These days it is difficult to think of Frank Lloyd Wright as other than a star architect and commercial box-office hit. The Guggenheim museum broke some of its own attendance records with its recent exhibition, and an endless supply of books cater to the public’s interest in pictures of his work and sensational accounts of his life. Two recent books that focus on a tragic moment in Wright’s life are manifestations of this phenomenon.

In *Loving Frank* Nancy Horan, a journalist from Oak Park, Illinois, recounted the love affair between Mamah Borthwick Cheney and Frank Lloyd Wright that began around 1907 and culminated in her murder in 1914 when Julian Carlton, a servant working for Wright and Mamah, murdered her and six others at their home, Taliesin, in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Using the work of scholars, but altering historical fact and inventing dialogue as well as letters, Horan created a romance novel that became a *New York Times* bestseller. Critics, particularly newspaper journalists, have widely praised the book, and it has sold thousands of copies. So what is wrong with historical fiction that takes liberties to produce a popular novel?

Before answering that question I should disclose that I am one of the scholars whose work Horan has purloined. She acknowledged my book, *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Lost Years* as “invaluable” (361), and indeed, her book could not exist without it as she appropriated not only the chronology I published, but also the preponderance of details about Wright and Borthwick in Europe.1 It is always strange to see years of research and writing lifted and presented as original work in someone else’s book, but we seem to live in an age of such “borrowing.” Much posturing about the book’s originality emerged both from the author and from general reviewers who know little about Frank Lloyd Wright. Horan implies that in 2001 she learned about the cache of letters in Sweden between Mamah and Ellen Key, the Swedish feminist, but she neglects mentioning that Alice T. Friedman discussed such “borrowing.” Much posturing about the revelation of scandal, particularly sexual misconduct, but in seeing it punished. Wright and Borthwick’s tragedy provided the fodder for a true morality play that parallels today’s media events, which range from exposés of sports figures, politicians, and clergy. We love titillating accounts of salacious behavior and seeing sinners who defy social conventions punished by an avenging angel representing moral rectitude. More often than not that avenger is a journalist. Horan tapped into this prurient tendency to produce the most successful exploitation of Wright’s life so far. While doing this, she misses capturing the atmosphere of the period, a

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Nancy Horan

*Loving Frank*

New York: Random House, 2007, 384 pp., no illus. $23.95 (cloth), ISBN 9780345494993

William R. Drennan

*Death in a Prairie House: Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Murders*


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necessity for all romantic treatments, and
provides instead a mood that is too con-
temporary. Horan’s casual diction adds to
this defect: the characters appear as if they
have just emerged from the 1990s instead
of being personalities from the turn of the
twentieth century. Wright sounds particu-
larly unfamiliar. Contrary to what Horan
states in a postscript interview published
in her book (372), Wright had written a
great deal by 1909 and certainly had found
his voice. Horan misses the character that
emerges from how he spoke and what he
wrote.

The problematic diction contributes to
the rendering of the characters as one-
dimensional stereotypes. Mamah comes
off as a flawless saint, a good and noble
post-Victorian heroine who succumbs to
passion and discovers women’s liberation.
Ellen Key is presented as tawdry, even
crude. Anyone who has seriously read her
books and letters would not recognize the
personality Horan has drawn. When she
has Key asking Mamah, “Does he give you
good sex?” (133), the phrasing is so stilted
that it is risible; Key was a distinguished,
sophisticated, and articulate person who
certainly could speak idiomatic English.
Wright, of course, gets major drubbing.
Horan’s portrayal of his persona conforms
to the current standard line: he may have
been a genius, but he was a selfish cad and
an egomaniac. Horan renders him as
sloppy and slattern, even vulgar. A friend
of mine who read the book asked me how
Mamah Borthwick could love such a man.
A good question indeed, and clearly there
was more to the man than revealed here. If
Horan had been more diligent in her
research—looking, for example, at numer-
ous letters between Wright and allies such
as Charles Robert Ashbee, Darwin D.
Martin, and William Norman Guthrie—
she might have produced a richer book in
which we would have encountered in
Wright a far more complex and conflicted
figure.

William R. Drennan’s Death in a Prai-
rise House focuses on the murders that cul-
minate Horan’s novel. Drennan, a professor
of English at the University of Wisconsin–
Baraboo/Sauk County, took, however, the
opposite tack: attempting to recreate the
Taliesin murders, in the format of a crime
story, from factual sources. His setup of
Wright’s life prior to 1909 is conven-
tional and derivative, introducing new
errors and repeating old ones, including
ones that have long been corrected. He
relies too heavily on secondary sources,
particularly out-of-date biographies and
an antiquated bibliography. Some of his
deductions are dubious. Like Horan, he
cannot resist sensationalizing the story
and stroking the prurient interest of the
reader. But unlike Horan, Drennan did
visit the Wright Archives at Taliesin
West to conduct research and examine
documents, and he correctly identified
the real motives for the murders: psychi-
sis and revenge. His contribution is to
confirm unequivocally the motives for
the murders.

Drennan’s and Horan’s books may
increase the public’s awareness of Frank
Lloyd Wright’s dramatic life, but they do
little in providing a general understanding
of Wright’s major objective: the creation
of an organic architecture that represents
American democracy. For that under-
standing the public and scholars will need
to look elsewhere.

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Notes
1. See Anthony Alofsin, Frank Lloyd Wright: The Les-
tsons of Europe, 1910–1922, PhD diss., Columbia Uni-
versity, 1987; and Frank Lloyd Wright: The Lost Y
ears, 1910–1922 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1993). These reconstruct Wright’s travels to Europe
(1909–10), give the story of his Wasmuth publica-
tions, provide a documentary chronology from 1908
to 1923, and introduce a new primitivist phase in his
oeuvre. They establish Wright as a feminist who
collaborated with Borthwick and extensively discuss
Ellen Key’s writings and philosophy.

2. See Alice T. Friedman, “Frank Lloyd Wright and
Feminism: Mamah Borthwick’s Letters to Ellen
Key,” JS-HH 61, no. 2 (June 2002), 140–51.

3. Herbert Fritz, Wright’s other draftsmen at
Taliesin, was badly burned in the fire set by Carlton
but survived. He recounted to his son Herbert Fritz,
Jr., the ongoing conflict between Carlton and Bro-
delle. (Copy of a letter from Herbert Fritz, Jr. to
Robert Twombly, 29 June 1979, William C. Marlin
Papers, folder 4103.300, Frank Lloyd Wright
Archives, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona.)

4. Darcy Lewis, “Loving Frank: An Interview with
Novelist Nancy Horan,” Wright Angles 34, no. 1
(Feb.–April 2008), 7.