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Portraits of France

Robert Daley

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Publishers Weekly
Freely mixing travelogue, history and offhand cultural commentary, Daley's serendipitous journey appraises France's soul. Whether he is expressing consternation at Avignon's immense Palace of the Popes, monument to medieval extravagance, or tracking the legend of bike racer Jacques Anquetil, Daley has a knack for the telling detail, the unusual observation. A few of these 19 vignettes delve into little-known events, like the building of French concentration camps in the Pyrenees during WW II. Among the indelible portraits we find those of French soldier- politican-aristocrat Lafayette, Grace Kelly, Scottish novelist Tobias Smollett (inventor of the ``fabulous Riviera" mystique) and De Gaulle, an obscure brigadier general in 1940 worried mainly about his wife and retarded daughter. Other pieces deal with Lourdes, Bordeaux, a perfume factory in Grasse, Jules Massenet writing operas in Paris and the Sansons family, which operated the guillotine through six generations.

Library Journal
Popular writer Daley whips up a delightful blend of history and anecdote mixed with a little travelog to provide an intimate, refreshing look at France. Each chapter draws a revealing portrait of a place. ``As much as possible, I have based my descriptions on scars that can still be seen today," Daley writes, "scars on the national body, each one dating from some accident in its past." All of the familiar cities (Paris, Nice, Bordeaux) are here, but not sites like the Eiffel Tower and Versailles. Daley's anecdotes are fascinating. He writes about Charles Deville Wells, ``the man who broke the Bank of Monte Carlo," and a renegade cop who ran a Paris gestapo. Recommended for those who enjoy a richer form of travel writing and seek a deeper appreciation of France.

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