

Flirting with French

By William Alexander

Algonquin, 226 pages, \$23.95



Mr. Alexander is a bit of a Walter Mitty who's developed an expertise at playing the novice. His first book, "The \$64 Tomato," chronicled his misadventures as an amateur gardener. Next, in "52 Loaves," he reported his experiences as a hobbyist baker, going so far as to grow his own wheat. Now, in "Flirting with French," he discovers that learning a language late in life is as difficult as an uphill climb on the Tour de France.

Mr. Alexander tries to become fluent in French by using interactive software from Rosetta Stone. "Unfortunately," he concludes, "the resulting effect is less 'you are there' than 'first-person-shooter video game.'" So, over the course of a year, he tries to sharpen his French by biking around Brittany (a mistranslation gets him lost) and watching a dreadful sitcom from Quebec (he deems it worse than "Three's Company"). In a bid to inhabit French culture, he even makes croissants through a video tutorial from Julia Child, during which Child pants not from passion, but exhaustion. "About as easy as learning French," he quips to his wife.

As Mr. Alexander strives to speak like Maurice Chevalier, he's forced to reconcile romantic impulse with reality. This is the man, after all, who once attempted French in a Paris eatery and ended up saying, "I'll have the ham in newspaper, and my son will have my daughter." But despite these comic setbacks, Mr. Alexander's tone remains one of wonder rather than resignation: "The hush of dawn at a medieval monastery, for a magical ten minutes perhaps the most beautiful spot anywhere on earth, as the Norman mist vaporizes before my eyes, lifting its veil from rows of sunlit apple and pear trees, their ripe fruit awaiting the attention of a monk's hands and a chef's knife." If only he could render that as beautifully in French.

The problem with achieving fluency, as several experts explain and research shows, is that Mr. Alexander is 57 when he starts his quest. Younger minds seem much more adaptable to a new language, and this flexibility appears to decline fairly rapidly as the birthdays pile up. Early on in the book, Mr. Alexander hears one linguist at a conference warn "that only 'a tiny, tiny minority' of postadolescent students will ever achieve near-native proficiency in a foreign language, and *none* will attain native proficiency."

Despite the long odds, the author soldiers on. His quixotic resolve to transcend his inherent incompetence recalls the participatory journalism of George Plimpton, the lanky patrician whose unlikely stints in football and boxing lent nobility to failure. Like Plimpton, Mr. Alexander presents himself as an apprentice, but the reader quickly discovers he is also a master teacher.

A lively chapter on the origins of French traces its mingling with English, a marriage that inspired such redundancies as "cease and desist," which used both the English and French forms of the same word in a bilingual nod to Englishmen conquered by Normans. The English word "curfew," we learn, comes from the French *couvre-feu*, "the time when everyone must cover his fire." Mr. Alexander even manages a highly readable gloss of Noam Chomsky's linguistic theory, a feat of intellectual distillation akin to "Jacques Derrida for Dummies."

Like the author's halting efforts to master a new language, "Flirting with French" isn't without flaws. A side plot about the author's treatment for cardiac problems seems tangential, as if it were included to beef up the page count. But if the book betrays occasional imperfections, the author makes the point that learning to accept the less-than-perfect can be a gift of middle age. "Even as French has eluded me, my ardor for the language has only grown," he writes. "I love, and will always love, French. Whether it loves me back, I have no control over."

—Mr. Heitman is a columnist for the Advocate newspaper in Louisiana.