Have you ever been in a situation like this where an adventure and its risks beckon you and/or a partner? What did you decide to do and would you have made a different choice in retrospect?
3. How did Don and Mindy first "make citron pressé" with their lemon of a house? What did they do to find the silver lining in a rather unfortunate situation?
4. The Wallaces seem to blunder in their first encounters to befriend Madame Morgane, the matriarch of the village. They try to make things right by buying unpasteurized butter and eggs that might be contaminated by salmonella to show her how much they want to assimilate. How much of a risk do you think they took and do you think it was worth it or could they have done something else?
5. When visiting Madame Morgane at night, Don is mistaken for a German by her old father, who ignores him. Madame Morgane's mother stays hidden in her cupboard bed. Why do both elderly islanders fear and resent the idea of a German when WWII is at least three decades in the past? What do you think the occupation still signifies to them?
6. On a walk down a valley to the beach, Mindy and Don run into Dede, a cowherd, and his cows. On the return trip, Dede proposes to Mindy and seems to encourage his cows to cut Don away from Mindy. Is this a harmless maneuver? Are Dede's intentions honorable, from our point of view, or is he harassing the Wallaces? How about from his point of view?
7. Seven years is a long time to buy a house and not occupy it. Do you think they made the right choice to see the process through? Or do you think they should have cut their losses and sold the house, and if so, how do you think this might have affected them, their marriage, and their dreams?





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8. The parental pressures on Don and Mindy seem to have reinforced their impulse buy of a house far away from their hometowns. Do you think going away—whether short-term, like going away to college, or longer—can help manage a stressful family relationship?
9. The powerful French woman who befriends Don and Mindy, Gwened Guedel, delays telling Don some very important information about herself until after he has signed the sale papers. How shocked were you by this—how would you score it on a scale of 1-10 in terms of a betrayal? Did you ever “like” Gwened again? If so, why did you forgive her for the deception?
10. The village welcome to the American couple is not all that warm, at least from certain people. The Wallaces lose a well and a road and their rose bush is killed, deliberately it seems. Given this difficult or even hostile relationship, are the Wallaces deluding themselves about how they fit in and are regarded? Are there ways you think they could have mastered the village’s mostly unwritten laws and culture or do you think they handled it well?
11. Do you think *The French House* represented something deeper to the Wallaces that they didn’t quite recognize? Did it replace or fix something that was missing in their lives? If so, what do you think it was?
12. Having read *The French House*, would you feel emboldened to follow through if a new opportunity to buy an overseas property presented itself or embark on some other adventure, despite the obvious risks? What would make you decide to do it or not? Are there some helpful tips and practical advice in the book that might prepare you for the details and psychological issues of living in a foreign country?

