

**Death in a Prairie House:
Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Murders**
Discussion Questions
by William R. Drennan

Author Bio: (Wisconsin Press)

William R. Drennan (1944–2015) was professor emeritus of English at the University of Wisconsin–Baraboo/Sauk County and adjunct instructor in the Department of English at Appalachian State University, in Boone, North Carolina.

Characters:

- **Frank Lloyd Wright** – (1867-1959) – Innovative architect who started the Prairie House concept. Had easy charm and was bad with money. Loved music, nonconformity, individualism, and Emerson. Very little formal education. Grew up in Spring Green > moved to Chicago and built Oak Park > built and moved to Taliesin.
 - 1st wife – Catherine – Married 1889.
 - 6 kids – Lloyd, John Lloyd, Catherine, David, Frances, and Llewellyn.
 - Mistress – Mamah Borthwick Cheney
 - 2nd wife – Miriam Noel – Married in 1923.
 - 3rd wife – Olgivana Hinzenberg - Married in 1928
 - Wright lived for 47 years after the fire. He was buried in Spring Green near Mamah. His body was exhumed and moved after death of his 3rd wife.
- **Mamah Borthwick Cheney** – Wright’s lover. Divorced from Edwin. Two children – John and Martha. While married, Mamah and Edwin were Lloyd Wright’s neighbor in Chicago. Wright built them a house. She had a Master’s degree in Teaching. Translated written materials into English. Worked for women’s equality and rights.
- **Julian Carlton** – Handyman at Taliesin. Killed 7 people at Taliesin on August 15, 1914 and set it on fire. Married to Gertrude, the cook at Taliesin. They lived at Taliesin for 2 months before the murders/fire.
- **George Clementson** – Judge presiding over Julian Carlton’s trial.
- **Henri Sullivan** – “Father of Skyscrapers.” Wright worked with him as a draftsman and he taught Wright most of what he knew. His philosophy is “Form follows function.” Wright called him “Lieber Meister.”
- **Anna Lloyd Jones Wright** – Frank Lloyd Wright’s mother. School teacher. From a very distinguished, respected, and prosperous Spring Green family – the Lloyd Jones. Had 3 children – Frank, Mary Jane, and Maginel. Very devoted to Frank.
- **Catherine “Kitty” Lee Tobin Wright** – Chicago socialite from a well-to-do family. Met Wright when she was 16. Married Wright at 18. They had 6 children. Refused to give Wright a divorce for years.

- **William Carey Wright** – Frank’s father. Musician and ordained minister. Bad with money. Widowed with three children. 1st wife was Permelia. 2nd wife was Anna. Divorced/left Anna and kids in 1884 after 18 years of marriage.
- **Sheriff Williams** – Arrested and took Julian Carlton to jail.

Timeline:

1909 – Wright abandoned his wife, 6 children, and architectural practice. Returned briefly in 1910.

1910 – Wright left for Taliesin permanently with Mamah.

1914 – Murders at Taliesin occur on August 15, 1914.

- Wright is in Chicago with his oldest son, John, working on a project.
- Mamah and her children (John, 12, and Martha, 8) are thought to have been attacked/killed 1st while at lunch. Attacked with a hand axe.
- Gertrude, Julian’s wife, runs away.
- Julian Carlton serves the draftsmen and workers lunch. He locks the door and then pours gasoline into the room and sets it on fire.
 - **Herbert Fritz** (20) – On fire, jumps out of window and rolls downhill putting out his flaming clothes. He returns to help. He sees Bordelle killed. Fritz survives.
 - **Emil Brodelle** (30) – Jumps out window and is killed by Carlton with the axe.
 - **Billy Weston** (35) is hit twice with the blunt end of the axe and is stunned. He survives the massacre.
 - **Tom Brunker** (66) is hit with the axe. He is later killed.
 - **Ernest Weston** (13) is killed with the axe.
 - **David Lindblom** is struck with axe and collapses. He later dies from his wounds.
- Julian Carlton sets Mamah and her children’s bodies on fire.
- Billy Weston rouses and runs to neighbors to get help. Returns to Taliesin and starts trying to put out the fire with a hose. Neighbors arrive and try to help put out the fire.
- Julian Carlton is found hiding in the insulated furnace. He drinks acid before he is arrested. He dies 7 weeks later from starvation due to trauma from the acid he drank.
- Mamah is buried in Spring Green by Wright. Her kids are buried in Chicago by Edwin.

Places:

- **Spring Green, WI** – Town nearest to Taliesin. Town where the Lloyd Jones family is located.
- **Taliesin** – Frank Lloyd Wright’s personal home. Built near Spring Green, WI. House destroyed twice by fire and rebuilt twice. Taliesin I is destroyed by arson. Taliesin II catches fire due to faulty electrical wiring. Wright live at Taliesin III until his death in 1959.
- **Oak Park** – Suburb of Chicago where Frank Lloyd Wright built the house he shared with Catherine and kids.
- **Prairie homes** – Houses tied to the landscape, used indigenous materials, and were built with the family hearth central to the home. They were both functional and aesthetically pleasing.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. Do you think the author is biased toward or against Frank Lloyd Wright? Does his biases slant the book?
3. Did you like the pacing of this book? Too fast, too slow, or just right?
4. The vocabulary in this story is very collegiate and unusually difficult. Did that help, harm, or have no impact on the story for you?
5. Do you think Anna's attachment to her son, Frank Lloyd Wright, caused some of his oddities? His successes? What about his father?
6. Wright's Prairie style homes focus on family and unity, yet he abandons his family for his mistress. Why do you think Wright's personal life and design concepts were so diametrically opposed?
7. Why do you think the title of the book is "Death in a Prairie House" when the house, Taliesin, had a distinctive name?
8. Everything Wright did with Mamah was steeped in scandal. Wright said he did it for "freedom and individuality." What do you think? Do you think he liked, disliked, or had no opinion on the notoriety they engendered?
9. Wright said (and I'm paraphrasing) that laws and civil morality were designed for ordinary men and, since he was extraordinary, they did not apply to him. What do you think about that statement?
10. Wright's business suffered when he moved to Taliesin because he forced prospective clients to come to him. Why do you think he did that?
11. Many of the facts of the Taliesin murders and subsequent fire are muddled and inconsistent. Why do you think this happens?
12. Frank Lloyd Wright was not even at Taliesin during the murders, but many people in Southwestern Wisconsin blame him for them. Why do you think Wright is so disliked in his hometown?
13. Do you think Gertrude, Julian Carlton's common-law wife, had anything to do with the murders?
14. Why do you think Julian Carlton murdered the people at Taliesin and set the house on fire?
15. At the time, the Wisconsin court believed that Julian Carlton primarily wanted to kill Emil Brodelle and, at first, only charged him with Brodelle's murder. What do you think?
16. By the end of the day of the murders, 2/3 of Taliesin had burned down, 7 people were dead, and two were gravely injured. Wright rebuilds Taliesin using the remaining stone walls and foundations. Would you rebuild after such a tragedy? Why or why not?
17. Wright's building style changed after the fire. It became less nature-centric and more somber, heavy, and fortress-like. Do you think the murders and fire at Taliesin changed him? Why or why not?

References:

- Novelist - <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/novp/detail?vid=2&sid=6f88ce8a-2c31-42eb-9192-75df3fbaa6e8%40sessionmgr4009&bdata=JnNpdGU9bm92cC1saXZi#UI=287542&db=neh>
 - Wikipedia – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Lloyd_Wright
 - Wikipedia – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taliesin_\(studio\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taliesin_(studio))
 - Wisconsin Press – <https://uwpress.wisc.edu/books/4700.htm>
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If you liked Death in a Prairie House, try...

- Divided We Stand – Eric Darton
- Devil in the White City – Erik Larson
- Brunelleschi's Dome – Ross King
- 740 Park – Michael Gross
- The Home Within Us – Bobby Mcalpine