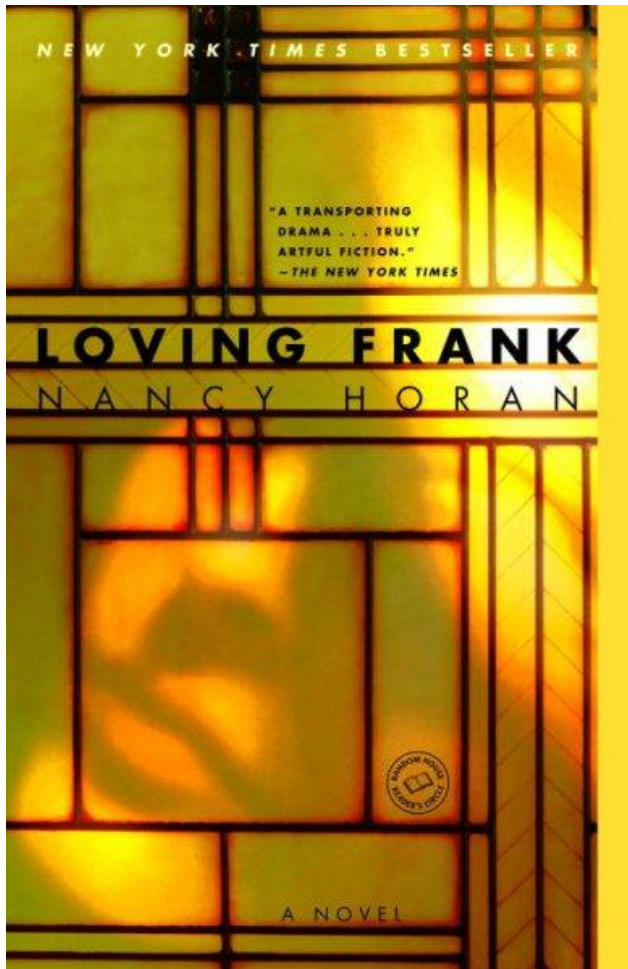


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1328062>

About the Book



In this ambitious debut 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 Cheney'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. Mamah's is an unforgettable journey marked by choices that reshape her notions of love and responsibility, leading inexorably ultimately lead 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.

About the Author

Source: Literature Resource Center <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>



Writer and journalist Nancy Horan lives on an island in Puget Sound in the state of Washington. However, she previously lived in Oak Park, Illinois, for more than twenty years, and it was that locale that inspired her love of architecture and the creations of Frank Lloyd Wright. The town boasts a complex that includes the famed architect's home and studio, as well as several houses he built on commission for various clients.

Among the latter is the home of Mamah Borthwick Cheney, whose husband hired Wright to design the house, and who later left her husband in order to live with Wright. Horan lived on East Avenue, the same street as the Cheney home, and while she learned the history of Mamah and Wright early on, she was aware that their relationship was rarely mentioned by tour guides for the Wright properties. This lack of information sparked her imagination, and she set out to research the woman and the details of her affair with Wright. For many years scholars ignored the relationship, fearing that it threw a shadow over Wright's accomplishments. However, in recent years, some scholars have suggested that Mamah might actually have inspired Wright and even influenced him, and therefore believe that the relationship must not be ignored any longer.

Whatever the ultimate decision regarding Mamah's influence over Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural designs, Horan remained fascinated with the couple's story and determined that, if she had too little information to write a biography, she could still write a novel with the affair at its core. She worked on the story for seven years, at one point throwing out her completed manuscript and starting again from scratch. The result, *Loving Frank: A Novel*, offers a fictional account of the affair and the scandal that occurred when Wright and Mamah left for Europe together, with Mamah abandoning her children in the process. Meg Wolitzer, writing for *Book World*, noted Horan's uneven combination of fact with fiction: "In writing about tenderness between lovers or describing a physical setting, she uses prose that is knowing and natural. At other times she allows us a glimpse of the hand of fact guiding the hand of art, taking it places where it might not necessarily have chosen to go." However, Kathy Piehl, in a review for *Library Journal*, noted that "Horan's extensive research provides substantial underpinnings for this engrossing novel." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* commented on the way that historical facts result in a less-than-smooth narrative, stating that "Mamah's life is cut short in the most unexpected and

violent of ways," forcing the novel "to crawl toward a startlingly quiet conclusion."

Reviews

Booklist

In the early 1900s, married architect Frank Lloyd Wright eloped to Europe with the wife of one of his clients. The scandal rocked the suburb of Oak Park, Illinois. Years later, Mamah Cheney, the other half of the scandalous couple, was brutally murdered at Wright's Talliesen retreat. Horan blends fact and fiction to try to make the century-old scandal relevant to modern readers. Today Cheney and Wright would have little trouble obtaining divorces and would probably not be pursued by the press. However, their feelings of confusion and doubt about leaving their spouses and children would most likely remain the same. 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. This is essential in a novel dealing with real people who lived so recently.

Publishers Weekly

Horan's ambitious first novel is a fictionalization of the life of Mamah Borthwick Cheney, best known as the woman who wrecked Frank Lloyd Wright's first marriage. Despite the title, this is not a romance, but a portrayal of an independent, educated woman at odds with the restrictions of the early 20th century. Frank and Mamah, both married and with children, met when Mamah's husband, Edwin, commissioned Frank to design a house. Their affair became the stuff of headlines when they left their families to live and travel together, going first to Germany, where Mamah found rewarding work doing scholarly translations of Swedish feminist Ellen Key's books. Frank and Mamah eventually settled in Wisconsin, where they were hounded by a scandal-hungry press, with tragic repercussions. Horan puts considerable effort into recreating Frank's vibrant, overwhelming personality, but her primary interest is in Mamah, who pursued her intellectual interests and love for Frank at great personal cost. As is often the case when a life story is novelized, historical fact inconveniently intrudes: Mamah's life is cut short in the most unexpected and violent of ways, leaving the narrative to crawl toward a startlingly quiet conclusion. Nevertheless, this spirited novel brings Mamah the attention she deserves as an intellectual and feminist.

Library Journal * Starred Review *

In 1904, architect Frank Lloyd Wright designed a house for Edwin and Mamah Borthwick Cheney, respectable members of Oak Park, IL, society. Five years later, after a clandestine affair, Frank and Mamah scandalized that society by leaving their families to live together in Europe. Stunned by the furor, Mamah wanted to stay there, particularly after she met women's rights advocate Ellen

Key, who rejected conventional ideas of marriage and divorce. Eventually, Frank convinced her to return to Wisconsin, where he was building Taliesin as a home and retreat. Horan's extensive research provides substantial underpinnings for this engrossing novel, and the focus on Mamah lets readers see her attraction to the creative, flamboyant architect but also her recognition of his arrogance. Mamah's own drive to achieve something important is tinged with guilt over abandoning her children. Tentative steps toward reconciliation end in a shocking, violent conclusion that would seem melodramatic if it weren't based on true events. The plot, characters, and ideas meld into a novel that will be a treat for fans of historical fiction but should not be pigeonholed in a genre section. Highly recommended.

Kirkus Reviews

Journalist Horan's debut novel reflects her fascination with the brilliant, erratic architect Frank Lloyd Wright and his scandalous love affair with a married woman and mother of two.

The book capitalizes on Horan's research into both the architect's private and professional lives. The story opens when Mamah (pronounced May-Muh) Cheney, an Oak Park, Ill., woman, and her husband Edwin, a successful local businessman, contract with Frank to build their new home. Although both Frank and Mamah are married and seem content, the architect and his female client soon find they not only like being together—they must be together. Mamah, an early feminist longing for a more meaningful life, succumbs to Frank's charms as the two enter an affair that is both physical and spiritual. Soon, their relationship is the hook for all of Oak Park's gossip. After leaving their spouses, the pair flees to Europe, finding delight in a less-disapproving continental society, as well as an outlet for their cultural pursuits. Frank, father of the "prairie style" of architecture, proves a thoughtless and irresponsible businessman, but Mamah remains by his side until the couple finally quits Europe and returns home. There, Frank builds a home they call Taliesin. Eventually, Mamah makes peace with her former husband and her two children—son John and daughter Martha—who visit her at the rural estate. However, Frank's wife, Catherine, adamantly continues her refusal to grant her husband a divorce. But just when it appears that their relationship problems have lessened, a terrible and unanticipated tragedy strikes and changes forever the lives of the two lovers who were forbidden to marry. Lovers Frank and Mamah fail to generate sympathy, and the story closes with the unsubtle reminder that real life is never quite as tidy as fiction.

Literary Criticism

Notes on a Scandal

In "*Ragtime*," his fable of social change in early-20th-century America, E. L. Doctorow sent a stuffy paterfamilias on an expedition to the North Pole, leaving his docile wife behind in New Rochelle. In the Arctic, the man was disgusted to

encounter uninhibited Eskimo women coupling lustily with their husbands. Watching one of them in flagrante, he thought nostalgically of his seemingly spouse and doubted whether the Eskimo wife even deserved the name of woman. But while he was off finding the True North, his wife was undertaking her own journey of discovery, setting her sensuality aflame with the teachings of Emma Goldman. Upon the explorer's return, he sensed with alarm that the orbit of his "moral planet" had shifted. In their marital bed, his wife was "not as vigorously modest as she'd been." To him, her liberation felt like a punishment from God. But what did it feel like to her? Would changing mores permit her to leave a man she had outgrown and still keep her good name?

"Loving Frank," an enthralling first novel by Nancy Horan, is set at the same time as Doctorow's modern classic -- the decade before World War I -- and recreates its weld of fact and fiction, wrapped around the core theme of female self-actualization. Unlike the wife in *"Ragtime,"* however, the woman under scrutiny in Horan's book actually lived, and the world's reaction to her liberation is known. The "Frank" of Horan's title is the architect Frank Lloyd Wright; the "Loving" came from a woman who has been all but erased from history's rolls: Mamah (pronounced MAY-muh) Borthwick Cheney, a learned, lovely woman who scandalized Chicago when she left her husband and two young children to flee to Europe with Wright -- who left behind a wife and six children of his own. The two fell in love in 1907, while Wright was building a "prairie house" for Mamah and Edwin Cheney in Oak Park.

If guilt were calculated by the sheer number of abandoned offspring, Wright's rap sheet would have been longer than Mamah's; but Mamah was more vilified because she was a woman. (Horan weaves lurid contemporary press accounts into her narrative as proof.) In society's view, Wright was merely misbehaving, while Mrs. Cheney was doing something far more shocking: acting like an unnatural mother.

Horan prods readers to consider an uncomfortable question: Were Mamah's feelings unnatural? Edwin Cheney didn't think so; he granted her a divorce and allowed her access to their children. Wright didn't think so; he wanted to marry her, but his estranged wife, Catherine, refused to divorce him. Compelling the reader's sympathy, Horan evokes the image of Mamah, sunk in depression after the birth of her second child, recording a quotation by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her diary: "It is not sufficient to be a mother: an oyster can be a mother." Mamah wanted more. "For as long as Mamah could remember," Horan writes, "she had felt a longing inside for something she could not name." A few months after the diary entry, that longing acquired a name: Frank Lloyd Wright. Public outrage followed Frank and Mamah across the Atlantic in 1909, endangering the young architect's career and destroying his companion's good name. Wright's legacy has been retroactively protected and buttressed by his work, but Mamah Borthwick Cheney's reputation didn't survive their romance -- and neither did she. Horan follows the couple as their relationship travels from its

anxious, ecstatic beginnings, past doubts and compromises, through renewed hope, and on to its tragic close. The conversations she invents between Mamah and Frank, as between all of the characters, proceed with unforced ease, enfolding multiple layers of their personal and professional lives, touching on poetry, translation, architecture, idealism, love and family.

At a distance of a hundred years, these conversations can hardly be actual, but Horan makes them plausible and engrossing. In France, desperately wishing to ease her guilt over leaving her family, Mamah seeks solace in the feminism of the Swedish suffragist Ellen Key. (Key later authorized Mamah to translate some of her work into English.) Reading Key's book "Love and Marriage," Mamah tells her lover in excitement: "She says that once love leaves a marriage, then the marriage isn't sacred anymore. But if a true, great love happens outside of marriage, it's sacred and has its own rights." Exhilarated, she continues: "The human race will evolve to a higher plane where there won't be a need for laws regulating marriage and divorce." Cynically but not unkindly, he responds, "So if we can just hang on for a millennium or two, it'll all work out."

Upon the couple's return to America, Wright built a refuge for them in the hills of southwestern Wisconsin -- his famous Taliesin -- hoping to escape censure and prying eyes. But their bid for privacy failed, and reporters besieged them. Grieved by the sanctimoniousness of the "birds of prey" who flocked round Taliesin, Wright released an impassioned defense of Mamah to the local press in the summer of 1914, but by then it was far too late to save her. She was "noble," he explained, and "valued womanhood above wifedom or motherhood." Their life together was not hedonistic, he argued, because "the 'freedom' in which we joined was infinitely more difficult than any conformity with customs could have been. Few will ever venture it. ... You wives with your certificates for loving -- pray that you may love as much or be loved as well!"

And yet, few of Mamah's closest friends and relations, watching her bond with Wright deepen, had much love to spare for her. Mamah's older sister, Lizzie, whom Mamah left to care for her children when she decamped with Wright, scorned her sister's judgment. "Do you realize what you gave up for Frank Wright?" Lizzie asks. "The kind of life most women -- most feminists -- dream of."

Even Ellen Key, whom Mamah regarded as her mentor, sent a letter to Taliesin, urging her to leave Wright for the sake of her children. "It has been my belief and expressed philosophy that the very legitimate right of a free love can never be acceptable if it is enjoyed at the expense of maternal love," Key wrote. To Mamah (in Horan's depiction), this defection was both devastating and intellectually dishonest: "It struck her that Ellen Key's ideas were inherently self-contradictory." How could a woman who believed that staying in a loveless marriage was "tantamount to prostitution" tell her to return to one? In her response to Key (drawn from one of only 10 letters from Mamah that Horan was

able to find) she explained that she had made "a choice in harmony with my own soul and what I believe to be Frank Wright's happiness." As for reuniting with her children, she added, "that cannot be just yet." Was such single-mindedness admirable or chilling? Where would this love have led Mamah, if fate had allowed it to continue?

A century after pathbreakers like Emma Goldman, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Ellen Key struggled to raise female consciousness, there is still no satisfactory answer to the question of how a woman dedicated to her own self-expression can fulfill the tradition-bound, justly demanding needs of her children when presented with a competitor for their love. The problem EllenKey wrestled with in her philosophy, and that Mamah could not solve in her life, had no solution in 1907 and still has none in 2007. In "Loving Frank," bringing the buried truths of the ill-starred relationship of Mamah Borthwick Cheney and Frank Lloyd Wright to light, Horan only increases her heroine's mystery. Mamah Borthwick Cheney wasn't just any woman, but Horan makes her into an enigmatic Everywoman -- a symbol of both the freedoms women yearn to have and of the consequences that may await when they try to take them.

Source: Schillinger, Liesl. "Notes on a Scandal." *The New York Times Book Review* 23 Sept. 2007: 16(L). Literature Resource Center.
<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions Source: <http://www.randomhouse.com/rhpg/lovingfrank/>

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?
11. Why do you think Horan chose to give her novel the epigraph from Goethe, "One lives but once in the world."?
12. When Mamah confesses her affair to her friend Mattie, Mattie demands, "What about duty? What about honor?" Discuss some of the different meanings that characters in the novel attach to these two words.
13. In analyzing the failure of the women's movement to make more progress, Mamah says, "Yet women are part of the problem. We plan dinner parties and make flowers out of crepe paper. Too many of us make small lives for ourselves." Was this a valid criticism at the time, and is it one today?
14. Why does seeing a performance of the opera Mefistofele affect Mamah so strongly?
15. "Why is Mamah's friendship with Else Lasker Schuler important in the book?"
16. Ellen Key, the Swedish feminist whose work so profoundly influences Mamah, states at one point, "The very legitimate right of a free love can never be acceptable if it is enjoyed at the expense of maternal love." Do you agree?
17. Another of Ellen Key's beliefs was that motherhood should be recompensed by the state. Do you think an idea like this could ever catch on in America? Why or why not?
18. Is there anything that Frank and Mamah could have done differently after their return to America that would have ameliorated the harsh welcome they received from the press? Have things changed very much in that regard today?
19. What part did racism play in Julian Carleton's crime? Were his actions the product of pure insanity, or was he goaded into violence?

Multimedia

Touring Frank For Loving Frank (Video Clip)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Slw0H1Shh_M

A tour with author Nancy Horan of the homes that famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright designed, one of which was for his mistress.

Novel Sheds Light on Frank Lloyd Wright's Mistress (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12536605>

A discussion of the book on NPR's *Morning Edition*.

Further Reading

Moving the Mountain: Women Working For Social Change by Ellen Cantarow

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1014585>

(Call number: 305.4 Ca)

These vivid oral histories of the lives of three remarkable political activists document a century of social change movements. Florence Luscomb campaigned for suffrage early in the century and went to work in the labor, peace, and contemporary women's movement. Ella Baker was a civil rights organizer for over fifty years. Jessie Lopez De La Cruz, a lifelong farmworker, was the first woman to organize in the fields for the United Farmworkers.

The Georgetown Ladies' Social Club by C. David Heymann

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1217640>

(Call number: 975.3 He)

Prize-winning biography Heymann tells of a group of highly motivated and independent women who all happened to reside in the same place at roughly the same time, pursued common goals and interests, and were married to successful and power-driven men.

Frank Lloyd Wright Collected Writings by Frank Lloyd Wright

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1098766>

(Call number: 720.92 Wr)

Collected writing of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Author's official website

<http://www.nancyhoran.com/>

Information, resources, and news about the author.

Read-Alikes

The Wilde Women by P.S. Wall

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1288944>

(Call number: Fiction Wall)

Having left her southern hometown of Five Points five years earlier after discovering that her sister and fiancé had been having an affair, unpredictable Pearl Wilde returns home to exact revenge.

Holy Skirts by Rene Steinke

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1247952>

(Call number: Fiction Steinke)

From the talented author of "The Fires" comes a fascinating novel of art, passion, modernity, and war set in the early years of the 20th century that provides a portrait of the real-life Baroness Elsa of Greenwich Village.

Mr. Emerson's Wife by Amy Brown

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1275364>

(Call number: Fiction Brown)

In this novel about Ralph Waldo Emerson's wife, Lidian, Amy Belding Brown examines the emotional landscape of love and marriage. Living in the shadow of one of the most famous men of her time, Lidian becomes deeply disappointed by marriage, but consigned to public silence by social conventions and concern for her children and her husband's reputation. Drawn to the erotic energy and intellect of close family friend Henry David Thoreau, she struggles to negotiate the confusing territory between love and friendship while maintaining her moral authority and inner strength. In the course of the book, she deals with overwhelming social demands, faces devastating personal loss, and discovers the deepest meaning of love.

Extra!

Have each member of the group come prepared with a picture of one of their favorite architect's works to share with the group. Discuss each other's picks.

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