



These Dividing Walls: Shortlisted for the 2018 Edward Stanford Travel Writing Award

Fran Cooper

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One Parisian summer

A building of separate lives

All that divides them will soon collapse...

In a forgotten corner of Paris stands a building.

Within its walls, people talk and kiss, laugh and cry; some are glad to sit alone, while others wish they did not. A woman with silver-blonde hair opens her bookshop downstairs, an old man feeds the sparrows on his windowsill, and a young mother wills the morning to hold itself at bay. Though each of their walls touches someone else's, the neighbours they pass in the courtyard remain strangers.

Into this courtyard arrives Edward. Still bearing the sweat of a channel crossing, he takes his place in an attic room to wait out his grief.

But in distant corners of the city, as Paris is pulled taut with summer heat, there are those who meet with a darker purpose. As the feverish metropolis is brought to boiling point, secrets will rise and walls will crumble both within and without Number 37...

'Confident and brilliant. She will immerse you in a world I dare you to turn away from.' Lisa O'Donnell, author of *The Death of Bees*

These Dividing Walls: Shortlisted for the 2018 Edward Stanford Travel Writing Award Details

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Travel Writing Award Fran Cooper

From Reader Review These Dividing Walls: Shortlisted for the 2018 Edward Stanford Travel Writing Award for online ebook

Beverley says

Such a cleverly interwoven plot. The interconnections between each of the characters is effortlessly portrayed as we witness the whole spectrum of emotions and complex parallel lives residing under one roof in a seemingly ordinary corner of Paris. A deeply affecting, intelligent read.

Moray Teale says

In a rundown, unfashionable part of Paris, far removed from the romance and grandeur of the City of Love a young Englishman arrives looking for a safe-haven following a family tragedy. As he tries to deal with his own inner confusion he becomes embroiled in the lives of his many neighbours and their worries, their dislikes, their uncertainties represent a sense of wider change and growing agitation in Paris as a whole.

There is so much to enjoy in *These Dividing Walls*. She writes with impressive assurance and clarity for a debut novel, with perfect narrative control and poise. Her characters are excellently realised, forming a diverse cast of peoples whose lives intersect and collide in their shared building, it's a dynamic that you will probably be familiar with if you have ever lived in a block of flats. These are convincingly ordinary people, living recognisable, largely unremarkable lives but Cooper writes them with real charm and sympathy, and a finely-judged dash of eccentricity so that you come to care for each of them in spite of their flaws and pettiness. They're amusing infuriating, heart-breaking and most importantly they are believable, because this is not just a charming, light-hearted tale about neighbourhood relations, it's also a book of clever contrasts that sheds thoughtful light on the sides of Paris more at home in the headlines than the picture postcards.

"Oh, Edward," one character sighs towards the end, "the myths we make for ourselves," and this theme defines many of the contrasts that Cooper contracts between the real and the imaginary, the simplified ideal and the complex reality. There's subtlety and insight in the way that the grandeur of the Louvre and Monmatre with homelessness, unemployment and the struggle to make ends meet in the dilapidated streets where Edward settles. These daily struggles weigh on her characters and the new Muslim family moving into the building become easy targets for hostility and frustration. These issues are sensitively unpicked as fear and tension rise with a new terror attack at Notre Dame and the violent response of the Far Right. She convincingly demonstrates the all-too-easy drift into extremism for those looking for someone to blame and it rings very true both for those characters who watch on from the periphery in horror or vindication and for those swept up more directly in the flow of hatred. My only reservation with this aspect of the story is that there is so little of the Labiris (the new Muslim residents) whose perspective could have contributed so much.

The way that innocuous personal narratives are woven with violence and terrorism is remarkably true to the way these things really touch most people, shockingly but often peripherally and life goes on in spite of them. Edward struggles with his personal grief and forges new relationships far from home while his neighbours struggle with failing marriages, unorthodox relationships, loneliness and mental illness. And yet despite it all this is not a dark book. It's full of characters I became fond of and is often astute and touching in equal measure. It offers a lot of hope without denying that there is darkness in people. A warm and ultimately uplifting story

Marianne says

4.5★s

These Dividing Walls is the first novel by British author and museum curator, Fran Cooper. Number 37 Rue des Eglantines is not in the fashionable, tourist-frequented part of Paris. It's far back on the Left Bank, tucked in a warren of quiet streets, a block of apartments with two shops on the ground floor. It's the place where Englishman Edward Rivers has come to escape. He's staying in a tiny top floor apartment that belongs to his friend, Emilie. Her aunt Frederique is the first to welcome him and she recognises, almost immediately, the sort of loss from which he is running, having experienced it herself.

Frederique has lived at Number 37 for most of her life. She knows everyone there, but perhaps not as well as she thinks: many of them have something to hide. Chantal and Cesar's happy marriage might not survive the secret that Cesar has been keeping for months, a secret that sees him taking extreme action. Hairdresser Estella Marin, the flamboyant gardienne of Number 37, seems a mismatch for the very beige Augusto Marin, with her barely discreet affairs, and yet....

On the second floor, Anais Legrange is a young mother of three who is at breaking point, while her hard-working husband, Paul is puzzled at the change in their relationship. Fourth floor resident, Isabelle Duval vents her xenophobic frustrations online, completely unaware that, one floor up, her long-time neighbour Henri Lalande is actually a Muslim.

Homeless Josef is often parked in an alcove across the street from Number 37. He watches carefully and perceives more about the building's residents than anyone would believe. During a sweltering Paris summer, as racial tensions rise with the mercury, Number 37 have their own dilemma to deal with: Ahmed and Amina Laribi are about to move into the empty third floor apartment.

Cooper's structure is not unlike McCall Smith's 44 Scotland Street; she melds that with Katherine Pancol-like French characters in a drama that features loss and grief, pride and prejudice, depression and insecurity, love and loyalty and friendship. As well as the main characters, sometimes the building itself has a role as narrator; certainly, the City of Paris and her denizens are a play a significant part. Cooper's prose is often beautiful and her characters are easily believable. This is an outstanding debut novel from an author to watch.

Maya Panika says

A ship of fools story set in the real Paris, the Paris few visitors experience. A glimpse at a disparate group of people struggling to live in a hot, steamy, dusty and doubtless over-priced apartment building in an unfashionable Parisian suburb, all living mundane, workaday, recognisable lives against a backdrop of rising political tension, the divisions of race and religion, and the ever-present threat of terrorism. Each character has their own demons to battle, their own struggles, and though I found the politics more than little black and white and lacking in nuance, it was an interesting hook to hang a story on, though it has to be said, there's not much of a plot, and what there is is entirely reactionary. This is very much a character study: a harassed

mother, slowly losing her mind; the fiercely leftist bookshop owner with a big secret, her looks fading in middle age, who finds solace in her friendship with an English student seeking respite from his grieving family. There's a recently redundant banker who resents the young immigrants he blames for taking his job; a young Muslim couple moving into the building, and Isabelle, who simply does not want Muslims around. Dividing Walls is a perfect title for this tale of personalities clashing and melding as the heat of summer builds and tensions rise to a horrific crescendo, before tumbling down the other side of the tale as the characters all react to events in their own way. Some stories are resolved, some are not and are left hanging, like life. I can't say I was entirely engaged for the whole of it. My attention definitely sagged towards the middle. It picks up pace when The Event occurs, right at the apex of the narrative, when the story grows markedly more interesting, though still somewhat lacking in incident for my taste. The best of this novel is in the writing, which is deliciously metaphorical - lyrical, with incandescent moments which are truly poetic, yet always within the flow of the writing; thrown-away brilliance that never interrupts the flow or is too self-consciously clever. The story lacks impetus. It is often patchy, with a narrative that is not often well stitched together. There are some nicely-sketched characters, but read it for the writing. The glorious writing is far and away the best of it, the reason I recommend everyone should read it and why I am very much looking forward to reading what Fran Cooper writes next.

O says

I received an uncorrected proof copy in exchange for an honest review.

This book promised more than it could chew. I was disappointed, and agree with a previous reviewer who wrote "it lacks a plot". To me it feels like the author has attempted to write a feelgood-novel mixed with a little preaching on the social inequalities in the world and what they may lead to.

I don't like, or empathise with the characters. They feel too one-dimensional, and their "objectives" are too predictable: obviously the person who "runs away" will realise where his home is and return. The "love story" is evident from the start. The suggestion that a "normal" middle class man would be "radicalised" in less than half a year - or that a serious, violent protester would trust him with extremely secret information after a relatively short period of time does not ring true at all. Or, at least, the book didn't make me believe that it happened.

The writing style is very wordy. Sometimes it feels like the author has spent more time thinking up metaphors than plot, for example, this good bye:

"When she pulls her body away from his it is with a sigh that echoes long after she has retraced her steps down the interminable corridor, a sigh that echoes in his ears like the rush of blood in a seashell, the magnitude of ocean in a hand."

It comes across as pompous and contrived. Maybe it feels like the author has "tried too hard"? I'd be interested in trying another book by her where she spent more time on thinking of "what do I want to say" rather than "how do I say it". (But I cannot guarantee I would finish it!)

The cover is really clever - apart from the fact that the "turquoise door", that is mentioned umpteen times in the book, doesn't exist on the cover. Seems like it would have been an easy thing to fix.

Barbara says

I was disappointed in this book and it might be closer to 2 1/2 stars than 3. The book begins with the description of an apartment building and its residents in Paris. It is tucked away in a corner of the city that is not overwhelmed with tourists. In fact, the parts of the book that described tourists managed to turn me off the idea of visiting the city, ever. The descriptions of mad hoards of people just running from famous site to famous site to take pictures (and not actually see anything) were off putting. Although Paris doesn't need promoting to get tourists there, these descriptions, and the current climate in the age of terrorism, would scare many away.

One criticism of this book is that there are too many characters and many are not adequately developed. Some of the character's actions weren't well explained. Other characters had narrow back stories that are repeated endlessly without more elaboration. The depressed mother of 3 young children, the angry middle aged female vandal who hates immigrants, etc. etc. Things are neatly (perhaps too neatly) tied up in the end. The one compliment I can pay the author is that she kept this novel relatively short.

Anger against immigrants, and Islamophobia, are widespread in contemporary Europe. This novel attempts to deal with these huge issues in a book that starts off as a story about a building and its residents in Paris. What starts as a potentially sweet portrayal steers off into a story of contemporary hatreds. I do think there is a way to create such a portrait but in this novel the themes often fail to merge in a convincing way.

Cathy says

I was really, really impressed with this book; despite being a debut it has such an assured feel to it. From the beginning I was drawn into the stories of the various individuals living at Number 37, storing up the nuggets of information provided by the author about each character. I felt a bit like James Stewart's character in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, eavesdropping on the residents of the neighbouring apartments.

Number 37 seems to act as a microcosm of society, not just French society. There are secrets, frustrations, unhappy memories, prejudice, loneliness, depression, love and loss. But there are also new beginnings, reconciliations and a coming together in adversity.

The author very cleverly connects the intimate personal stories to the wider political situation in France where tensions over unemployment, immigration and change threaten to boil over in the sweltering heat of a Paris summer. Reading this in the wake of the terror attack in London, the events depicted and the emotions that gave rise to them really resonated.

I absolutely loved this book and I can't wait to read more from the author who I'm sure has a glittering career ahead of her. Highly recommended.

I received an advance reader copy courtesy of NetGalley and publishers, Hodder & Stoughton, in return for an honest review.

Thebooktrail says

Visit Paris with this novel!

An apartment in Paris filled with people from all corner of the globe – now I've lived in such a place and didn't know my neighbours either – that planted the seed for wanting to see behind the closed doors of this apartment block!

There's something delicious about peaking behind the curtains (or lack of as is the case in France) and seeing what people get up to. There's the curious in all of us and this is a fascinating insight into a multicultural French society.

Crime and trouble is known to become worse when the heat of the summer gets worse, and this is no exception. Paris is having problems – there is racial tension on the streets and protests of all descriptions. When a muslim family moved into the building, I felt a prickle of nerves as this was becoming very poignant and relevant to what's going on in the world today.

There's not much to be said other than you have to read it and go on the journey with these people to see, experience living in a Paris apartment and a city undergoing turmoil in every sense of the word.

I found the 'afterword really interesting as this illustrates how life carried on after the riots and turmoil of the summer

Whispering Stories says

Book Reviewed by Stacey on www.whisperingstories.com

Whilst the setting in Paris, France might have you reaching for the book, what is inside is far more beautiful than any city could ever be. Between those creamy, orange covers is a story about life and the residents of the apartment building, Number 37 Rue des Eglantines, that has stood on the street corner for many decades.

Whilst the main character might be the young English Edward Rivers, who has taken up residence in his friend's apartment as he tries to get away from his present life, the plot features so many more superbly created characters in the shape of the other residents, and one who lives on the street facing the building. Including many with secrets, passions, and a sense of trying to come to terms with their current situations.

Ms. Cooper's writes so elegantly and heart felt. Every joyous, happy, sad, upsetting moment was vividly felt. The scenery was distinctly described. Don't expected to be seeing Paris through the eyes of a tourist though, this is back streets Paris, it almost felt like I was stepping back in time.

This isn't a fast paced book, this is one to be savoured. There are no twists, turns, big plot reveals, just a realistic story that centres itself on looking at society as a whole. This is a book that will make you think

about the world we live in and, may even make you have a little bit of empathy for those around you.

Kate says

Stories about people in apartment buildings are a bit like stories about groups of school mates for me – you invariably have a mixed bunch of characters who are tied together because they have one (physical) thing in a common – a building. I generally quite like these stories, which is why I picked up Fran Cooper's *These Dividing Walls* (the very pretty cover also swayed me).

These Dividing Walls is about a particular apartment building in Paris. It's described beautifully, just as I imagine the quintessential apartment building in Paris to be – a courtyard, heavy wooden doors, flower boxes, winding staircases, a garret room at the top and, the pièce de résistance, a bookshop at the bottom.

There's a mix of characters, dominated by Frédérique, the book shop owner, and Edward, a visiting Brit, in Paris to grieve the sudden death of his sister.

Thankfully Cooper avoids a stereotypical cast and her descriptions of the apartment block residents are playful and intriguing. However, afforded the opportunity to assemble an unlikely group of characters, Cooper takes it one step further and throws in some unlikely plot twists. When you're building a story around characters whose lives would not ordinarily cross paths, I think their interactions must be believable. And it's enough for the plot to be dominated by these interactions. Unfortunately, in *These Dividing Walls*, the interactions felt contrived, the characters built around pushing a certain (political) agenda and there were too many parallel story-lines that had to be hastily resolved at the end.

There are some lovely passages in this book – an awkward one-night stand described as “*...a night where the only bits that bumped were the bits you didn't want to – a long percussion of teeth and noses*” and some sensitive thoughts on grieving – “*...everything that had suffocated her before in its intensity turned now a cushion against pain; scar tissue around her heart*” but these sat alongside the ‘action’, upsetting the pace.

2/5 Not for me but don't let that stop you.

I received my copy of *These Dividing Walls* from the publisher, Hachette Australia, via NetGalley, in exchange for an honest review.

Isobel Blackthorn says

These Dividing Walls takes the reader on a journey into the lives of the inhabitants of an apartment block in arrondissement Paris, drifting seamlessly from one character's perspective to another. Meet among others, Edward and Frédérique, both stricken by grief; depressed and emaciated mother of three Anais and her absent husband Paul; Chantal and her lost and disillusioned husband César Vincent; Madame Marin, the gardienne who runs a hairdressing salon in the courtyard and slips out in the night; the hate ridden Isabelle Duval, and Josef, the vagrant who sleeps in the doorway opposite. Through this cast of quirky and troubled characters the various attitudes to be expected in any social mix, from tolerance through prejudice to extremism, are explored.

The writing is exquisite and discursive. The narrative meanders, rich with incidental details and acute observations, Cooper's strength, her ability to enter into the souls of her characters. Frédérique seeks "a world beyond the bourgeois formalities cradled within these walls...everything that has suffocated her before in its intensity turned now a cushion against pain; scar tissue around her heart."

The use of the present tense brings an immediacy to the story, focusing the mind of the reader on the characters in close proximity. Through it, Cooper, invites the reader to ponder the inane and banal aspects of prejudice.

These Dividing Walls is a slow read that contains few surprises. The portrayal of terror and reprisal bleeds into the narrative, growing ever larger, vying for centre stage, seeking to oust the much larger and more poignant story of grief. Contemporary fiction is difficult to write, for the risk is always that themes appear stuck on, worked into something already in existence. Cooper manages to achieve a good balance, using the weather – Paris endures a June heat wave – to full and dramatic effect. Ultimately, it is the weather that binds this story and makes it work.

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK NETGALLEY AND HODDER AND STOUGHTON FOR MY REVIEW COPY.

<https://isobelblackthorn.com/2017/05/...>

Alex Manthei says

Read a proof. Absolutely loved this book. It's timely, thoughtful, thrilling, and deeply human. Can't wait to see it come out for the world to enjoy!

Joanne Harris says

There's a lot to like about this book in terms of its warmth, its human interactions and its social conscience, but I couldn't help thinking it tried too hard to be quaint, colourful and consciously Parisian - though this is the Paris of Amélie, a picture-postcard from a nostalgic past, rather than anything recognizably contemporary. The character names are a giveaway: old-fashioned names suggesting the France of the Fifties, rather than the present day. The language? Too many unnecessary verbal reminders that we're in France (as if we needed them); too many "little cabbages." (Fun fact: in French, "mon petit chou" does not translate as "my little cabbage", but refers to the popular pastry, the chou à la crème, so would be the equivalent of something like "cupcake".) I know; they're all minor niggles, but the devil's in the details where research is concerned. Still, worth reading, by all means, though perhaps not by someone who knows Paris well...

Debbie Robson says

I didn't know what to expect when I found These Dividing Walls. I think I had seen something about it somewhere but decided not to read it. It was obviously contemporary but then discovering the book in my favourite bookshop Lorelei, I took a closer look at the prose and then straight away knew that I couldn't ignore such beautiful writing (and for a first time novelist - a young English woman writing about the

French). Who can resist that?

Cooper sets the scene with elegance and a wonderful flow. We begin with the building itself in a backwater of Paris. We then encounter a young English man Edward (trying to escape his own grief) who sees the small apartment he has been leant by a friend for the first time in the light of day.

“Four o’clock, and Edward stands outside his new building in a new city, breathing damp summer deep into his lungs.”

But it is Frederique who drew me as a reader. She has lived in the apartment block since she was a child: “That is how she thinks of this apartment, her childhood home: a place where feeling is left at the door. So many years seeking expanse, horizon, a space larger than this city, a world beyond the bourgeois formalities cradled within these walls. And then to have life made infinite; to have a son, and lose him and to feel the universe in all its immensity within her bones. To become hollow and yearn again for the slim childhood bed, the flowery walls, the heavy furniture and the grim-faced portraits - everything that had suffocated her before in its intensity turned now into a cushion against pain; scar tissue around her heart.”

How wonderful is that? Cooper goes on to acquaint us with the other major players in the apartment block but her touch is not just personal. As we read *These Dividing Walls* Cooper spreads her net to Paris itself, to an unrest that is pervading the city. There is a divisive meeting of the residents of number 37 at Cesar’s apartment. And the news for some of the residents is not good - a Muslim family is moving into the third floor apartment of Batiment A.

Whilst Edward finds his way in this new Paris life, we learn more about the other residents. Soon after the meeting Cesar (who has lost his job but hasn’t told his wife) is drawn into the shady world of a violent dissident group. Anais, the exhausted young mother with three children, becomes more paranoid and the new Muslim family arrive.

There is a terrorist attack in Notre Dame and with impressive skill, Cooper evokes not only the events but the effect on each of the residents and the city itself. But it’s not over yet.

“But there are also those who stay at home. Those who watch the pictures on the news from inside their airless apartments, those who peer anxiously out from behind their blinds, afraid of or waiting for something to happen in the city streets.” An enjoyable read.

SJ Reads says

FULL REVIEW HERE; <https://weavinglife.wordpress.com/201...>

3.75 STARS

I found this book really interesting but super lacking in plot! This is essentially a character study of people living in an apartment building, and how the political backdrop of France effects them. I did enjoy the writing style the most as it was beautiful and found myself hoping for a happy ending for many of the characters. A full review will be on my blog on Friday!!!
