

TRAVEL/LANGUAGES/COMMUNICATIONS/ANTHROPOLOGY

Raymonde Carroll presents an intriguing and thoughtful analysis of the many ways in which French and Americans—and indeed any members of different cultures—can misinterpret each other, even when ostensibly speaking the same language. Cultural misunderstandings, Carroll points out, can arise even where we least expect them—in our closest relationships. The revealing vignettes that Carroll relates, and her perceptive comments, bring to light some fundamental differences in French and American presuppositions about love, friendship, and raising children, as well as such everyday activities as using the telephone or asking for information.

"*Cultural Misunderstandings* is . . . especially useful to anyone about to live abroad for the first time, but may also serve as a source of revelation to those of us who have already traveled and have French friends whose behavior is now finally explained. Gracefully translated, full of colorful anecdotes, Carroll tells us a lot about the French but even more about ourselves."

—Bettyann Kevles, *Los Angeles Times*

"The cultural differences that exist between the French and the Americans are complex and mysterious. . . . Few tools exist to aid us in deciphering these mysteries. I wish, therefore, to recommend one to anyone who is planning a trip to France or who deals with French people in the United States. It is equally valuable for French people in the same situations with regard to American culture. It's a small book entitled *Cultural Misunderstandings*. . . . Vive les différences, donc, mais aussi la compréhension!"  
—Marie Calanti, *Journal Français d'Amérique*

RAYMONDE CARROLL was born in Tunisia, educated in France and the United States, and now teaches at Oberlin College. She has published a book of legends from Micronesia, *Nukuoro Stories*, collected while she lived for three years on a Pacific atoll.

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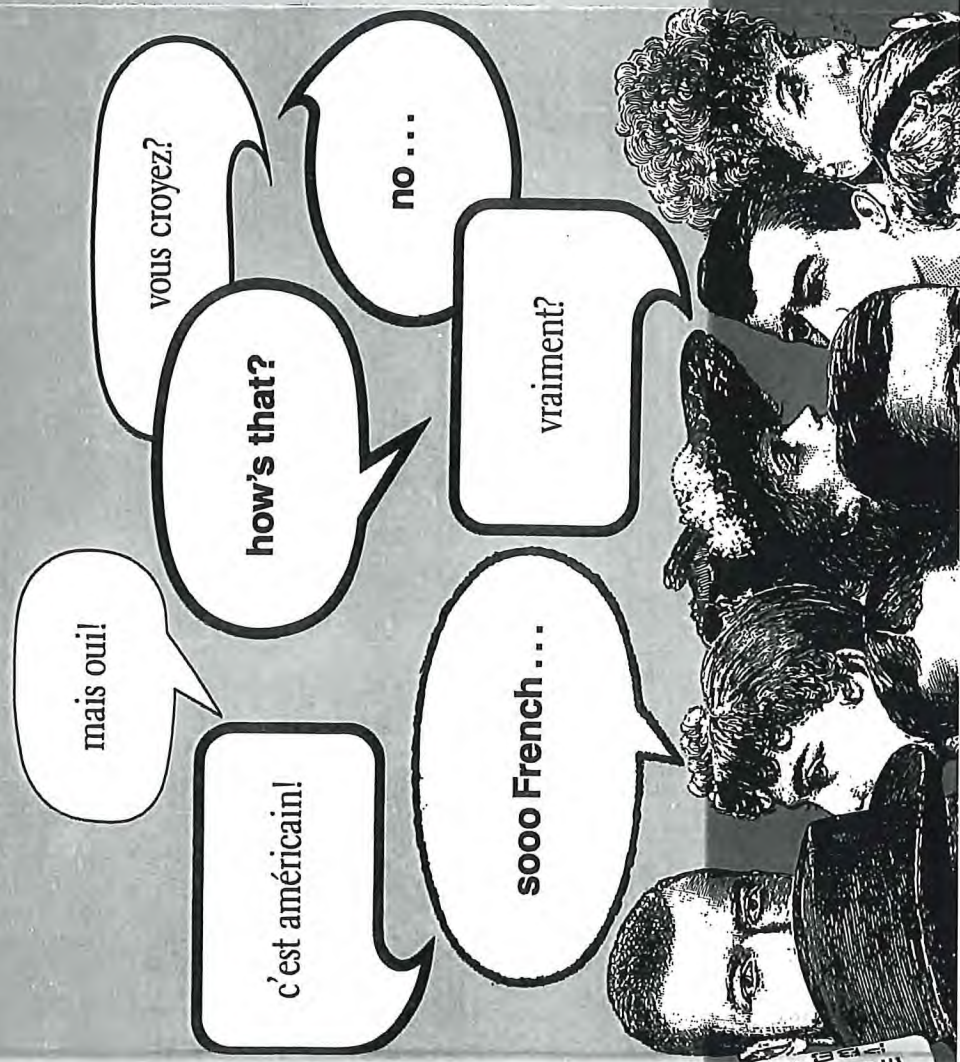
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RAYMONDE CARROLL

# Cultural Misunderstandings

THE FRENCH-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Translated by Carol Volk *Parents and children*



Raymonde Carroll

Cultural Misunderstandings





### 3 Parents and Children

coming from the other side of Paris where I had seen a play for a class, and that I had a good reason for being late." The last straw (which convinced her to leave the dormitory) was when the director's assistant ("hardly older than I was") reprimanded her for having forgotten to sign the register upon leaving by making a gesture as if to slap her, while she was "in the presence of an American friend who was in France for the first time" (and who therefore could only interpret the scene from an American perspective).

Americans and the French seem to be in complete agreement on only one point: they do not understand (which means they do not approve of) the way in which the children of "the other culture" are raised. Thus, many "American" situations can be displeasing to a French person. Here are a few, such as they were recounted to me:

—I am engaged in an interesting conversation with X, an American. Just as he is about to answer my question, or else at the most important point in my discourse, his child comes in and interrupts our conversation in what I consider to be an intrusive manner. Instead of teaching him manners, X turns and listens to him. He may even get up, apologize for the interruption by saying that he must give or show something to the little one and that he will return "in a few minutes." X comes back, a smile on his lips, asking, "Where were we?" and resumes the conversation. The worst of it is that if the little child comes back because he didn't find what he was looking for or because something is not working or because he is proud of having finished what he was doing and wants to tell X, he won't hesitate to do so. And X will not hesitate to respond. No doubt about it, these Americans have no manners.

—We're at the dinner table. Y, an American, is sitting next to her three-year-old daughter, who has demanded a setting identical to that of the grown-ups (and received it from the hostess, since the mother seemed to think it was only normal) and is "acting cute." She asks for soup, then refuses to eat it. Her mother is trying to persuade her, saying, "You'll see, it's very good." The little girl finally takes a spoonful, then exclaims, "I hate it, it's yucky." The mother says, "You're going to make Z (the hostess) feel bad," or "No, it's very good," or else (are you ready for this?) "Z's cooking doesn't seem to be a hit with the little one." Slaps, that's what they deserve, these kids! And the parents too, while we're at it! You should see them in restau-

"While I was living in France," an American academic told me, "I often saw the following scene: a child does something which his parents don't like, or one of his parents doesn't like. The parent tells him to stop. The child continues. Nothing happens, the parents don't say anything and don't do anything. The child continues to do what he was doing. The parents repeat, 'Will you stop that?' and it continues. What good does it do to tell children to stop doing something, if nothing happens when they don't?"

An American student who had just spent the year in France after having made several shorter visits told me, still horrified, about her experience in a Parisian student dorm, which she summarized in these indignant terms: "They treated us like children." What had deeply shocked her was that during one residents' meeting, the director of the dormitory announced that she had gone into the students' rooms while they were away, "because you can learn a lot about people by seeing how they keep their rooms." This particular student shared her room with a French woman and unflinchingly accepted the comings and goings of the maid. It was therefore the fact that the director had entered without permission that seemed an intolerable assault on her private life. In addition, she was surprised that the French students, who were in the majority, did not seem to find this intrusion upsetting or even surprising. Similarly, the nightwatchman treated her "like a little girl" the first time she arrived a quarter of an hour after the curfew at 11 p.m. Not knowing where else to go hardly a month after her arrival in Paris, she insistently banged on the door of the dormitory. The night watchman "lectured her" and "yelled at her." She added this remark which I found surprising: "And he didn't even ask me where I had been; he would have found out that I was



rants. The kids get up, mosey about, sometimes they even come up to your table to make conversation; they eat like pigs, talk loudly, do whatever they please, as if they were at home; they think they can do anything.

—I'm riding in my car, on the main street of a residential neighborhood. It is not a small, out-of-the-way street that is isolated and quiet, and it certainly is not a dead end. It is a major, busy street. I have to slow down. Right in the middle of the street, on the road, children, yes, children are playing baseball, or with frisbees. They stop, "allow me" to go by with big smiles, sometimes even a little tap on my car. Can't they play elsewhere? This isn't a ghetto—there are big parks nearby, huge lawns surrounding their houses. No, they must have the street, and so they take it, that's all there is to it. They are nice enough to let me go by, why should I complain? You should see how they're dressed, barefoot, right in the middle of the street. These Americans are impossible . . .

The preceding examples represent just a partial collage of comments that I have heard repeatedly concerning American children. And I am sure we (French) can all provide examples, which we have either seen or heard about, concerning their "lack of manners." Spoiled, ill-bred, undisciplined; with no manners, no reserve; egotistical, impolite, constantly moving, running all over, touching everything, making noise . . . Everyone has his favorite story, and not only in France. Many French parents who have been living in the United States for a long time, whose children have been raised in the American style "despite" them, complained about American schools during interviews conducted by my students. "No discipline," "they let them do what they want," "not enough homework," "no general education . . . even I, with the little education I have, know the capital of every country in the world. . . . Go find an American who can tell you that." "No respect," "spoiled rotten," are comments I have often heard and recorded myself. "Here, Madame, it is not the parents who raise their children, it is the children who raise their parents. . . . I'm proud to have remained French. . . . But don't get me wrong, I'm also proud of being an American."

Similarly, Americans have much to say about French children, or rather, perhaps, about French parents. Here is an example told to me by an American, who had obviously been mystified by the scene: "We were having a drink at the house of some friends. She's French (like

my wife), and he's an American (like me). Our children are having fun together, running in and out of the room, absorbed in chasing each other. The adults' conversation is suddenly interrupted by C., the French lady of the house, who loudly scolds the kids, all the kids, hers and ours, 'because they're making too much noise and preventing us from speaking calmly.' This threatening and screaming happens again—with increasing stridency—each time the children forget C.'s command in the heat of their chasing. When we get home, I mention to my wife that C. was the one who had made any conversation nearly impossible with her loud interruptions." He adds, with a look of amusement, that C. is always complaining about the "rudeness" of Americans, and about the "atrocious" manner in which they bring up their children ("and in addition she annoys me because she always says to her husband and me each time she criticizes Americans, 'not you two, of course, you're the exception, we've found the only two tolerable Americans' . . . but I'm also an American").

Some American students with whom I was studying French magazine advertisements were very impressed by the children's clothing displayed in certain ads; they admired the interesting colors, the quality of the garments, the style. After a few moments' thought, a few of them asked, "But how can they play in these clothes?" I sent them to children's clothing stores, where they could compare the American clothes with those that had been imported from France, feel them, study them. To sum up their reactions: they felt that the French clothes were far prettier but that it was impossible to imagine a child dressed in them doing anything but standing still or sitting down. It would be impossible to imagine a child running or roughhousing, rolling on the ground or even in the grass—in short, playing any game at which one could get dirty. As far as the baby clothes went, they noticed something else they found strange: the snaps or other closings were on the shoulders or at the back of the neck, not between the legs as on the American clothes. This leads one to believe either that one undresses the child completely in order to change diapers or that one doesn't change them very often—which means either that the baby's comfort comes after his or her appearance or that babies are taught to control themselves very early. The French clothes were unanimously condemned, despite their good looks. My students all agreed that a well-dressed child who must constantly be wary of getting dirty, a child who thinks about his clothes, is a victimized child.

The opinion of my students on this subject is the same as that of