



A Life of Her Own: The Transformation of a Countrywoman in 20th-Century France

Emilie Carles, Robert Destanque, Avriel H. Goldberger (Translator)

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First published in France in 1977, this autobiography vivifies the captivating Carles from her peasant origins in a tiny Alpine village through her work as a teacher, farmer, mother, feminist and political activist.

A Life of Her Own: The Transformation of a Countrywoman in 20th-Century France Details

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Sierra Wilson says

Very interesting. This book provides an excellent look at the impact of WWI and WWII on common people. The book is set in rural France and shows the devastation of war. However, it also shows the strength simple people can have when united. Other themes touched on include: the role of a teacher, pacifism, politics, gender roles, and more. Sometimes the book may seem biased. Just keep in mind that it is one woman's life and outlook. This is a chance to look at an eventful slice of history through the eyes of a woman who lived it! I read this book in a European history class and would recommend it!

Alex says

"You pass sentence onto yourself. I say you have the right to a life of your own," the author's husband says to her.

The book is interesting. I read it for a history class: European Social History in the 1900s. Carles offers a cool perspective, as she lived in the same small valley just about her whole life, riding the waves of WWI, WWII, and too many personal destinations to count. Her life begins harshly. The most telling story is where she fell from the 2nd story balcony at age 7, almost died, and her father seemed to brush it off as a non-issue. Today, that seems ridiculous; but therein lies the interest in the book: it portrays the changing social and economic attitudes in Europe throughout the 20th century. Pre-WWI, to a peasant, the death of a child wasn't apocalyptic. You still had to get up early and work the next day to feed your family.

Her viewpoints, although I don't agree with many of them, are interesting as well. She comes off as bitter towards war, the gov't, and authority in general, but weighing her personal experiences with them, it's almost understandable. It's also reflective of the growing sense of modernity and liberty in the 20th century France. Political movements gained momentum, and Carles' perspective was that of an anarchists'.

Overall, this book was much more interesting than I thought it would be.

Charles says

Une Soupe aux herbes sauvages immediately became a best-seller in France, according to the Introduction to this edition, and in the original French and translations into Italian and German in much of the rest of Europe. It was republished in a "definitive edition" in Paris in 1988 (Éditions Robert Laffont). Yet this English translation didn't appear until 1991, and then in a university press listing, not under a commercial imprint.

Not hard to guess why. The author's tone careens from the colloquial to the philosophical; you can't be sure whether you're reading fiction or history; the structure; much of the content is in the context of French peasantry, local politics, and the curious French elementary educational system which has for nearly two centuries had the overriding motives of impressing centrist and secular values along with a modicum of

literacy on children too often prepared with nothing but prejudice and localism by their parents.

Carles was born in 1900, and lived her nearly eighty years in the Alpine valley village where she was born: Val-des-Prés, on the scintillating Clarée river, a good day's walk north of Briançon. She spent short periods in Paris in school, and was assigned briefly to other villages in the Maurienne near Briançon, but much of the time was allowed to teach in the school where she herself had learned to read, the only one of her five surviving siblings to take it up with pleasure and continue it after the short *école maternelle* (elementary school) curriculum — basically, as few years as you could possibly contrive. It was, after all, a peasant life. One doesn't know if her mother read — she could hardly have had time to, with the children, the fields, the cooking, the household, and the early death, struck by lightning while haying, when Carles was four years old. Her father learned to read in his old age.

A marvelous preface opens the book, a lyrical, thoughtful page or two describing the setting:

The Clarée, that river blessed by the gods, runs by at my feet. Through the branches of the trees, I can make out the clear undulating waters, constantly shifting in color and intensity: tumultuous, calm, roaring, or monotonously quiet. All around me, birds are singing. I speak to them and they answer, and I arrogantly take this concert in as if it were meant for me alone. They are singing a hymn to the sun, the one Rostand speaks of in these words: "Oh sun, though without whom things would not be what they are." ... Right before my eyes is the most beautiful place on earth.

I quote this at length, because it exactly matches my experience an hour or two's walk downstream, at Plampinet, hardly more than a month ago. It is still a remarkable paradise, at least if no thunderbolts threaten; and that it has remained so is in fact to a great extent Carles's own work.

Her book is arranged chronologically but artfully spun, leaving clarifications and fuller contextualizations of events seen in childhood, for example, to later in the book, when a richer accumulation of experience reveals relationships and motivations a child would not suspect. In the same way, the patient reader discovers the complex ramifications of the deceptively simple life of a *paysan*.

Private moments, intimate family moments, and public life are similarly juxtaposed. We see her improbable yet utterly credible meeting, in a railway coach, with her future husband, eleven years her senior — a freethinking bachelor exactly suited to her independent intelligence.

The narrative comprises both World Wars and the Depression between them, poignantly describing their effects on both her valley and the national temperament. Throughout those years Carles continued to teach, almost exclusively in small one-room schools, and to participate in the community, often negotiating villagers's resistance to her commonsense charity and political skepticism, generally prevailing through her obvious goodness of heart — about which she is modest! — and her dedication to work.

The life she describes will strike most readers today as incredibly restricted, devoid of comfort and entertainment, and hard. But between the lines of her book lies a persuasive hymn to frugality, generosity, tolerance, and dedication to the pleasures and the obligations of daily life. *A Life of Her Own* goes on my bookshelves next to Gillian Tindall's *Célestine* and Pierre-Jakez Helias's *The Horse of Pride*, Laurence Wylie's *Village in the Vaucluse* and John Berger's *Pig Earth*. These are books about *terroir*, but also about humanity. It seems to me they are particularly apposite at the present moment.

Cee Bee says

An astonishing and discerning account of independence, courage and perseverance amidst the harshness of peasant life in the High Alps of South-eastern France. Set against the background of the catastrophic upheavals of the 20th century and speaking with refreshing honesty and grace, Émilie (Allais) Carles reminds us of what is truly important in life. Inspirational!

Elisse says

surprisingly good for a book I had to read for class. Carles is an interesting woman with very intense memories and ideals. One can tell from reading it that she was very strongly influenced by her pacifist and much older husband (but who isn't influenced by their spouse) and that tends to make me wonder what her views on life were without his mixed in. It is a wonderful portrayal of rural life in France during the two World Wars. I was interested to learn the impact of these huge world events on peasant people.

Anne Makin says

Loved this book an absolutely delightful read about life in provincial France and one amazing girls journey to adult hood. Not what I would normally read but loved this.

Kelsey says

I was not sure whether to give this book three or four stars (simply because some chapters caused her story to drag a bit, in my honest opinion), but I ultimately decided that Emilie Carles's undying strength as a French-peasant-turned-pacifist-and-feminist was basically unheard of during this period. I had to read this for my history course, but it was quite the exciting adventure. With this book I cared for the life of a countrywoman who has already left this world, and has left her wisdom behind for the rest to absorb.

"Let us learn to read, because reading means strengthening our minds through the minds of others, steeping our hearts with feelings that please, and struggling with an author according to whether our ideas and feelings agree with his or diverge. Learn to live by knowing how to live and let live. Never take anything in life but flowers, and from flowers, only the perfume..." (259-260).

Stéphane Vande Ginste says

We waren op vakantie in de Franse Alpen in Le Rosier bij Val-des-Prés: een prachtig dorpje in een wondermooie vallei ("Vallée de la Clarée") vlakbij Briançon. Naast de verplichte toeristische folders, in ons vakantiehuisje, lag een boekje, "livre de poche", met op de voorflap een ouwe dame en met de titel hierboven. Ik bladerde er eerst wat in, in de mening dat dit een banaal stationromanjetje was en legde het terug om er niet meer naar te kijken.

Tot ik ergens iets over die Madame Carles las.. ze bleek hier vlakbij gewoond te hebben, was hier heel haar leven boerin én onderwijzeres... Verrast greep ik het boekje terug vast en begon erin te lezen... Fascinerend om te lezen hoe het leven hier was bij de mensen die hier woonden... Een mooie natuur, een idyllisch bergriviertje... allemaal mooie plaatjes, maar het leven van de mensen hier als boer was allesbehalve een mooi plaatje... Dat laat Emilie Carles ons duidelijk voelen. Haar leven was dan ook bijzonder hard. In een naturalistische stijl à-la-Maupassant beschrijft Carles het zware labeur van de boeren... Toen Carles een anarchistische, idealistische man ontmoette, nam haar leven een andere wending. Met een forse energie reageerde ze fel tegen de kuddelementaliteit van de gewone boer. Ze kreeg het zelfs gedaan dat er geen autostrade door die mooie vallei loopt (wat een geluk!!). Een pakkend, emotioneel portret van heel moedige dame.

Laura moffitt says

I loved this book. Emilie shows us what it is to have inner strength and vision. An inspiration for women everywhere written in her unique voice. It reminds me of memoirs my own mother would write capturing country life.

Dianne Oliver says

3.5 Really interesting view into the realities of life in the mountain regions of France in the early 1900's. How harsh and sad it could be, and I believe the pictures in the book reflect that. I often wonder how some people are able to step outside the norms of their time and region, and she gives insight into how, in her and her husbands case, that happened- how she became educated and he, as an avid reader, educated himself. She was much influenced by her husband, and together they tried to live out their convictions. I personally am not of their ilk, humanists and pacifists, and found the final bit of the book less interesting as she expounded on those issues, but can appreciate their honesty as they put it on the table.

Sally says

The simply written autobiography of a courageous woman who grew up in a poor and conservative peasant family in the Hautes Alpes of France in the early twentieth century. Given the unusual gift of higher education, she rebelled against the narrow conventions within which she had been raised, speaking out against patriarchy, chauvinism, nationalism, militarism—even the Catholic Church and its God. She saw it as her role as a longtime schoolteacher in her native valley to shape and broaden the perspectives of the peasant children whom she taught, and nearing death in her mid-seventies, reflected that it was “splendid to leave life with the thought that you have done the maximum possible to defend the ideas you believe just and human, and to help those who need to be helped without discrimination.” An unusual, thoughtful, albeit sometimes naïve, look at life.

Jacqui says

I really enjoyed the tale of Emilie Carles' life as it opened my eyes to the struggle that people went through during the early years of the 20th Century. Within history courses throughout school we are taught events and cause/effects largely based around America, so hearing in detail the life of a women growing up in France during the beginning of the century and onward was extremely riveting. I would have given it higher marks, but seeing as it was a book assigned to me to read, I wasn't able to enjoy it in the same way as I would have if I had pulled it off the shelf on my own. Besides that, I feel the story of Emilie Carles' life as well as her opinions and feelings toward the world hold important lessons and are worth hearing. I highly recommend the book!

Lorraine says

excellent well written book recommend

Linda says

I came upon this title from a reference in the book SYLVIA'S FARM. Am I ever glad I followed up. This is the story of a French peasant woman, born in 1900, who became a teacher. She wrested her education from nuns and in the direst of living circumstances, always going back to her father's farm to work on weekends. She bicycled to her father's farm and worked like the devil, or at least, a peasant. Sycthing wheat, working with dray horses, drawing water, chopping wood. Her living conditions, while she was studying, were also severe. She had many duties after her classes and then had to study late into the night. How she did all this is a miracle. She was a pacifist because of the horrors of World War I, and a leftist, along with her husband, in revolt against conditions of the poor and downtrodden in the peasant communities where she lived. As she grew older, in her 70's she became an activist in the protection of her beloved, bucolic valley in Val-des-Pres and fought commercial forces to build a super highway into the area. She died in 1979, having made a difference.

Lauren McGill says

I'm desperate to visit this little village now! An incredible story (I've since read there is some controversy over whether it was all truth- we sometimes forget we each have our own truth) of Emilie and her life growing up as a peasant farmer, getting her education and fighting to keep her valley simple and pure. I particularly loved her last two pages. What a little gem x
