



# Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright

*Brendan Gill*

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## **Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright** Brendan Gill

Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) is often described as the greatest of American architects. His works—among them Taliesin North, Taliesin West, Fallingwater, the Johnson Wax buildings, the Guggenheim Museum—earned him a good measure of his fame, but his flamboyant personal life earned him the rest. Here Brendan Gill, a personal friend of Wright and his family, gives us not only the fullest, fairest, and most entertaining account of Wright to date, but also strips away the many masks the architect tirelessly constructed to fascinate his admirers and mislead his detractors. Enriched by hitherto unpublished letters and 300 photographs and drawings, this definitive biography makes Wright, in all his creativity, crankiness, and zest, fairly leap from its pages.

## **Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright Details**

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## **Robert LaCommare says**

You do not have to be a fan of Mr. Wright or his Architecture (As I am) to enjoy this well crafted bio. Also, you will be amazed at how many twists and turns occurred during his lifetime.

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## **Sean says**

While visiting family in Ireland and England, I finally finished Brendan Gill's, *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright*. Wright was, of course, a true American genius but as was noted by one acerbic critic, a bit like PT. Barnum. He was a relentless self-promoter and a bit of a con man in his financial affairs. Perennially in debt, one of his more amusing and self-serving lines was: "Take care of the luxuries first and the necessities will follow." *Many Masks* is a terrific book, at once gossipy and deeply informative.

Wright could be extremely offensive by just being who he was. He visited President Roosevelt and this is what he said to a friend (loudly) just outside the President's door. " You know Carleton, I've always told you I would rather be Wright than President." And I think he meant it literally, rather than as a pun, although with Wright you could never tell. Then this marvelous boner speaking directly to the President: "You know Franklin, you ought to get up out of that chair and look around at what they are doing to your city here, miles and miles of Ionic and Corinthian columns (which Wright despised)." President Franklin, it should be noted, did not subsequently commission him for any buildings in DC.

Towards the end of the book, Robert Frost's poem, "The Gift of Outright" indicates how Wright, and of course others like him, were at the vanguard of a new story about America.

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright  
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)  
To the land vaguely realizing westward,  
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,  
Such as she was, such as she would become."

Architects were supposed, in a way, to give us some of the art back that has been lacking in America. Certainly Wright did so but in a most curious manner. Ahead of his time, he walked through doors that have still to be fully opened. He said something, for example, that caught me off guard but that resonates deeply. "You know we have no religion to go with the Declaration of Independence, to go with the sovereignty of the individual." And he was absolutely right. The vague deism of Jefferson and Washington had little power except to remove the old impediments of imperial religion. It is, perhaps, the task of the new age and of those yet unsung to provide the story of America with a new vigor rooted in an epistemology of virtue and vice. Hopefully, it will be a story that reflects on what it really means to be a son or daughter of God. (God doesn't think small and neither should we.)

The Catholicism of Chesterton, perhaps, infused with the wisdom of Yeats beckons (and forgive me for waxing, perhaps, too extravagantly in the direction of hermeneutics). The inoculation of sacramental grace against our ancient reptilian instincts simply allows us to be who we are but there is so much more to do. In

the vast profligacy of the heavens, the message of an extraordinary generosity and desire is patterned. God wishes to know Himself completely as other than Himself. This is both our lineage and, so to speak, our job. The comfort that we take from extraordinary lives, such as Wright's, is a testament to the power of the unseen world both within and without. This is an adventure on an epic scale. Not a story just of loss and restoration, or primarily a soteriology of damnation and everlasting life, but an adventure.

"We cannot know truth but we can embody it." --William Butler Yeats

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## **Troy Williams says**

Brendan Gill does an excellent job of exposing the inner workings that made Frank LLoyd Wright the iconoclast he became. As with any legendary figure Wright himself attempted to create a mythology. Anyone who has read his autobiography will clearly understand that this was a man with unbounded self-confidence and admittedly a certain level of genius. His life was alternatively euphoria and tragedy some of both at his own responsibility. In my humble opinion, this writer does a more than admirable job of interweaving the psychology of a man who can only be described on the edge of mania at times with the self-assurance (narcissism) that changed the world of architecture both for the good and for eternity. I highly recommend this book.

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## **carl theaker says**

With so many books written about such a gigantic figure such as FLW I checked about and found this biography, which is considered by at least some to be a definitive work.

It reads well and as would be necessary for a book about an architect, pictures throughout.

FLW lived at minimum 3 or say 4 lifetimes, his monumental work, his humongous ego, murder, mayhem, scandal, it's all there, an interesting good read.

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## **richard says**

need to finish

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## **Josh Perez says**

I am presently reading the book *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright*. The book is good and it tells a lot about the architecture that Frank Lloyd Wright designed and created in his years. The part I don't like is the fact that it talks so much about his social life. The book depicts him as such a bad guy and doesn't let the audience hear the other side of the story. This book doesn't get enough input from the side of Frank Lloyd Wright and just hangs him out to dry. In fact it only really talks about the houses he lived in or did something in his personal life or if there was some sort of huge scandal that was left by him. There are pictures of houses and paintings on every page with captions underneath them to give a brief explanation. However the text doesn't explain the picture of his designs fully. I believe this is the most important part of his life and they don't give all of the details about his masterpieces. When you see these houses it just tantalizes you and it makes, me personally want to learn more about the houses that are shown on the captions. I think Frank Lloyd Wright will be remembered more for his designing houses rather than his personal life, and he should be revered for doing all that he did in designing hundreds of houses that are still valuable and in fashion even now a days.

Overall this is an interesting book about an interesting man. If you were reading the book, and you had no idea who Frank Lloyd Wright was, you would just think he was a smart, thriving socialite who was pretty good at designing houses. However anyone knows that Frank Lloyd Wright was the self proclaimed greatest architect in the world.

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## **Washingtonmaid says**

While *Seacrest* is considered "the Wright Biography" Gill offer a more complex man

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## **Henry Sturcke says**

Gill chronicles the amazingly long and fruitful life and career of Wright with the dual advantage of having known him yet not blindly in awe of him. He sees the flaws of the man, a deceitful egomaniac, reckless with finances, both his own and those of his clients, careless of reputation, both his own and that of the women who fell under his spell, his churlishness in hiding what he had learned by studying the work of others, especially his contemporaries.

Yet Gill remains convinced that Wright was one of the greatest architects of all time. Not every building he designed was a masterpiece—he was never reluctant to flaunt the principles he proclaimed—but the best of them are unsurpassed not only in their technical achievement but in their ability to elevate the spirit of anyone who enters.

Does this balance out the flaws, to raise the question often posed in considering such geniuses? Gill struggles not to place his assessment on these terms, but in the end must concede that while many take more from the world than they give back, Wright was not among them; he struck a good bargain with the world.

The title expresses an aspect of Wright central to Gill's interpretation: Wright spent a lifetime inventing and discarding a series of personae, from teenage runaway who transformed himself into boy wonder, all the way to ancient sage. Gill applies his reportorial skills to explode some of the founding myths of the Wright cult, including the dream his mother was purported to have had while pregnant with him revealing his destined profession.

Together with Gill, the reader shakes his head, wondering why such an undeniably great man felt the need to

embellish as he did. Yet this mystery is not nearly as great as the level of creative innovation Wright was able to seemingly “shake out of [his] sleeve,” as Wright himself repeatedly described it. A good read, highly recommended.

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### **Norm says**

Very interesting, what a piece of work Wright was! Liar, self-publicist, unscrupulous debtor, took advantage of women and friends...and a genius!

The book is very well written but the parts that go in for deep architectural descriptions or historical discussions get a bit bogged down...i started skipping a few pages here and there just to get on with it.

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### **Czarny Pies says**

There have been so many books written about Frank Lloyd Wright that I am reluctant to give this one the fifth star that it possibly deserves. Since there may be a better book on Wright available that I am not aware of, I feel that I cannot give this book more than four stars.

If you are interested in Wright, this book is if nothing else great fun. I fundamentally agree with Gill's assessment that Wright was a brilliant artist and a somewhat erratic architect. Wright's furniture drew blood and his ceilings leaked but the artistic vision always shone brightly through.

Wright was a charmer but an utter scoundrel. He cheated his first employer (Adler and Sullivan) and many of his clients. All however was done for the cause of art.

I decided to read this book after participating in four docent led tours of Wright houses in Buffalo in a three year period from 2002 to 2004. At the time, a major renovation of the Darwin Martin House was underway. In this remarkable building, Wright put the stairwell on the east side of the chimney on the ground floor and on the west side on the second floor. In order to construct according to Wright's plan the builder had to put an elbow in the chimney at the ceiling of the first floor, run a six foot span in the chimney parallel to the floor and then insert another elbow to allow the chimney to resume its upward course. Such a design violated New York's building code. Thus the restoration team had to obtain a special law from the state assembly exempting the Darwin Martin House from the state building code in order to proceed with the renovation.

The great quality of Gill's book is that he represents Wright as you think he must be after having visited a number of his buildings.

Bravo to the good people of Buffalo for taking such excellent care of the buildings of this great architect.

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### **Candice says**

A great outsider perspective; good for both the architecture as well as the dramatic life story.

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**Dana says**

This was a better biography than the Secrest book, but I need to move on now to other topics besides Frank Lloyd Wright....

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