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# An intercontinental romance

Cecile Rischmann's novel *The French Encounter* takes the underlying idea from her own life

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If Oscar Wilde could opine, in his 1889 essay, *The Decay of Lying*, that 'Life imitates art more than art imitates life', in the case of writer Cecile Rischmann (Cecilia is her real name), it was a bit of 'both ways' that inspired her to write her debut romantic novel *The French Encounter*. Married to Jean-Paul Rischmann, Cecile lives in France but visits Chennai very often to be with her siblings. In 2014, Cecile Rischmann's short story *Jilted* was chosen in a nationwide contest and published in an anthology, *An Atlas of Love*. She talks about her aversion to French and about how her book came into being.

**When did you meet Jean-Paul Rischmann?**

I was working at the Honorary Consulate of France at the time when Saint Gobain France decided to build a glass float in Chennai. Jean-Paul and five other expatriates were sent for the project. His best friend came over to the Consulate to announce their arrival and invite me to their party. I met Jean-Paul there in May 1999. We got married on March 13, 2004.

**Tell us about your life in Chennai.**

I studied in Christ Church Anglo-Indian Higher Secondary School up to the tenth grade and then switched to St Ursula's Anglo-Indian Higher Secondary School where I did vocational training. I joined Stella Maris College and graduated in Sociology. But during the first two years of college, I developed



**A LIFE IN WRITING** Cecile with her husband Jean-Paul Rischmann

an aversion to French as I was terrified of my professor. It was so bad that I used to bunk classes to avoid being put on the spot. And then one day the professor brought me up to the board just as I feared and asked me a question. I struggled, looking around hopelessly, wishing that the floor would open and swallow me. I still remember the look in her eye and that contemptuous tone: "Cecilia, you are going to miss the boat in French." After that, I completed five years of French until my Diploma Superior and a Stage Pédagogique at the Alliance Française and simultaneously pursued my M.A in French at the Madras University.

Then I went on to study other languages: Italian at the Indo-Italian Chamber of Commerce, Spanish in

Mexico, Business English Higher at Cambridge University, through the British Council, Chennai, Creative Writing at British Council, Delhi, and finally MHRM at Annamalai University, through correspondence).

**When did you leave Chennai?**

We left in 2006 after Jean-Paul completed a second project in Chennai and we headed to Mexico (two years), Colombia (six months), Egypt (one year) and Delhi (three years). Finally we returned to Chennai and we now shuttle between France and India.

**When did the idea for the book emerge and how long did you take to complete it?**

Although Jean-Paul wanted to date me, he told me that marriage was not on his agenda. And when he

came to know it was on mine, he was petrified. The idea began from there. "What would happen if an Indian woman fell in love with Frenchman?" and *The French Encounter* emerged.

I didn't have a timeframe and worked at my own pace.

In between, I met Bollywood producer-director-Editor Subhash Sehgal and I got interested in scriptwriting. I worked on *Youth* and *Visa to Paradise*. Both started as short stories.

But nothing really took off until I began *The French Encounter*. There was some kind of magic in the story and I had the time of my life writing it.

**What's next?**

I'm working 24/7 promoting *The French Encounter* so that it reaches its audience and they feel its impact. My next novel, *Visa to Paradise* is taking shape.