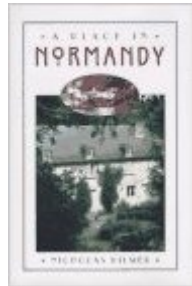




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A Place In Normandy



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Customer Reviews

A Place in Normandy is the story of the author's struggle over whether to retain his grandfather's home in Normandy-, France--a place that evokes enchanted childhood memories--or sell it. The farmhouse was the place where his grandfather, Impressionist painter Frederick Friesseke, created some of his greatest works. (His other grandfather was the poet Joyce Kilmer.) Nicholas Kilmer recalls several days in late spring he spent preparing the house for summer renters. As he considers his wife's arguments for selling the house, he weighs his own attachment to its quaint quirks, the beautiful surrounding countryside and the history and traditions the family home embodies.

What distinguishes this account of the trials and joys of fixing up an old French farmhouse from many others like it is that Kilmer didn't buy the place but inherited it; also three generations of his family spent memorable years in it and in its Norman village of Mesnil, near Pont l'Eveque. Long established, warm relations with the villagers protect Kilmer from regarding them as quaint or exotic. Even more unusual, although he and his wife, Julia, appreciate the excellence of French produce, Kilmer doesn't dwell on the familiar marvels of French cuisine. Instead, while shoring up the neglected place?roof, plumbing, bearing walls, electric wiring?is the impetus for his book, it also becomes an excursion into family history and a meditation on French village life since the 1920s, when his grandfather, American Impressionist painter Frederick Friesseke, bought the house. He traces each generation's structural additions and alterations, the gardens they planted, their parties,

weddings, funerals, communions, crises and pleasures, and the distinctive beauties of the countryside. This quiet book subtly catches the rhythms of life and the flavor of an American family at ease in another culture. Photos. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Nicholas Kilmer is an agile writer and creates a chronicle of the labors with the "House in Normandy" which I believe he still owns. This book is more than the chronicle in that it also involves a treatment of his grandfather, Frederick Freiseke, one of the American Impressionists of some note and lesser acclaimed. Nicholas' parents, founders of the Green Hedges School in Vienna, VA are also involved in the House in Harmony. This is an interesting book that places the house in Normandy as a frontispiece, figuratively, but is interesting because of the people who appear in the narrative. A worthwhile book by the grandson of Joyce Kilmer.

Nick Kilmer's lush, exuberant prose takes the reader through an eventful week, during which, by means of flashbacks and vignettes, we experience his dithering over the purchase of his family's wonderful house in Normandy. He will have two gardens (one in Cambridge and one in Normandy), two roofs that need attention, piles of books and letters and projects and paintings in every stage of finishment, and one wife who cannot say no, and cannot say yes, to this expensive disaster that is his family's ancient home. Pleasantly meandering, we visit stone-age Normandy, the days of the war, the ancient farmer's wife in whose arms (he tells us) his grandfather died, newly baptized (but still staunchly Republican ...) A fine read, growing better with each rereading. Let's have more from this writer.

An excellent and entertaining book.

If Mr. Joyce had written about a house in Normandy he might not have written it this well because of his detachment.

De gustibus non est disputandum, I suppose, but I really don't see why so many reviewers were so enraptured by this book. As a painter as well as a writer, Nicholas Kilmer has a flair for description and a talent for metaphor. But I never felt more than the smallest connection to his Norman home and the train of friends, relatives, tradesmen, and ancestors who marched through it during his few days of residence. More to the point, I left the book without even feeling like I knew much more about Normandy than I did before I arrived. Unlike Peter Mayle's year in Provence, Kilmer's week in

Mesnil seemed to open few doors to a broader understanding of the region and its people. I think the comparison to Mayle is instructive because of the popularity of the foreigner-buys-a-house-in-France genre, lately expanded to Tuscany and other parts of Europe. Though American, Kilmer isn't entirely a foreigner: the house in Mesnil has been in his family for three generations. And so the reader could hope for some insights -- some sense of connection -- deeper even than the fish-out-of-water tropes of the other books. But I didn't get that at all. It felt more like the author's thought process was "People are writing books about houses in France; I have a house in France; therefore I will write a book." Unfortunately, the book turned out to be far more about collapsing bathroom floors and the mystery of the missing silver tray than about a passion for Normandy or even for a house. Does Kilmer really love the place? Or will he buy it from a sense of family obligation? I haven't the slightest idea. I am going to be visiting Normandy in a few weeks, so I hoped this book would form a suitable introduction to the place and the people. Unfortunately, unless I end up standing in the author's upstairs bathroom, I'm afraid this book won't have much relevance at all. And I find that disappointing.

The account of a week in an ancestral Normandy farmhouse is very funny, but it may require some familiarity with neglected French country houses for the reader to get the full effect of Kilmer's predictament. I laughed out loud all the way through this delightful book and enjoyed the writing style which evokes the ambiance of the setting very well. Sensory memory of apple orchards, damp linen sheets, goose poop, old books is magically brought forth in words. I enjoyed the self deprecating narrative of a hapless descendent of a beloved, but eccentric family trying to decide whether to "throw himself (and his own generation) under the wheels of happiness" as Christopher Fry would put it...and take possession of this house and its many stories.

Quite frankly, I wish I hadn't bothered to buy and read this book. I read dozens of travel books each year and this so far is this year's least satisfying. The main story line is an account of four or five extremely boring days the author spent in Normandy trying to decide whether or not to keep a beloved family house. As far as I could tell (though by the end I admit I was skimming the book, desperate to rid myself of it), he and his wife never did come to a decision. The best part of the book were the family photographs and stories. The author's grandfather seems to have been an Impressionist painter of some note and Kilmer's mother spent her childhood in the house in the 1920s. Aside from this period flavor, though, the book didn't seem to do anything well. There were long rambling descriptions of laundry problems. There was an unconvincing cast of characters,

none of whom seemed to have a personality (other than appearing to be generally weird.) The author seemed to have little understand or appreciation for French culture or food. In the end, I had no idea who the author really was, why he was telling the story, or what I was supposed to take from it. I really hate being this critical of a writer's honest effort, but on the other hand, I want to spare others the boredom I just endured. Buy MFK Fisher, Ruth Reichl, Susan Herman-Loomis, Peter Mayle, AJ Liebling, even a Sebastian Faulks novel if you want to read something interesting about France--but don't buy this.

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