



Author Margaret Ambrose, telling *How to be French*.

Picture: DAVID SMITH. N37CK201

Faction on francophilia

KATE HAGAN

WHEN she signed up for French lessons six years ago, Margaret Ambrose ventured well out of her depth.

With her career and personal life under control, the Elwood resident went far outside her comfort zone by starting classes at Alliance Francaise, St Kilda.

"What comes out of your mouth sounds ridiculous and people laugh at you," she said. "I learnt it's OK to say I don't understand, even though everyone else does."

Ambrose's persistence paid off with the publication last month of her debut novel, *How to be French*. It tells of her path to becoming a fluent francophile, travelling regularly to Paris to interview local celebrities in their native tongue.

With characters inspired by teachers and students, Ambrose describes the novel as "faction" – a mixture of fact and fiction.

It started life as a collection of notes that recorded amusing anecdotes shared with fellow student Julie.

"At first it was about our friendship and a memory of our time at the Alliance," Ambrose said. She realised that, far from just learning verbs, it was a story of personal growth – and lots of laughs and shared confidences.

"I think there's a certain mystique about the French identity that women aspire to," Ambrose said. "Julie's character, for example, thinks the love of her life is going to be French."

"As the book progresses, the characters come to the realisation that people are people."