

## Playing post office in France

PARIS. Tramping, cycling or driving over 70,000 itineraries in navy-blue uniforms with tell-tale yellow stripes, 100,000 posties evoke a France of slower, gentler times. Of times before e-mail and pagers, of dreaming village spires, of letters touching hearts with joy, sadness or (hello taxman!) dismay. As much a part of traditional village life as the mayor, teacher or priest, *le facteur* is a familiar, trustable figure. He talks to everybody on his rounds, and everybody talks to him.

He -- now as often she -- is not just a person delivering letters and packages. He represents *La République*. Message: public services are central to French life, and *La Poste* -- a profit-making public enterprise owned by the State -- serves all Frenchmen equally. And intimately: he conveys everybody's secrets (love, money, good and bad news), but keeping them in sealed envelopes. Closeness, mystery, drama, all delivered discreetly.

Books and movies romanticize the postie's role. Crime-writer Georges Simenon loved to parachute a postman into his famous Inspector Maigret tales, from *Maigret voit rouge* (Maigret Sees Red, 1963) to *L'inspecteur cadavre* (Inspector Corpse, 1968). Dozens of Simenon's books and spun-off movies used letters to hint at mystery, menace or suspense.

Films of '40s-'60s stars like tough-guy Jean Gabin and clownish Louis de Funès (*Le Tatoué* or *Man With a Tatoo*, 1968) wove postmen into celluloid dramas or comedies. France's classic postman flicks came from postwar humorist Jacques Tati (creator of the acclaimed film wacko *Monsieur Hulot*). His 1947 *L'École des facteurs* (Postmen's School) and 1948 *Jours de Fête* (Statutory Holidays) are comic hallucinations praising the dreams, adroitness and pluck of hapless countryside mailmen. Deadpan Buster-Keaton-style disasters littered the first film. The second showed a richer, more lovable character who, during rounds, would stop at the village café for a "small glass of white" -- or even put down his mailbag to help bring in a crop threatened by rain.

Fast-forward to 1990 and another postal comedy: *Promotion canapé* (Sofa Promotion). In full French-farce tradition, this one surfed on the mass arrival of women in the French postal system. Pre-politically correct, this crude, cynical satire portrayed vertical advancement proceeding horizontally.

France, of course, is not the only country to romanticize posties. Italy's touching *Il Postino* (The Postman, 1995) showed a simple, idealistic postman fantasizing about his idol, Chilean communist poet Pablo Neruda. Hollywood gave us *The Postman* (1997) with Kevin Costner.

But the French may have developed the richest, most influential postal mythology. Tied to the religion of public service -- often meaning the public exists to serve trade unions -- France's postal people are revered. Seventy percent of French youth yearn to join the set-for-life civil service, and their first choice is *La Poste*. Job satisfaction? Gossiping counter clerks may irritate clients in a slow-moving post-office line. But the mail-bag hauler earns only gratitude as the all-weather servant of French tradition.

Take the Christmas calendar that every postie offers free (well, in sly expectation of a tangible *merci*). Oblivious to political correctness, every day on it lists a saint's day.

Church and state split in 1905, yet this harmless little anachronism makes everybody an honorary Catholic. Neither Muslims, Protestants, Jews nor even atheists seem to mind.

Certainly not Olivier Besancenot, France's most famous postman. Atheist and Che Guevara fan, he is again running for President of France for the Revolutionary Communist League, one of several Trotskyite sects. At 27 in the 2002 election, he won 1.3 million votes. Still carrying his mail-bag on regular rounds, he parades his far-left views to delighted TV studios, street demonstrations and platforms. But not to the post office. If all employees argued politics there, blood would flow, or at least deafness would ensue. Anyway, there may well be no Trotskyite way to lick a stamp.

Besancenot's ideas are antediluvian, but *La Poste* struggles to innovate. When I was a student here in 1954, you had to yell into the post office's pre-war phones. But with help from Canada's Northern Telecom, France leapt forward. Paris was already ahead with its subway-routed network of pneumatic tubes (a mid-1800s Scottish invention): you could have a love-letter delivered in a 12 cm. *pneu* anywhere in Paris within three hours -- carried from the destination post office by a bike-riding *facteur*.

*La Poste* continues modernizing. It has just announced a total makeover of letter-carriers' lives: new high-tech electric bikes and scooters, GPS telephones, even new dark-blue uniforms with those nifty yellow stripes. As the TV cameras rolled past the bikes to a young female modelling the elegant uniform, the announcer suavely intoned: "In the postal war against competitors, *il faut séduire*." Now, *séduire* may mean merely to please, not necessarily seduce. But this is France, and *La Poste* clearly wants to deliver pleasure.