

Nicole Ward-Jouve grew up in Marseille, and taught literature at York University (as well as Paris, Edmonton, Canada and UMass, UK). Among her published works are Shades of Grey (short stories), The Streetcleaner: The Yorkshire Ripper Case On Trial (essay), and most recently Female Genesis: Creativity, Self and Gender (Polity Press). She writes in English and French.

Birth of the Euro



31st December 01; countryside, near Aix-en Provence

Fabius – the Finance minister – has been interviewed on the News, looking smoothly confident that the change from francs to Euro tomorrow will go well. He also expressed full confidence in the patriotism of the Bank clerks who are threatening to strike on 2nd January, the very first day when the French will be confronted with the new currency (1 January being a Bank holiday). He may be over-optimistic. Striking is one of the French “rites of spring” and - this year - spring is early: the medical profession is already on strike.

At coffee time my brother shows us his Euro kit. 100 francs worth of Euro coins in a transparent plastic holder, all gleaming and tinkling. Everyone but me seems to have got one. They’ve been on sale everywhere but now cannot be found for love or money. My friend A. says they’ve become collectable and are now selling for 600 francs. She bought three and is keeping two, on spec. So I did not dare ask if she’d sell me one...

My mother and I inspect the coins. I am pleasantly surprised; they’re pretty. Much care has gone into differentiating them. No edge is the same; some are thick, some thin and with diversely spaced grooves; to help the blind? The decimals are brass coloured, the units copper, the ones and twos silver circled with gold. They’re light, small, they slide pleasantly. They feel more substantial, more fun than I thought they could; minute masks of “Marianne” on the copper cents, floating in space like Venetian masks. The “Sower”, republican and muscular, on the brass decimals. A rather fine stylised Tree of “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité” on the 1 and 2 euro coins. On the tails side, tiny maps of Europe.

1st January 02

Stayed at home with my mother. The evening news show merrymakers in Paris, but also in Rome and Madrid, going to cash points at midnight on the dot and taking their first Euro notes out. They all sound very excited. It moves me suddenly to think that over 200 million of us all, in Germany and Greece and Ireland and ... are going to have the same banknotes, the same coins in our pockets, purses,

lives... Makes me feel friendly, as if for the first time the word *Europe* meant something concrete. Jospin is filmed surrounded by a big crowd, going to the "boulangerie" to buy a loaf of rye bread and proudly pulling out his Euro coins. He gets it wrong in view of all the cameras, pretends he hasn't. Pity he did not turn his oh so understandable mistake into a joke ("Damn. See, how easy it is to get mixed up? But we'll all get it eventually"). That would have been leadership for you. We need a bit of encouragement.

2nd January ; Marseilles

Still haven't got any Euro. The banks are on strike, surprise, surprise. But we've got till the 17th February to use francs alongside Euro. Poor Germans, who've got to do it all on the day. I pay for *Le Monde* in francs. 7 francs 90. The lady at the kiosk gives me back my change in francs. Too complicated to do it in Euro. She says she's keening to go home and to bed. It's been a fiendish day, what with some paying in Euro, others in francs, change all mixed up.

3rd January; Paris

At last I get change in Euro. I put the coins in a special purse.

I could not get Euro in Great Britain when I left on 20 December. My stay in France was going to be a good six weeks this time, so I changed £1000 and got 10,000 francs. I've still got most. So I go to the Post Office. There is the longest queue I have ever seen. A notice says, "when the queue reaches this notice there is a one-hour wait." It has. So I go to a smaller post branch in a back street. The queue is big, but bearable. An old lady in a muddle is driving a clerk crazy. Other clerks come to her help, the queue does not move forward, everybody gets talking, grumbling or being philosophical. Good fun. Parisians normally ignore each other. When my turn finally comes the clerk explains he can only change 1,000 francs, it's the rule, with the banks closed there's been such a rush on Euro they've had to put a ceiling on changes. Still, I've got my first Euro notes. They feel a bit like Monopoly money; not for real. But with their shimmering silver strip they also look quite fun.

8th January

Still haven't been able to change my francs, so I keep paying in francs and getting Euro change. The bank would not help; I have to put the francs into my account, then get Euro out. Too complicated. The queues at the Post offices continue to be huge. Like the queues at the bakers'. The cashiers look like women drowning. Such a lot of small change, and giving back the tiny Euro coins when people are getting rid of notes in francs produces the most fiendish sums. A baguette has moved from being worth 4 francs, a tidy clear sum, to 0,61 Euro... People moan about the weight of change in their purses, pour it into their palm and offer the gleaming mass to the shopkeeper who selects the right coins. I calculate, counting on my fingers; there are eight Euro or cents coins when there were nine franc or centimes coins. Why do we have the impression there are so many more? Because of the fiendish rate of exchange (1 Euro = 6,55961 francs...), so that Euro prices are full of cents? The sales will be on tomorrow: some shops have four prices (old one in francs, new one also in francs, and both old and new in Euro) – others simply francs, yet others only Euro... It is hard to know what things are worth. I tell

myself that Euro are like dollars, worth just a bit less... After all, they did peg the Euro to the dollar, even though it's lost about 10% of its value since then. But it does not work for me, thinking in dollars in France, though I've done it in Bulgaria or Turkey... Calculations are laborious. To convert francs, you add half and divide by 2; 100 francs + 50 divided by 10 = 15 Euro. To convert Euro back into francs I roughly multiply by 7, the official change being mind boggling. Fortunately, *Le Monde* is a tidy 1,20 Euro.

I am moved by an article by Bertrand Poirot-Delpech. He mourns the passing of the old notes. He bewails the hygienic, washed out, rootless quality of the new ones, with their streamlined, modernistic buildings and their futuristic bridges. He eloquently, angrily denounces the design of each banknote, from the 10 to the 200 and the 500 – not that we'll see many of those, each worth about 350 quid. Suddenly everything falls into place for me. *We are going through something huge*. A change fit for a new century, perhaps even a new millennium. We have been given plenty of practical advice - we've all received booklets from banks and the finance ministry illustrating the new money, explaining the conversion rates, politicians and little girls in TV ads have made all sorts of cheering noises, but we have been given no psychological preparation. It is a death. The death of a currency, of a means of exchange and communication between citizens, with all that this symbolises in terms of nationhood. This ought to have been acknowledged. There ought to have been a ritual – to help us with mourning the passing away of a huge icon.

So I decide that I am going to have the ritual, that I need it: that is why I haven't been able to change my francs so far. I light a candle, I concentrate. I remind myself that francs were created 700 years ago, by a French king whose name I have of course forgotten. That is a long time. And I loved the word. Franc: free. "Liberté". Ronsard in the sonnet on his deathbed, ready to be "Franc des liens du corps pour n'être qu'un esprit". Franc: frank, honest. Franc: France. Centuries of patriotism rolled into one noun. "'Tis gone 'tis gone...". Then I start looking at the French banknotes. I had forgotten how they represented famous French men and women: scientists (Pierre and Marie Curie) inventors (Gustave Eiffel) artists (Delacroix) writers (Saint-Exupéry, the air pilot, the author of *The Little Prince*). It was a very decent view of what makes a civilisation. It celebrated the more intellectual or spiritual aspects of the past, rather than statesmen or battles. I liked that. Now "'Tis gone". It makes me sad. I also recall some of the countless things French money has meant to me over my long life; the pleasure of getting French currency every time I returned home, the sense that it was already the feel of home. The things, food, travel, clothes, presents I bought with it. The access it gave me to exhibitions, plays, films, markets. I thank life for it all. But now I cannot hold it back. I have to bless it and let it go. Nothing new can come about unless we allow the old to die, painful as that is. It is a new century. It moves me to have discovered that one can do such a thing with money. It always seemed ungodly before. I'll have to have a similar ceremony with the Euro notes. It now occurs to me that there is something beautiful about them too. Arches, Romanesque or Gothic, but also a Greek portico, a Roman aquaduct, bridges... symbols of union, of communication, mementoes of our common past, Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages... I think of Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. We're being given a clean bill for the future. It may be a dream, but it's a fine one. Nothing wrong with castles in the air as long as one puts foundations under them.

17th January

I did take my francs to the post office and put them into my account. I said to the clerk, "isn't it sad to know they are going to punch two holes in these notes, then take them to a place to be shredded?" She agreed. She also laughed: "and do you know, there still are burglars to steal them from the vans and try to circulate them with their holes?" I think of the thousands of vans in Europe, ferrying huge amounts of old and new currencies, invisible to most of us... Of all the pasts disappearing materially in the pulping of paper.

I now have no francs left.

I meet up with my mother who has come for the day. We have tea with two of my nephews. We discuss the Euro, the speed with which francs have disappeared. You now feel eccentric, antediluvian, almost guilty if you pay in francs. I say something "positive" (good old me!) about the new notes with their arches and bridges. My mother says, "why do you think they have put an American suppository in the transparency of the 20 Euro notes?" And I thought it was a broken arch... American (and I think English) suppositories are pointed, whilst French ones are rounded... I am left speechless.

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