



A Breath of French Air

H.E. Bates

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‘I should like to go to France,’ said Ma.

‘God Almighty,’ Pop said. ‘What for?’

‘For a holiday of course,’ Ma said. ‘I think it would do us all good to get some sun.’

And so at the end of a rainy English August the Larkins – all ten of them, including little Oscar, the family’s new addition – bundle into the old Rolls and cross the Channel to escape the hostile elements.

But far from being the balmy, sunny and perfick spot Ma Larkin hoped for, France proves less than welcoming to an eccentric English family. The tea’s weak, the furniture breakable and the hotel manager is almost as hostile as the wind and the rain they’ve brought with them! And when the manager learns that Ma and Pop are unmarried yet sharing a room under his roof, the trouble really begins...

A Breath of French Air Details

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Camilla Tilly says

Before I read this second novel in Herbert E Bates five book series about Pop Larkin and his family, I did the mistake of watching the DVD with the entire TV series from the early 1990s. The TV series was alright but when reading this second novel in the series, I realised that the TV series doesn't by half measure up. Bates has an extraordinary language! It is a true delight to read his description of places and people that is totally lost in the TV series. My recommendation would really be to stay away from the TV series unless one just is looking for a cozy fun series to watch on a cold winter night. Otherwise just stick to the books, they do not need to be visualised by Catherine Zeta-Jones and the like.

This second novel in the series, start out with Mr. Charlton sitting reading about France and reminiscing about his childhood summers in Bretagne and the fantastic hotel he had stayed in there. Since the summer has rained away, Ma starts wishing for a holiday, beaches and sun, so she listens carefully to Charley's rantings. Before he knows it, Pop has been persuaded to take the entire family to Bretagne and to the same hotel Charley stayed in as a boy before the war. Charley and Mariette Larkin has by now been married for a year and Pop is deeply disappointed that they have not produced a grandchild so he feels that a vacation in France might do the trick and decides that they will go for an entire month.

When the family arrive, the hotel is not so grand anymore nor as big as Charley remembered it. And the weather is ghastly for three days so that the family is close to returning home. Not only does Larkin's state of unwed couple meet with disapproval at the hotel, but Ma's body size and all the seven children as well.

Because Ma has had a new addition during the year that has gone between the first book and the second.

When the hotel owner starts thinking that Pop might be aristocracy, everything improves for the family and they get some wonderful memories to bring home.

The book is hilarious at places like when a jealous Charley get very drunk and runs around on the beach puncturing all beach balls so that the "froggies" can't throw them Mariette's way and flirt with her.

Pop Larkin's admiration for the fairer sex can get a little tedious to read about but luckily he has a very understanding "wife" and if she can accept his gazing, so must I as a reader. All in all, it is a fun book to read and as "shocking" as the first one since this is a very eccentric family. One ought to read them in order though since the build on each other.

Lisa says

As wonderful as the British TV series!

Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says

This was OK, but just OK. The Larkins are displeased with life in general during a rainy summer, until Mariette's husband of one year begins to rhapsodise about his childhood holidays in France. Except he probably went there in July or August, and the Larkins spend the month of September in a coastal town, unaware of the abrupt changes in climate France is famous for on the cusp of the seasons.

Very much a period piece, this book satirises the typical English tourist of the sixties, seventies and even part of the eighties who wanted the Mediterranean climate of sun, sea and sand--but also wanted everything else

to be just like home: English food, English newspapers, English spoken everywhere. Pa Larkin picks up a word and a phrase here and there and figures he's "fluent" in French, and the whole family sits and criticises the people, the food, the fashions because hey--they're not like England. Then there's the horsefaced English woman who's a member of the slap-leather set and spends her summer going what she fondly imagines to be "native" (blissfully unaware that the real natives probably mock her behind her back every time they meet), and her strait-laced sister who discovers the other Summer Holiday S--sexual dalliance. Ah yes, we remember it well; my OH was a travel agent in S. Spain all his working life and we still live here, given that he was born here and I've lived here most of my life.

So far so sixties, but it doesn't quite work. Partly because they're not in the comfy cosy surroundings of home, partly because Ma is relegated to the background unless she's breastfeeding the latest Larkin--and that's where the biggest "but" arises. I got very tired of the constant sexualisation of the breastfeeding biz and everything else. I have no problem with women who breastfeed in public, that's what breasts are for, after all--but why did Bates feel he had to use sexual language to describe the beachfront, the sea, or whatever? Tiresome, and it shows a lack of range. True to "comedy" fiction/movies/TV of a certain type in the 50s and 60s, dirty-old-man-ism is presented as "funny", as Pa puts his amorous moves on any female within reach and roars with laughter at their reactions...and fictionally enough, none of them seems to mind it a bit. Yeah right. Because we *all* want some middle-aged berk kissing us or feeling us up whenever the mood takes him, and then ridiculing us, don't we, girls? *Ugh*. And Ma just chortles and eggs him on in the background--probably glad to get a break from his attentions and palavering. But even more "ugh" is when he notices and practically slavers over the physical development and beauty *of his own daughters*. Including Primrose, who is--rising 12?? Per-lease. *Definitely* not funny.

I also found it hard to believe that they could just leave eleven-and-a-bit year old Primrose behind, no passport, no money, no nothing, and no repercussions. That would last until school opened--and then what?

Not Bates' best work.

An Odd1 says

<https://www.goodreads.com/photo/user/...> back cover

The fun is the boisterous conviviality and relaxed joy in traditional "sins". Ma 36 p 15 hankers for France, heat. Pop wants grandkids. So all ten Larkins flee their beloved junkyard England home in chilly wet August. Son-in-law "Charley" Charleton primes all with *bon mots phrases a bientôt* from his childhood remembered sunny seaside, drunkenly bursts beachballs athletic suitors "float towards .. every five minutes" p 73" his topless tanning new wife Marriette. Air is first stormy cold, tea straw-color weak, food tough, beef outside "charred .. [bloody] icy blue inside" p 81, bills overpriced "breathing charge" p 83.

Ma's jolly bouncing bulk nurses newborn Oscar, squashes wicker chair, advises Pop "equal shares" p 182 among admirers, "variety" including elegant silk and cashmere clad Angela Snow, and custom sews her own bikinis. Pop admires landlady Mlle Dupont for black corset and Lily of the Valley *muguet*-scent. She notes Pop's bachelor passport and calls him "milord" for fancy monogrammed Rolls Royce, eccentricities. Attentive "golden and aristocratic" p 89 Angela encourages her to ask him about "his home is his castle" p 120.

French women and children are pallid, unkempt, spotty, unfeminine sticks, far from fashionable. Servers are

"unclean, uncut .. belly both hairy and sweaty" p 80 rude, filthy, far from cultured. Pokes fun at "très snob" p 81. Then Exaggerated "young men .. magnificent .. tall, athletic, bronzed and lissom. Innumerable protruding knots of muscle .. hair was always perfectly crimped and waved ..middles wore nothing but skin-tight pudding bags tied with string .. tirelessly exercising" p 70.

Get drunk, amorous, and embrace physical pleasures. Pop concocts cocktails, improves "innocuous" looking punch, so everyone enjoys final "delectable" p 130 feast, 29 Aug Charley and Mariette's first anniversary festivities. Angela nearly kisses heads shorter hotel clerk Mr Mollett "bang in the center of the forehead" p 148, but "for keeps" p 150 Pop instead. Her strict preachy sister Iris, diet of anchovy paste on dry toast, claims "France is my mecca. Everything .. adored .. its food" p 143. On the moonlit beach, she "surrendered gladly" p 145. X-rating for topic, not delivery.

Book ends with feeding "a wide handsome spread of maternal bosom exposed, ready to give Ma decides to christen "Oscar Columbus Septimus Dupont Larkin a little drop of the best" p 159. Invited to attend christening as godmother, Mlle Dupont does, I remember. Precocious Primrose 11 stays with "boyfriend" Marc-Antoine 12 p 137. Re-reading Larkin may be saturated to excess.

Bree T says

A year has passed since the conclusion of *The Darling Buds of May* and Pop and Ma Larkin have added baby Oscar to their family, Charley and Mariette are now married (but no bun in the oven or little one for them yet) but otherwise the family remains the same as ever. Ma is depressed by the summer rains though and when Charley sees a little piece on France in the newspaper, he's reminded of the summers he spent there as a child and how deliciously warm and sunny it was. Ma is immediately interested and tells Pop that she wants to go to France for a lovely holiday, the whole family. Pop is a bit startled but after a bit of language instruction from Charley, he's on board.

Once they arrive in France though, all is not as they thought it would be. For a start, it's literally pouring with rain. The hotel isn't as Charley remembers it either, more run down and shabby. The food also isn't quite in the volume or to the taste that the boisterous Larkin family is used to, with their voracious appetites. The hotel also has a little problem with Pop and Ma travelling on passports in different names, given they're not actually married. Luckily Pop's charm is able to get them out of that little problem!

A Breath of French Air is the next novel in the series after *The Darling Buds of May* and I was very much looking forward to reading it, having enjoyed the first one so much. Very different to books I'm usually drawn to and if I didn't have to read *The Darling Buds of May* for an online book club I'd never have read it of my own accord.

Unfortunately, I didn't enjoy this one anywhere near as much as the first one. I've never been to France so I know little about it, but it is well lauded for its food, culture and tourist spots so it was interesting to read a book that seemed to portray most of that so negatively. I know it's English, and written in the early 60s, and I'm assuming it's very tongue-in-cheek, given the whole first book is pretty much tongue-in-cheek but I felt this one lacked the fresh and charming humour of the first. I'm not sure if this series is just a one trick pony or if this book is just something that didn't sit particularly well with me personally. There were flashes of good fun, but for a 137p book, quite a bit of it did drag. Weirdly, there's a lot of obsession with breasts here, particularly Ma's as she's breastfeeding baby Oscar in this novel and we get this described to us in glorious technicolour detail many many times with the focus being on describing her breasts rather than the feeding

itself. Then we get descriptions of Mariette's breasts and even Pa noticing that their 11yo daughter is developing as well.

As in the first, this one is rich with description and characterisation, the story just fell flat for me.

Emma Dargue says

Good little slice of life of the 1950s rural scene in the country. Liked this book but didn't like it as much as the book that precedes this one. The format I listened to them in which was an audible audiobook and because the length of the novels you can easily read/listen to one in a day. Phillip Franks does an excellent job narrating and I look forward to reading the next in the series.

Francis Pellow says

Enjoyable sequel to the Darling Buds of May. Perhaps a little too focused on Pop and not giving the other family members a chance to shine.

Sonia Gomes says

I do not think I enjoyed the sequel as much as I did 'The darling buds of May'.

You just cannot drag humour if there is no plot, 'The darling buds of May' had no plot but it was really enjoyable because of its descriptions of the British countryside, the delectable food, the jobs the young ones did to make money and all sorts of things so new to me. 'A breath of French air' cannot sustain as here the tremendous lack of plot shows and the book just disintegrates as a badly cooked souffle.

janetandjohn says

This is the second in the series of lovely, cheerful books about a larger than life family, The Larkins. It follows The Darling Buds of May. If you wanted to be cheered up, or wanted to fit in a short read between heavier tomes, these little novellas may be just the thing. The entire family love food and drink, and on their first holiday to France find that things are not to their liking (until they ask Alphonse the chef to provide some roast beef and Yorkshire pudding!) Various alcoholic beverages lead to unexpected pairings, and all in all the Larkins enjoy their time in France. Lovely.

Regina says

The second book of the series which starts with "The Darling Buds of May". You need to read these in order and you need to be very politically incorrect to enjoy the humor. I really find them funny - I am sorry to say! The description of the French resort in the middle of a storm with everyone filling up on "guillotined" bread for all they were worth was a riot - really. Give them a try.

June Louise says

"Inside the cafe Pop found himself to be the only customer. Presently a waiter who looked as if he had been awake all night and was now preparing to sleep all day came and stood beside his table. 'M'sieu?' 'Three boiled eggs,' Pop said. 'Soft'. 'Comment?' Thanks to Mr Charlton, Pop knew what this meant. 'Soft,' He held up three fingers. 'Three. Trois. Soft boiled.' 'Ex?' 'Yes, old boy,' Pop said/ 'Oui'. With his forefinger he described what he thought were a few helpful circles in the air and at this, he felt, the waiter seemed to understand. In a sort of ruminating daze he went away, muttering 'Ex' several times. Two minutes later he came back to bring Pop a large treble brandy. 'Ca va?' he said and Pop could only nod his head in mute, melancholy acquiescence, deeply regretting that among the French words Mr Charlton had taught him there had so far been none relating to drink and food. It was an omission that would have to be remedied pretty soon."

A Breath of French Air sees the Larkin family deciding to take a holiday in France (surprise surprise!) in their Rolls Royce. But, as with many of the things that happen to the Larkins, things don't turn out **quite** as they expect. Pop has to learn French, the hotel is uneasy putting up Pop and Ma when they are not married, Ma gets stuck in a chair, the weather is not as ideal as they would have liked, the food is awful and the coffee pots need a hammering in order to pour properly. But as the holiday progresses, things improve - Pop sweet-talks Mademoiselle Dupont, Angela Snow AND her sister Iris; and Charley and Mariette celebrate their first wedding anniversary with a party.

It's a fun, light, comic book to read - especially on holiday!

Tracy says

What can I say

This is just as great as the first . Everything word I read I can hear the voice of each character (cause of watching the show) every thing really comes to life . Great book looking forward to the rest

Beth Bonini says

This is a silly book, but it's a joyous romp - or 'lark' as Pa Larkin would have it. When a wet July - 'a real thick 'un'- starts getting Ma down, the Larkin's new son-in-law begins reminiscing about his childhood holidays in France. Next thing you know, a whole crew of Larkins (all of those daughters with floral names plus baby Oscar) are crammed into the Rolls Royce and heading for their first foreign holiday. Their first encounter with Beau Rivage is pretty grim, but soon Pa Larkin has them all drinking English punch, eating roast beef and abandoning that French pose for a rollicking good time.

This is the sequel to *The Darling Buds of May*.

Nickki says

Loved it! The descriptive writing makes me feel that I am there with them

Loved it. Fantastic descriptive writing that makes me feel that I am there too! The characters just come to life

Marg says

Some of the same things that were charming in the first volume were not quite so when you take the Larkin's out of their natural environment
