Family sagas and a rich history

Edward Rutherfurd traces a city, and her cast of characters, in Paris

Paris: The Novel, By Edward Rutherfurd (Doubleday Canada, 809 pages, $37.95)

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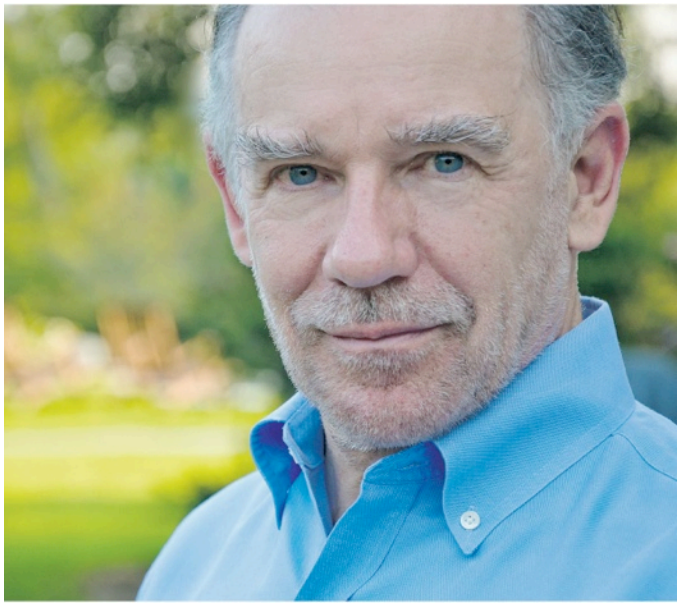

Down at his family's mansion in Fontainebleau at the height of La Belle Époque, a handsome young artist named Marc Blanchard remarks to an American painter friend who's visiting for the summer: "We French are so conscious of our history - it's everywhere around us - that we feel as if we have lived many times before."

And with a smile, he adds: "This may be a delusion, but it's a rich one, and it gives us comfort."

Blanchard is a central character in British author Edward Rutherfurd's new novel, Paris, a brick of a book that runs over 800 pages, has its own slick promo video on YouTube and is much in the vein of the other popular historical epics Rutherfurd has written: New York (2009), The Princes of Ireland (2004), The Rebels of Ireland (2006), Russka (1991) and three books on England: his debut novel, Sarum (1987), London (1997), and its follow-up, The Forest (2000).

Neatly plotted tales that choose a place and weave through its centuries of history are the specialty of this bestselling (six million and counting), Cambridge-educated author. Lose your way, and you need some maps and a display of family trees to remember where everything is happening and who everyone is. Just as he has done before, Rutherfurd, now 65, provides these in the endpapers and opening pages of this, his eighth novel.

In 26 chapters and a short epilogue, Paris follows six extended families - the working-class Le Sourds, aristocratic de Cygnes, bourgeois Renards/Foxes and Blanchards, labourers Gascons and Jewish art and antique dealers the Jacobs - as their lives flow and collide with each other and the great actors of French history. It reaches back as far as the mid-13th century and ends in the turbulent student riots of May 1968, via Versailles, the French Revolution and France under Nazi occupation.

Unlike Rutherfurd's other books, the plot jumps back and forth in time, with successive chapters often skipping several centuries. To an inattentive reader, this can be confusing. But Rutherfurd's prose is so clean and unembellished, the dialogue so fluid and true to the era it's spoken in, that "l'appétit vient en mangeant," as the French say: the more you read, you more you want. The characters are memorable and "attachant," even the crooks and low-lifes (and there are a few).

Cityscape and landscape feature strongly in the novel. Consider this Hemingwayesque description of the view from Montmartre's Sacré Coeur in the early 1920s, seen through a foreigner's eyes (as it happens, Hemingway's, leading a group of a dozen friends to the lookout). "At the top, they walked across from the funicular to the steps in front of the great white church, and looked across Paris as the early evening sun turned the rooftops into a golden haze, and the Eiffel Tower in the distance was like a soft grey dart pointing at the sky, and below them on the broad, steep steps that flowed down the hill, the people and the benches threw their lengthening shadows eastward."

The book is delightfully filmic, with echoes of Jean Renoir's Les Règles du jeu and La Grand Illusion, Marcel Carné's Les Enfants du paradis and Les Visiteurs du soir - even Woody Allen's Midnight in Paris. History buffs will enjoy the words put into the mouths of such well-known figures as Henri IV, Robespierre, Gustav Eiffel and Coco Chanel. Canadians and Americans get their due (Champlain explored us, the American Revolution inspired the French), and so do non-Catholics (the Huguenots, the Jews). And anyone who devours the multigenerational epics of James Michener (on his website, Rutherfurd acknowledges his debt), James Clavell, Alex Haley and Canadian writer David Rotenberg (Shanghai), as well as historical thriller writers like Alan Furst, will find Rutherfurd a kindred soul.

The author is not for all tastes, however.

He can be overly expository, a city tour guide disguised as a master of fiction, prone to the rather lazy device of having characters explain their city to wide-eyed visitors. And he hates to leave any loose end untied - hence the too-perfect coincidence near the end involving a parachuted Canadian airman smuggled to safety; life is not always a grand pattern, surely.

Often, his tale gives off a whiff of to-the-manor-born, as well, with many of the heroes and heroines issuing from the social elites (though there are some villains there, too).

Rutherfurd's not always accurate, either - surprisingly so for someone who prides himself on fastidious research and attention to detail.

There are a number of annoying anachronisms. A visitor to Henri IV in 1604 remarks that hatred between "the classes" can divide a country, using a term more proper to the 19th century. An American artist in Paris in 1898 says young women aren't "shrinking violets," an expression that wouldn't come into vogue for another decade. A French military strategist in 1917 refers to the "payload" that German aircraft bombers carry, when in fact the word only came into use just before the Second World War. The medieval Knights Templar are said in 1307 to have a "huge international capacity" - 500 years before "international" was even a concept. A character says "Inuit Indians" were part of the show at the Paris World's Fair of 1877 (sic; it was actually 1878); not only are the Inuit not Indians, back then they were called something else entirely: Eskimos.

There are some unnecessary duplications in the story, too. The most jarring involves two of the book's most important characters, the wily street kids Thomas and Luc Gascon. Early in the book, Thomas introduces Luc to Eiffel, the famous engineer and architect, during the construction of the Statue of Liberty destined for New York City. A hundred pages on, Thomas introduces Luc to Eiffel for the first time again, during the building of the Eiffel Tower - as if they've never met. In other parts, words are repeated unnecessarily, sometimes on the same page ("the fashionable Marais quarter ... the quarter known as the Marais"), sometimes in the same sentence, and there's the odd typo here and there. There were many more duplications and errors in the advance galley copy I started reading before the published hardback arrived; obviously, the copy editors had their hands full.

(I can't resist mentioning a couple of typos the proofreaders caught, however, simply because they're funny. At Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in Neuilly in 1889, we're told, "there were two hundred tents, and big corals for the horses" - make that "corrals." Unwittingly continuing on the same cowboy path, 50 pages on, there's mention of an elegantly upholstered Second Empire sofa in a high-class hooker's bedroom and, by the fire, "a broad bench, similarly unholstered." Less amusingly, the advance galley was very lax with French accents, omitting most of them - and the book's promotional material still does.)

And for all the author's fluency in French (his father's family was raised in France, and Rutherfurd has been visiting since he was a boy; so have his own children), he does stumble sometimes.

There's no reason Baudelaire's poem L'Invitation au voyage should be capitalized as L'Invitation au Voyage, nor that a poster announcing Buffalo Bill's show in French should lose its capitalization (JE VIENS) and be rendered incorrectly "Je Viens" (the 'v' should follow the rules and be lowercase).

There's also a Frenchman in the book with an oddly anglicized name, Jean Companion - surely "Compaignon" would be more accurate. Other times, the author (or perhaps his dual publishers in Britain and North America) can't decide what market they serve: 'Neighbors' and 'unsavory" are spelled the American way, but then out comes a British locution like "at the weekend" and "a Turkey carpet" (not Turkish).

But these are quibbles. A book as big as Paris is open to all sorts of cross-checking and verification; in the end, it still amounts to a cracking read. Even in its mistakes, Rutherfurd's novel stimulates the mind, just as its subject does.

"A city's a huge organism," Hemingway remarks to his entourage in Montmartre, sitting down to a meal at a long table under the trees in Place du Tertre. "It can be all sorts of things at the same time. History may or may not remember the recent French presidents, but it's going to remember the Impressionists, and the Ballets Russes, and Stravinsky, and Picasso I suspect, all together. So what will Paris be? The memory of all those wonderful things. We remember Napoléon, the Corsican, and Eiffel, who was Alsatian, and most of us also remember that Ben Franklin lived here. That's Paris."

He grins.

"Paris became an international city, so now it belongs to all of us. Everyone in the world."