

# Our man in Antibes

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I am in Antibes and I'm a bit lost as the GPS on my phone keeps packing up. Furthermore, there is something of a fracas on the street I'm heading down. A red *pompier* truck has parked itself squarely in the roadway, blue lights flashing, traffic is backed up and people are stepping out of their cars in aggressive mood. Is there a fire? As I draw near, I can see that on the rear window of the *pompier* truck there is a big sign: "Grève". No sign of the striking *pompier* driver who has simply abandoned his light-winking vehicle in the middle of a major thoroughfare. Clearly this is a mobile traffic impediment designed to infuriate the citizens of Antibes and to draw attention to the legitimate claims of the local firefighters. Only in France. The French *se manifestent* better than almost any other nation as the *gilets jaunes* have proved.

I take a detour and, reverting to analogue methods of getting from A to B, ask a passer-by if she knows where Avenue Pasteur is. It turns out I'm now actually on Avenue Pasteur. I head off down the street, looking for the *Résidence des Fleurs*.

The Avenue Pasteur is an unremarkable street a couple of blocks back from Antibes' port. The *Résidence des Fleurs*, a large apartment building, was where Graham Greene lived for the last twenty-five years of his life. I never met Greene but I know quite a few people who did. A friend of mine interviewed him in his apartment: one bedroom, bamboo furniture, a living room with two walls lined with bookshelves, a television set, a distant view of the masts of the yachts in the marina. Greene was sixty-two when he moved in here and, I suppose, at the height of his renown. It appeared to be a curious choice – I know he was in flight from the Inland Revenue – but to downsize so radically seemed strange, almost perverse, given his fame, given the money he must have been earning. There were surely nicer places to hole up.

Today the building is in bad shape – shabby, with faded tattered orange awnings, and low-rent *commerçants* occupying the ground floor. Very Greene-ian, in its way. When he arrived in 1966, the building was probably perceived as modern and rather chic. Given its present condition, half a century on, I wouldn't be surprised if it isn't demolished soon. On the wall by the main door is a small granite plaque, about a foot square: "Graham Greene vécut ici 1966-1991". And that's it. It seems something of a pitiful memorial.

As it happened, four days previously I had visited Virginia Woolf's country home, Monk's House, a clapboard cottage in the village of Rodmell, East Sussex. In strong contrast to Greene's last abode, Virginia Woolf's is in spanking good shape. Beautifully restored and curated, a well-informed guide hovering in every room, the garden immaculately kempt, it is a kind of literary shrine to the author. Her small electric fire, her pottery vases, Vanessa Bell's landscapes, Virginia's spectacles, her bound copies of Shakespeare's plays, her narrow bed pushed to the wall – all presented as semi-sanctified relics of her busy, troubled life.



Greene's life was equally busy and, in its own way, also troubled but no shrine exists – unless we decide to see the seedy decrepitude of the *Résidence des Fleurs* as somehow apt. Maybe he should have stayed in England and done a deal with the Inland Revenue.

Woolf's house is tasteful – if you like that Bloomsbury style of interior decoration. It is a small house with a large garden, and she wrote most of her few memorable novels here. She clearly loved the place. It is an interesting thought experiment to imagine it in 1919, when she and Leonard Woolf bought it. No electricity, no heating, no running water, an earth closet in the garden. Woolf's success and increasing prosperity steadily ensured that it became more comfortable and modernized: stoves, WC, a bath, central heating, a telephone, a gramophone, a wireless.

In those days, of course, novelists had "staff" and much of the tiresome daily business of living – shopping, cleaning, cooking, washing up – was done by your servants. Did Greene have a *femme de ménage* in the *Résidence des Fleurs*? He probably did, though he famously ate lunch every day in the same restaurant at the port, *Chez Felix*, so he had no one to cook for him. *Chez Felix* still exists (I checked it out) but it seems to be going the same way as the *Résidence des Fleurs*.

My visit to Antibes also allows me to experience my third writers' abode in a week. I am here to collect a prize – Le Prix Fitzgerald – named after F. Scott Fitzgerald for a work in translation that somehow reflects "L'Esprit Fitzgeraldien". The prize, now in its ninth year, is the brainchild of a remarkable woman called Marianne Estène-Chauvin, the proprietress of a fabulous hotel in Juan Les Pins called *Belles Rives*. It was built by her grandfather in the 1930s but before its life as *Belles Rives* began it was a villa, called the *Villa Saint-Louis*, where Scott Fitzgerald, together with Zelda and

little Scottie, stayed in 1925 and 1926. Along the bay was the *Villa America* where Gerald and Sara Murphy lived, the models for Dick and Nicole Diver in *Tender is the Night*. It was around Juan les Pins and Antibes that much of the now fabled allure of the Côte d'Azur received its initial injection of fame and glamour. Scott, Ernest, Picasso, Léger, Dos Passos, Cole Porter et al made it a summer venue. Previously, what the French call *le gratin* only came to the South of France in winter and fled as the weather heated up.

There are a few traces of the old *Villa Saint-Louis* remaining in the modern hotel. Apparently, my room, on the first floor, still has the existing balcony – the balcony of the room that Scott and Zelda stayed in. I stand on this very balcony looking out at the glittering bay, badged with its super-yachts (none bigger than Roman Abramovitch's), and try another thought experiment – imagining the place in the 1920s. The wild unbuilt-up coast with its few strategically placed villas half-hidden among the umbrella pines and mimosas giving on to the empty beach. Antibes, Cannes and St Tropez – just sleepy fishing villages. A difficult thought experiment, as it turns out. Easier to imagine Rodmell in 1919.

Scott Fitzgerald, like many of his generation, was a legendary drinker. When obliged to give up hard liquor, he resorted to beer as a notional non-alcoholic substitute, reputedly drinking forty bottles a day. He was, however, fully on the hard liquor in the south of France as he stood on his balcony in the *Villa Saint-Louis* – as I stand on it now, an alcoholic beer in my hand, looking out at the transformed view. There is a pub in Rodmell that was there in Virginia Woolf's time: a classic, third-rate, unloved English village pub. One searches in vain for the plaque: "Virginia Woolf drank here, 1919-1941". Maybe she popped in for a port and lemon from time to time, though I doubt it.

Fitzgerald died in 1940 aged forty-four. Woolf drowned herself in 1941 aged fifty-nine. Greene, who lived in every decade of the twentieth century, died in Switzerland in 1991 at the age of eighty-six. I find it slightly spooky that this week has randomly served them up to me as curious exemplars; that I have visited three of the places they lived or stayed in. Writers' houses – unlike the houses of artists or composers, perhaps – don't always deliver the necessary posthumous vibe. As I stand on my balcony looking out over the Golfe Juan, I wonder if it's all too late to try to inhabit vicariously the times and places these writers experienced: those worlds have gone forever. Even the world of Graham Greene's 1960s and 70s Antibes seems out of reach.

Anyway, it's the moment for the presentation of Le Prix Fitzgerald and I descend to the vast terrace of the *Belles Rives*, where 200 guests are assembled and, flanked by the judges, I am presented with a unique ceramic trophy designed by a Vallauris potter called Claude Aiello. The prize jury is composed of the finest French writers and intellectuals who are, metaphorically, letting their hair down here in Juan les Pins in true Fitzgeraldian fashion. Music blasts out over the terrace as champagne and canapés are served. The DJ is Frédéric Beigbeder, novelist, film director and all-round genial man of letters. Later there is a "dîner des écrivains" on a jetty right on the Med, water lapping all around, and later still the judges of the prize – it's a tradition – take a midnight swim. The prize-winner is invited to join them but he declines. After they emerge from the dark waters, they are all served with powerful gins and tonic. The prize-winner does agree to participate in this aspect of the tradition, however, thinking of F. Scott Fitzgerald and his esprit. Only in France. The French do literary prizes better than anybody else.