

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Loving Frank

Nancy Horan

Introduction

I have been standing on the side of life, watching it float by. I want to swim in the river. I want to feel the current.

So writes Mamah Borthwick Cheney in her diary as she struggles to justify her clandestine love affair with Frank Lloyd Wright. Four years earlier, in 1903, Mamah and her husband, Edwin, had commissioned the renowned architect to design a new home for them. During the construction of the house, a powerful attraction developed between Mamah and Frank, and in time the lovers, each married with children, embarked on a course that would shock Chicago society and forever change their lives.

In this groundbreaking historical novel, fact and fiction blend together brilliantly. While scholars have largely relegated Mamah to a footnote in the life of America's greatest architect, author Nancy Horan gives full weight to their dramatic love story and illuminates Mamah's profound influence on Wright.

Drawing on years of research, Horan weaves little-known facts into a compelling narrative, vividly portraying the conflicts and struggles of a woman forced to choose between the roles of mother, wife, lover, and intellectual. Horan's Mamah is a woman seeking to find her own place, her own creative calling in the world, and her unforgettable journey, marked by choices that reshape her notions of love and responsibility, leads inexorably to this novel's stunning conclusion.

Elegantly written and remarkably rich in detail, *Loving Frank* is a fitting tribute to a courageous woman, a national icon, and their timeless love story.

(Reading Group Guides)

About the Author

She was sitting in her office at a Chicago public relations firm. The phone rang. Nancy Horan picked it up and said, "Hello," whereupon she heard the magic words that were to change her life: "This thing's in motion."

It was her agent, calling from New York to report on the response from publishers to Horan's manuscript, a novel about Frank Lloyd Wright's scandalous affair with the wife of a client. The agent's sentence sounded as mysterious and opaque as a spy's message about a midnight rendezvous—something along the order of "The eagle flies at dusk"—but in the book world, its meaning was clear: Publishers were eager to snap up Horan's tale of love and infamy and architecture.

As well they should have been. *Loving Frank*, published last year by Random House, became a critical and commercial success, lingering on the New York Times best-seller list.

But come to think of it, neither the agent's message nor the sales figures were the real life-changers, the actual magic. What set Horan's life going in an entirely new direction was the moment she sat down with a yellow legal pad and a pen and began to tell a story. What truly mattered was the moment she decided that – long odds be damned – she would write about what intrigued her, in the way she wanted to, and try to get it published.

Horan, who lived with her husband and two sons in Oak Park, had been a freelance journalist in the Chicago area for more than two decades. She had worked in public relations. Before that, she had been a middle school English teacher.

But what she really wanted to do was write a novel. And that's just what she did, over a two-year period that included a complete rewrite of the manuscript.

Nancy Horan is a writer and journalist whose work has appeared in numerous publications. *Loving Frank* is her first novel. She lived most of her life in Oak Park, IL, until her recent move to an island in Puget Sound.

(Chicago Tribune)

Reviews

"The novel has something for everyone—a romance, a history of architecture, and a philosophical and political debate on the role of women. What is missing is any sort of note explaining which parts of the novel are based on fact and which are imagined." – *Booklist Review*

"The plot, characters, and ideas meld into a novel that will be a treat for fans of historical fiction." – *Library Journal Review*

Seattle Times Article

A vivid construction of Frank Lloyd Wright's love

By Kris Gilroy Higginson

Special to The Seattle Times

Mamah Borthwick Cheney wrote in 1911 that she had "made a choice in harmony with my own soul" after leaving her husband and young children to build a life with Frank Lloyd Wright.

But sensational headlines quickly intruded on that harmony. "HEGIRA TEARS CHILD HEARTS," shouted the front page of the Chicago Journal. "MRS. CHENEY'S OFFSPRING PRAY SHE MAY RETURN, BUT ONLY ONE HAS HOPE." Headlines about the famed architect's abandonment of his own family were no less condemning.

The couple drew dramatic media coverage again because of a horrific event at Taliesin, the Wisconsin home Frank built for them. These days, with the headlines long faded, Mamah's life and her relationship with Frank are sometimes just an aside in histories of the country's best-known architect. Yet in her debut novel, *Loving Frank* (Ballantine, 362 pp., \$23.95), Whidbey Island author Nancy Horan has transformed the half-forgotten affair into a compelling tale of love, loss and wrenching sacrifices.

Horan has brought Mamah to life by combing newspapers, letters and Frank's autobiography, then drawing from her keen imagination to fill the gaps between facts. The resulting character is a spirited and very real woman who wrestles with what it means to be Frank's partner and simultaneously a mother, a feminist and an intellectual in the early 20th century.

Horan achieves a careful balance in *Loving Frank*. She leaves no doubt that Mamah and Frank shattered their families when they fled to Europe together. But from our vantage point inside Mamah's head, it's hard not to care about her – especially when she realizes the harm she has done.

Although Mamah's relationship with Frank isn't always smooth, he is her solace, and his unconventional Taliesin becomes a treasured refuge.

"Most astounding to Mamah was the space within; it was a dimension unto itself," Horan writes. "What could be more expressive of the American ideal than a home where a person could feel sheltered and free at the same time? . . . It was as if there were no walls to limit her view or thoughts or spirit as they expanded out and out. This was the 'democratic architecture' Frank had been straining to achieve since she'd known him."

Horan draws Frank's character with so many vivid dimensions that he nearly jumps off the pages to stride through the room. Mamah, who eventually comes to see his faults clearly, describes his eccentricity in her (fictional) journal: "Frank Wright — what a joy and puzzle you are. . . . By day you dash around here looking like a country squire who has fallen into a pig trough. You sashay out into the middle of construction in your suit, just off the train from Chicago. When you should dress up, you don't. A couple of weeks ago, when we drove into Spring Green, you actually went into the bank barefoot. I sat in the car, trying to go unnoticed, while you went to see your banker dressed as Huck Finn."

Horan writes with liveliness, yet her language becomes artfully spare as she leads up to the shocker at the end of the book. The last few chapters are written and paced in such a way that even if you know the story of what happened at Taliesin, you won't be able to tear yourself away. And when it's all over, Mamah and her struggles are likely to stay with you for a long time.

(Kris Gilroy Higginson is the news editor at The Seattle Times)

Further Reading

Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright by Brendan Gill

Frank Lloyd Wright: A Biography by Meryle Secrest

Frank Lloyd Wright: An Autobiography by Frank Lloyd Wright

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. Do you think that Mamah is right to leave her husband and children in order to pursue her personal growth and the relationship with Frank Lloyd Wright? Is she being selfish to put her own happiness and fulfillment first?
2. Why do you think the author, Nancy Horan, gave her novel the title *Loving Frank*? Does this title work against the feminist message of the novel? Is there a feminist message?
3. Do you think that a woman today who made the choices that Mamah makes would receive a more sympathetic or understanding hearing from the media and the general public?
4. If Mamah were alive today, would she be satisfied with the progress women have achieved or would she believe there was still a long way to go?
5. In Sonnet 116, Shakespeare writes, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediments. Love is not love/That alters where it alteration finds . . ." How does the relationship of Mamah and Frank bear out the sentiments of Shakespeare's sonnet? What other famous love matches fill the bill?
6. Is Mamah's story relevant to the women of today?
7. Is Frank Lloyd Wright an admirable figure in this novel? Would it change your opinion of him to know that he married twice more in his life?
8. What about Edwin Cheney, Mamah's husband? Did he behave as you might have expected after learning of the affair between his wife and Wright?
9. Edwin's philosophy of life and love might be summed up in the following words from the novel: "Tell her happiness is just practice. If she acted happy, she would be happy." Do you agree or disagree with this philosophy?
10. "Carved over Wright's fireplace in his Oak Park home are the words "Life is Truth." What do you think these words mean, and do Frank and Mamah live up to them?

(Reading Group Guides)