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Nothing French is too strange

EmailLink By Julie Dalton, Globe Travel Staff December 8, 2007 02:22 AM

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Cavorting with strangers is something frequently allied with overseas travel and with youth, neither of which I am practicing lately. But an inventive, worldly professor, F. Patrick Butler, has cooked up a bouillabaisse of a book, "Cavorting With Strangers: Great Ideas and Their Champions -- Vol. 1: Paris" (Cypress House, 444 pp., \$19.95 in paperback), a fiction full of nonfiction that is the tale of a downsized New York book editor gone to Paris to escape her life's dilemmas and train as a tour guide. Her instructor in this hurried transfusion of knowledge of all things French enlists a prominent cast of characters that might seem familiar -- Rousseau, Napoleon, Hugo, Monet, Chanel, De Gaulle, Cousteau, et al. -- and also seem perfect Paris figures. Hélas, the nonfiction upon which the heroine builds her expertise is not always heroic in the learning: Chanel the collaborator, Sartre the predator, Hugo the womanizer, Rousseau the oddest of ducks, Napoleon the deserter of his freezing army in Russia. Mon dieu! Butler does nothing if not soldier on in an attempt to interpret French history and culture for us, his Francophobic countrymen, calling on these giants of philosophy and art and political science in a context not seen before. And don't forget, this is volume one. Next stop Berlin? London? . . .