



# The Only Street in Paris: Life on the Rue des Martyrs

*Elaine Sciolino*

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**A *New York Times* Bestseller:** “Sciolino’s sharply observed account serves as a testament to . . . Paris—the city of light, of literature, of life itself.” —*The New Yorker*

Elaine Sciolino, the former Paris Bureau Chief of the *New York Times*, invites us on a tour of her favorite Parisian street, offering an homage to street life and the pleasures of Parisian living. “I can never be sad on the rue des Martyrs,” Sciolino explains, as she celebrates the neighborhood’s rich history and vibrant lives. While many cities suffer from the leveling effects of globalization, the rue des Martyrs maintains its distinct allure. On this street, the patron saint of France was beheaded and the Jesuits took their first vows. It was here that Edgar Degas and Pierre-Auguste Renoir painted circus acrobats, Emile Zola situated a lesbian dinner club in his novel *Nana*, and François Truffaut filmed scenes from *The 400 Blows*. Sciolino reveals the charms and idiosyncrasies of this street and its longtime residents—the Tunisian greengrocer, the husband-and-wife cheesemongers, the showman who’s been running a transvestite cabaret for more than half a century, the owner of a 100-year-old bookstore, the woman who repairs eighteenth-century mercury barometers—bringing Paris alive in all of its unique majesty. *The Only Street in Paris* will make readers hungry for Paris, for cheese and wine, and for the kind of street life that is all too quickly disappearing.

## The Only Street in Paris: Life on the Rue des Martyrs Details

Date : Published November 2nd 2015 by W. W. Norton & Company

ISBN :

Author : Elaine Sciolino

Format : Kindle Edition 311 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Travel, Cultural, France, Autobiography, Memoir, History

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# From Reader Review *The Only Street in Paris: Life on the Rue des Martyrs* for online ebook

## Lea says

*"There is more civilization in an alley in Paris than in the whole of New York"* - Eça de Queirós

This is one of my father's favourite quotes, although he often likes to substitute "civilization" for "history".

It is true that if you're going to write a book about just one street, of course it is going to be a Parisian street. There is enough history in that city that you can study it your whole life and still have things to learn. You can walk there every day and still discover amazing things.

I will say that I enjoyed this book for the history of the Rue des Martyrs and for the many recommendations of shops there today. I learned a lot and now have a very long list of *bonnes adresses* to check out - and a brand new excuse to visit Paris again (as if I needed one). Reading the book, I could picture myself there, smell the city, see the shopkeepers, taste the delicacies - and this is why even a so-so book about Paris is still a good book.

What I didn't really like about the book was the author herself, Elaine Sciolino. She's obnoxious, arrogant, brash, clueless and a braggart. Some of the passages where she tried to insinuate herself in the shopkeepers' lives or tell them what to do without regard for their feelings, basically bulldozing into their privacy, were painfully embarrassing. She likes to play up her "immigrant" background (her grandfather was from Italy... very relatable to the shopkeepers from Tunisia in Paris, is it not? she seems to think so). And she "casually" likes to slip in bits about how she was wearing "her least favourite Hermès" in one occasion, shopping with Ariana Huffington on another (drinking game: one shot for every time she says "Ariana Huffington"), or wearing Louis Vuitton and Chanel for a freaking street potluck in Montmartre of all places.

In one particularly painful anecdote, she sees that the antiques dealer has left a Miró silkscreen on display on the sidewalk with other wares and closed his shop for lunch. She considers stealing the silkscreen to "teach him a lesson" on looking after his belongings. She claims she would "eventually" give it back and wonders if he would be "so grateful" to her that he might give to her for free. Ummm, what the fuck?

Sciolino is bureau chief for the New York Times in Paris, which is either evidence that the NYT has very low standards for journalists, or that Sciolino is playing dumb both in her interactions with the rue des Martyrs shopkeepers and in the book for the "benefit" of the reader. None of the options are very appealing.

My tip for prospective readers is this: if you love Paris, I recommend reading this book, but as soon as you notice the author going off on her narcissistic tangents or cringeworthy anecdotes, just skip whatever it is she is saying. Stick to the history and the bits about the shops and you'll enjoy yourself very much indeed with this light, fast read.

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## Stephanie says

I was about to order this book on my Kindle when Amazon kindly informed me I had bought it three years ago; I have no idea why I didn't finish it. It's marvelous, about the history and shop owners and friends and

quirks of this one extraordinary street in Paris reaching up to Montmartre...all seen by a journalist who made it her home for many years. I love books like this, about people living in a small area of a city I love and going about their daily lives, shopping for wine or apples and buying books and being with their neighbors.

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### **Al says**

I wasn't sure I could finish this book as I wasn't even 1/2-way through when Paris was attacked. Very glad I did. This book is a celebration of the people living in the village of Montmartre around the rue des Martyrs. It's a love letter to what makes them unique, strong and quirky. It was something of a catharsis to finish the book. Reading about such amazing people left me hopeful. Sciolino was able to capture the ineffable sense of being part of that neighborhood both as outsider and insider. It was transportive and well worth the read.

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### **Suzanne says**

I didn't have high hopes for this. So much writing about Paris tends to be predictable and as substantial as a croissant. The books are palatable and enjoyable but not terribly nourishing. Sciolino's book is not this. It is heartier fare. But not obviously scholarly or pedantic. It is a perfectly balanced meal of levity and information and provocative suggestions. Wait, no. That's not what I meant. I meant that it invites the reader to think more deeply about the tensions between the obvious benefits of modernization and globalization, and the less obvious, but no less desirable, benefits of preserving the past and protecting the native culture of a group.

Sciolino's discussion of these tensions is limited to one particular street in Paris but it can clearly be related to a hierarchy of meta-levels. How can the Rue des Martyrs maintain its peculiar nature while absorbing non-European immigrants and staying economically competitive, or, how can the Rue des Martyrs stay the Rue des Martyrs? How can we keep Paris Parisian. How can we keep France French. How can we keep Europe European. And it is a discussion that can be applied to any group.

But Sciolino keeps it simple and just discusses the Rue des Martyrs. If you choose to take it beyond that, that's on you. She never says you should.

The writing is very smooth, erudite, never fancier than it needs to be and is neither vulgar nor hoity. It has that quality of "painting a mental picture" that is so boring to describe and so transcendent to experience.

If I have any criticism at all it would be that while Sciolino is an excellent writer, she is only a mediocre performer in the audio version. That was initially a minor quibble that faded away. Whether she got better or I just got used to her, I couldn't say. All I know is that after a short time her story was more compelling than her performance was lackluster. Her French accent is reassuringly just adequate so she never comes across as trying too hard. If she was erring on the side of low-key to avoid an amateurish over-the-top reading, that was probably the right call.

I highly recommend the book. The audio version comes with the above caveats.

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## **Allyson says**

This was very informative and I even took some notes, but overall her tone was a little too cute and juvenile for me to consider her more seriously. I am sure she is a very nice person but I craved a more polished presentation. The "Only Street in Paris" felt a little bizarre as a title, but the faux script writing was indicative of it's lightweight status. Very probably she had little input into the book's design however. I was hoping for a much more polished book but maybe she was appealing to a different audience than this one.

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## **David Cerruti says**

After several starts, I just quit trying. The subject is fascinating, but the delivery put me off. It seemed like a blog for "All About Me and My Wonderful Street."

The Rue Des Martyrs is a pleasant street for strolling. This week we bought some ravioli in Sogno di Pasta, a beautiful new shop. Google Maps Street View shows another shop in that location as recently as May, 2016. You can see the entire street in Street View, and save yourself some travel time.

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## **Paul Secor says**

The Only Street in Paris was entertaining at times, but I sensed that the author's background clouded the book. She plays up the fact that she comes from a Sicilian immigrant background, but she obviously is upper upper middle class these days. I felt that her connection with the shop keepers on her street was mainly that of a good customer who spent money in their shops, and that there probably was a lot going on the Rue des Martyrs that she didn't experience.

Her description of a short shopping spree with Ariana Huffington turned me off. I'd rather go through a colonoscopy prep than go shopping with Ms. Huffington. I'm thankful that I'll never have to experience the latter.

Having said all of the above, I was entertained at times, and I give Elaine Sciolino credit for being someone who is open to people and who is seemingly willing to talk to anyone. That's a gift that I wish I had.

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## **Nancy says**

In this marvelous book Elaine Sciolino has perfectly captured what I love about France. The history, the art, the food, the people and so much more all come to life on the pages here. She not only shares with us the life and history of her street (Rue des Martyrs) but also a bit of her own life and some of her history (her Sicilian background and catholic upbringing and her interfaith marriage). Sciolino is an amazingly talented writer and I am quite certain that ANYTHING she wrote about would be a "must read" for me. (La Seduction, her other book about French life, was equally as enjoyable and as fascinating as this one). Since I listened to the audible version of "The Only Street in Paris..." I was doubly rewarded by hearing the author read her own

words. This is a "must" read for all Francophiles or anyone who just enjoys a delicious slice of (French) life. Highly recommended

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### **Sara Coriell says**

Overall I was bored with it. I skipped some chapters completely. Her descriptions made me feel like I was there, which I liked - however she seemed to drag on and on about the same thing, sometimes in a bragging way.

It did make me crave some good wine & cheese!

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### **Patty says**

*"Some people look at the rue des Martyrs and see a street. I see stories."* p. 1

All that was needed for this wonderful book to catch my attention was the first sentence. I have been visiting Paris through books off and on for more than a year, but even more importantly, Sciolino was promising me stories. My hopes for this book rose accordingly. After finishing her book, I feel that Sciolino more than met her promise.

When I meet people, whether in books or in real life, I want to know their stories. I want to know what makes a person tick, what her life is like and what his background is. Sciolino does a great job of telling what the rue des Martyrs is like now and how it got that way. Along with the history of the street, she introduces her readers to the people who live and work there now. I feel like they are all people I would like to meet in person.

John Baxter, whose stories of Paris I have also been reading, introduced me to literary Paris. Famous people are part of what Baxter talks about in his city of lights. Sciolino has narrowed her focus to one street. Famous people are part of her book; however, she includes more of the residents of the street. These are average Parisians. I enjoyed meeting them and learning a bit about normal life in Paris.

If you have been to Paris, or are just an armchair traveler, I think you would enjoy meeting the author and her neighbors. Sciolino's style is light and breezy and her tale whisks you away to an interesting place. Her story is worth reading.

Thank you to W. W. Norton & Company and Edelweiss for allowing me to read this book before publication.

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### **Sheirin says**

Having lived off the Rue de Martyrs in another life, I was excited to read this book, but the author was absolutely insufferable. Between her many passing brags about "her least favorite Hermès" and her bulldozing her way into everybody's personal lives, I wonder if her neighbors ever perfected a warning

system for l'arivée de l'américaine. This woman is so obtuse that in one chapter she talks about giving directions to the chauffeur for her and Arianna Huffington and follows it with "Gentrification is coming, less ferociously than at the bottom of the rue des Martyrs, but it is coming—crowding out the cheap bars, small-time drug dealers, itinerant winos, and chain-smoking streetwalkers." Just. I want to punch her.

One of her interviewee victims offered the best inadvertent review of this book: "books of anecdotes," she said. "You can't say very much with anecdotes. Too many anecdotes—it means the author lacks inspiration. There is no writing. There is no style. There is no poetry."

She sounds like she lives a fairly charmed existence, though - must be nice to be so oblivious!

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## **John says**

It turns out that I don't like memoirs by extroverts. Who knew?

The best parts were the stories of the people and the history of the street.

The worst parts were where the author is like: "Let me tell you about how I wanted the Pope to visit the street and someone thought that was a good idea and I wrote this letter, but nothing ever happened with it, isn't that cool?"

Or

"I talked to this person and they didn't want to talk to me so I annoyed them regularly until I broke them down and they were nice to me eventually, so all people really are good."

Or

"Let me tell you about a time when I threw a party and it was kinda cool, it turns out. People had fun!"

I mean, that's cool and all, but a chapter in a book? Seems a bit...narcissistic.

Maybe I just feel that way because I'm an introvert.

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## **Diane S ? says**

So did not want this book to end. Loved reading about this street which retains so many individual shop owners, many specializing in just one thing. The history of some of the buildings, meeting the shopkeepers, the history of the area and the delightful stores themselves. The books, famous writers, artists who once made this place their homes or mentioned them in their novels. The feel, the tone, the passion made me feel as if I was there. Definitely a place I would love to visit one day. Informative, entertaining and delightful.

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## **Laura says**

It will be impossible to ever understand all of Paris's secrets. This book unlocked the secrets of one of its streets: with unexpected details about its past and present residents and architecture. Overall colorful and funny. It's also a testament to the power of mindfulness: of paying attention, of unabashedly loving one's surroundings, and – perhaps most important of all - of taking the time to get to know those around us.

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## **Tiffany says**

In comparison to other travelogues (especially about Paris), it might be a 3 star. But a 3 star travelogue is still 4 stars in comparison with any other genre. ;)

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