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**Nisset, Luc. *French in Your Face.***

**New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007. ISBN: 13: 978-0-07-143298-6.**

I like this book. Set aside the fact that my students can learn a lot from it; I like it because it made me laugh while reviewing, well, a textbook. I cannot recall (honestly, I cannot) when I last had so much fun doing my job as a teacher and occasional reviewer. Using gestures and facial expressions to teach colloquial lan-

guage (and some of this stuff is really very colloquial French, if you catch my drift, not the kind of language you want to use around your French mother-in-law), this text delivers what its title promises: “French in your face,” authentic, real-life words and phrases that will open your eyes to a whole new dimension of the language. Again, this is not classical French (I seriously doubt that old Racine would understand, much less appreciate, some of the metaphors); this is street-wise French, the kind of language you would hear spoken in France today, especially by you younger folks out there, though hardly by a mature audience (of which regrettably, I am a part today, by age, if not by choice).

What the author has done is unique: with clever little cartoons he illustrates a variety of real-life situations, and fills in the blanks with all kinds of words and expressions to express a normal person’s reactions. As the preface boldly states: “A face is worth a thousand words... *French in Your Face* is designed to open your receptivity to the other person’s face. The French people are very emotional and sensitive ... this book is your passport to communicating with these wonderful people ... it links French terms, common expressions, idioms, colloquialisms, and even insults to the character, personality, mood, facial appearance, and gestures behind them” (v).

Among the many attractive features of this small volume, one is much impressed by the format (v-vi):

- Each of the 110 key terms in the first two units is accompanied by an illustration designed to provide context, reinforce meaning, and aid memorization.
- Captions provide English translations for the speech bubbles in the first unit and in the *gestures* section.
- Words that are synonymous or similar to each headword are listed, including adjectives, nouns, and verbs. Many of these are cognates or near-cognates of the English words, making them easier to learn.
- Related terms and expressions are listed to provide additional everyday vocabulary and commonly used phrases.
- Opposites are listed for some headwords. Note that in the sections *polar opposites* and *mood swings*, contrasting character types and emotions appear on facing pages.
- The symbol ○ indicates colloquial terms or slang expressions that should be used only in appropriate situations. The French do appreciate the risk you are taking in using slang, since it demonstrates your interest in their culture.
- Feminine forms and endings are indicated in parentheses.

For the most part, the various scenes and exchanges imagined by the author are perfectly realistic and accurate; however, I happened to open the volume quite at random and came upon the following situation: A stingy customer in a restaurant (11) leaves a mere 2 Euro tip, causing sour faces on two waiters standing by, and a bit of a row between this cocky customer and his cantankerous bet-

ter half. Much to his dismay, his wife accuses him of being *radin* (stingy) and, in his defense, he claims that his *quiche* was not quite done (*cuite*). She states emphatically that the tip still ought to be an incredible 15%! Boy, she must be American or something, and a *radine Américaine* at that (since 20% seems to be the norm in this country, at least in big cities) because, as everyone knows, the tip is always included in France; it's even spelled out in small print on every menu: *service compris*! If you are in a fine establishment, I guess it is all right to show your appreciation and leave a small *pourboire* (tip), but certainly not an outrageous 15%. Fortunately, this particular scene proved to be an exception.

Finally, it goes without saying that no one talks only in *argot* (slang); it gets a bit much at times when characters speak solely in slang. Not even my French students or TAs talk like the cartoon characters in this volume! In the author's defense, he wanted to cram as much useful information as possible into a short volume; in this he has succeeded, too bad if the average reader cannot digest the entire thing in one sitting. *French in Your Face* is a veritable goldmine of colloquial French. I imagine students could study a page or two in conjunction with a more traditional text. Next semester I am going to try a few excerpts from *French in Your Face* and see what students say. I am quite sure they will be duly entertained and perhaps learn a thing or two as well.

A word of caution is in order: the non-native speaker of limited ability (and that means most foreign-born students) should refrain from using some of the more *risqué* expressions and choice epithets contained in this volume for fear of offending someone or other. It is one thing for a native French person to say something *carrément* and quite another for a foreigner (and especially an *amerloque*) to try to be funny in polite society. The strange thing is that non-native speakers often miss some non-linguistic, cultural cue or other, so what was meant to be amusing can prove to be inappropriate or, worse, offensive. When in doubt, don't!

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## **Publisher's Response**

McGraw-Hill thanks Professor Conner for his thorough review of *French in Your Face*. I am particularly delighted that the book provided him with such enjoyment, as it reflects my own experience as publisher and as long-time fan of Luc Nisset's illustrative style. As Professor Conner points out, the book brings together a highly distinctive combination of expressive illustrations and a keen ear to contemporary French idiom (though as a French native now resident of Miami, perhaps the author has become corrupted by American tipping habits!).

While the reviewer's caution on the use of *argot* by non-native speakers is valid, I would also draw attention to the wealth of useful vocabulary and standard, everyday expressions contained in the book, all of which are enlivened by association thanks to the illustrative flair of the author. This book contains too much to digest in one sitting, certainly — but I challenge any student not to enjoy dipping into it, again and again.

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