

**Anna Sam interview by Anna Brown, for Gallic Books.  
July 14 2009**

She's been described as a 'figurehead' for cashiers; an 'unsung heroine' of ignored checkout girls. But for Anna Sam, a French cashier-turned-bestselling author, the motivation to put pen to paper was much more modest. "It's very simple really," she says when asked what was her biggest hope for her book, *Checkout: A Life on the Tills*. "Just to get people to say *bonjour*; it's the basis for everything, it's where all human relations begin."

Anna is well-placed to know. Her witty, eloquent and, at times, poignant look at daily life for a cashier is the fruit of eight years in the same checkout job at a hypermarket in the Brittany city of Rennes. Five years of studying for a literature degree failed to further her ambition to work in publishing, so she returned to her 'student job' to tide her over – and she stayed. Colleagues would joke about writing a book on customers' exasperating behaviour – like trying to steal CDs by hiding them in camembert boxes or finding myriad ways to sneak onto the '10 items only' till. In April 2007, Anna took her first step to writing that book. Her chronicles began life as an anonymous internet blog that quickly gained renown among other beleaguered cashiers, but also managers and even shoppers across France.

Then in December 2007, just as she had resolved finally to quit her job, a local newspaper unmasked her as the mystery blogger. "It was destiny, a star was pushing me out of the job," she says – and it propelled her into the full glare of the media. Within a month, she was being offered book deals equivalent to her entire annual salary. She was invited onto radio and TV chat-shows. And her book – published in France in June 2008 – went global, translated into 10 languages. Not only did it occupy the top slots of the French best-seller lists that summer; it became the inspiration for a play, and a film based on Anna's own Cinderella-style story has been optioned.

Anna took time out of her visit to the UK to talk to Gallic Books.

**Q: You've gone from being almost invisible, as you describe it in the book, to being the focus of enormous amounts of attention. Has it been difficult to adjust?**

**A:** Not difficult, but it's very strange. When I started to write about my life behind the till, I wanted to say to people 'I'm not only a number, I'm a human being'. When all the media hype occurred, I was still working and some customers came to see me. They said, oh it's wonderful what you are doing with your blog, now I will say hello to you! But they had known me for many years before that. That was strange.

**Q: Even before the book was written, just a month after you left your job, you appeared on a France 2 TV discussion with Segolene Royal, who ran for president in 2007. You seemed so calm and self-assured...**

**A:** Many people have said to me that it's very strange that you're not stressed by being on television. But I know what I say is important, not only for me but for every checkout girl. It's like having a message to get across, but it's the truth. People don't want to hear it, but it's about our own behaviour to each other.

**Q: Do you think your book been a kind of revelation for people, especially regarding the working conditions of cashiers?**

**A:** For many people, yes. When I started my blog, I thought, if only I could change one person's point of view, to make that person say 'hello' tomorrow to the checkout girl, then I will have won! But now so many people have read my book and it has changed their

behaviour. People didn't know the reality, but when you use a simple fact like [making the effort to] say hello, people tell me: 'oh my goodness, I never used to do that before!' People don't want to be confronted about their behaviour. It's a really simple message but it needs repeating often. When the book first came out, many cashiers from all over told me they sensed that people were being a little more attentive than before. That's an enormous step, even if there's still a long way to go.

**Q: Did you find yourself getting depressed by being treated like a robot, as you describe it in the book? Did the job affect you physically?**

**A:** No. You have to keep your own troubles hidden. When you are with customers you always have to smile, because that's your job. The best thing I could do was to try to approach all these difficult situations with humour. That's what I tried to show in the book. I wanted to laugh at some of the situations – and I wanted my readers to laugh too! But physically, yes, I had tendonitis, like many other cashiers. Others get carpal tunnel syndrome, which is the most widespread ailment among checkout workers.

**Q: You also write about how you can be trapped in the job for many years but still feel precarious because of the shift patterns. Why was this?**

**A:** Well, I would work around 20 or 25 hours a week in the store, sometimes 30. But I'd stay in the shop about 40 hours, because perhaps I'd be working from 9am to midday, then be back on the tills at 3pm until 9pm. So you're stuck for three hours. You can't drive home because it's too far and it costs money, so you stay at the store. You end up spending more time at the store than at home, but you're only paid for the hours on the till.

**Q: You worked at Leclerc for eight years. Was there something other than the lack of job opportunities which kept you there?**

**A:** There are two things which keep you in the job. Firstly, when you're hired as I was at Leclerc, within a very short time you are offered a permanent contract. But it's actually a trap. You're lured by the chance to have a stable job, even if the pay is low. The second 'trap' is that in the supermarket business, there's a lot of talk about internal career progression. But in fact, these are often false promotions. For instance, a cashier may be asked to take over something more commensurate with her qualifications, like accounting or secretarial work, to cover for maternity or sick leave. They could stay there for months, even a year or two, believing that their career is progressing. But they will always be sent back to the tills when the original worker returns. There are very few who manage to progress from the tills permanently.

**Q: Your opinion on these working conditions has been sought by politicians and industry leaders. Have you been able to get some of these points across?**

**A:** I try! But it's very complicated. Let's just say that managers at that level only listen to what they want to hear. Nowadays, I'm thinking of changing things from a different perspective. I'm considering a return to work within the supermarket sector partly because there are many things I love about it, but also because it would be a way to change things from the inside. You can't change things from the outside. Maybe I'll aim for a role in internal communications. I've started to put feelers out, but can't say more than that just now.

**Q: There was an amazing coincidence in December 2007 when you chose to resign your job just as a local newspaper revealed you were the mystery blogger. Why had you decided to resign just then?**

**A:** That was just amazing! I think there was a star in the sky for me that day which was telling me to get out of that job now! Do something else! The article was published the very same day that my supermarket manager received my letter of resignation. I didn't want to stay any longer in that job, I wanted to find something more in line with my studies. And I realised the longer I stayed, the harder it was to find another job. Any prospective employer would read my CV and only see me as a cashier. I had to draw a line under it, show it was meant to be just a student job.

**Q: How did colleagues react when your blog identity was revealed?**

**A:** I wanted to stay anonymous for as long as possible. But the local paper described me as 'Anna, 28, with a literature degree', so everyone I knew then knew it was me. When I saw my manager, he asked me to come to his office. I thought he would have received my resignation letter, which he had, but he said, congratulations on your blog! I saw the head manager of the store a few days later and he said the same thing. In fact, he was pleased to see someone defending the role of cashier. My cashier colleagues were very, very happy about the blog. They all said how wonderful it was that someone had finally explained how they live their lives.

**Q: What did your parents think to your newfound fame?**

**A:** They are very happy. There are maybe 10 or 12 folders now in my parents' office, and they are all full [of press cuttings]! It is very important for them for different reasons. Firstly, my job now is the job I always dreamed of. But the second reason is, my brother Gwenael died four years ago and my parents stopped smiling. But when my blog was in all the media, when my book came out, I saw my parents smiling again and that was the most important thing for me. [Anna's book is dedicated to her brother.]

**Q: Your second book is out now in France: you say on your blog it's not a sequel?**

**A:** No, but it's in the same area, of course, the store, and with the same humour. My new book is from the customer's point of view. We customers have many, many things that need explaining to retailers - the frustrating experiences we endure, the difficulties we have with affording everything. Also, it's about how in food retail everything is calculated so things are the same whether you're in Lille or Marseilles. We need to re-centre our lives, make them more local, and spend less time in soul-less environments. Nowadays, lots of supermarkets are trying to give themselves more individual characteristics, but they haven't got it quite right yet.